I Meant Well

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There was once a man who went on a daring adventure for a king. But that's not what this story is actually about. He achieved his goal through wisdom, bravery, and spirit. But the story is really about the parts of his body. As the man prepared to appear before the king, his body parts began arguing.
"If I hadn't thought up the plan," said the brain, "we never would have succeeded."
"But I saw the way," countered his eyes.
"I led us there step-by-step and have led us back home," argued the feet.
"Silence!" ordered the tongue. "I'm clearly the most important of all." The other body parts scoffed. "You did nothing!" they cried.
The tongue decided to teach them a lesson. As the man approached the king, the tongue shouted, "Here is the hated fool!" The king was outraged and ordered the man to be arrested. The other body parts were shocked. Immediately, they acknowledged the power of the tongue and begged it to save the whole body.
The tongue coughed and spoke again to the king, "Excuse me…I said, 'Here is the sacred jewel!'" The king took the sought-after treasurer from the man and rewarded him for his mission. The body parts all agreed that the tongue might be the most powerful of all.[1]

Our speech can bring healing and kindness, compliments and declarations of love. Yet our words can be painful, harmful, and cruel. The list of sins offered on these Days of Awe highlights that power. In just the *Al Cheit* prayer, we acknowledge the failures of thoughtless words, disrespect, deceit, making light of serious matters, gossip, rumor, and wronging in our routine conversation. Sometimes, these words are intentional. Too often in today's world, we can be nasty and punishing with our words. But more often, we strive to be compassionate, or at least neutral. The results don't match our intention. But we meant well.

In everyday conversation, we offer a lot of short, pithy phrases, declarations, and questions to people around us. Many are said with neutral intent – words simply to fill the space. Bland clichés that mean nothing. "How are you?" as a greeting when we don't seek or listen for a response.
"You'll be fine" and "It will be okay," when we don't know that it will actually be okay.
"They're in a better place" and "Everything happens for a reason" when we stumble to say something to a person in pain.
"You're so strong" and "When one door closes, another opens," when we divert from the issue at hand because it makes us uncomfortable.

"Nice" and "interesting" when we have nothing of substance to offer.
These phrases add zilch to the consolation or growth of the other person. As intelligent, thoughtful people, we can find better, more honest, and meaningful words.

Many of our words are said with positive purpose. We meant well. But they end up bringing negative impact and even harm to the listener. I crowdsourced on social media what phrases we hear that might have been said with good intentions but have the opposite result. Quickly, I received a flood of responses.

Sometimes, we make assumptions about the person in front of us.
"Is that your daughter?" when it is their wife.
"Is that your daughter?" to a boy with long hair.
"Do you have a boyfriend?" to someone who is lesbian.
A friend of mine was regularly asked if she was her own child's nanny because they had different skin tones. Think of the pain this thoughtless dismissal brought to this young mother over and over again.

In the Jewish world, this happens all the time. "Funny, you don't look Jewish" makes no sense in a diverse Jewish community of different cultures, countries of origin, conversion, and adoption. At the check-in for a Jewish conference, I was stunned when the volunteer asked the black woman in front of me if she was a Christian guest. She was actually the Jewish keynote speaker. What a rude welcome she received. Our assumptions might be meant without harm, but to the recipient, it is a reminder that they are not welcome for who they are but what someone else decided they were.

Commenting, "You look tired," does nothing for the listener. If they <u>are</u> tired, it only reminds them of their situation. If they <u>aren't</u> tired, they now wonder how they must look to elicit such a statement.

Asking someone when their baby is due is a catastrophe when you find out they aren't pregnant at all. Whoopi Goldberg just embarrassed herself this week doing exactly that on *The View*. In fact, we might want to avoid any comments about weight. Asking, "Have you lost a few pounds?" is meant as a compliment. And maybe the person will smile and say, "Yes! I've been watching my weight." Or they've actually gained weight. It is only your perspective that is now awkwardly highlighting that for them. Maybe they are struggling with an eating disorder or another disease. Your commenting on their body triggers their own struggles and pain.

In general, we should be cautious and reticent to comment on people's appearance, especially to people we don't know well. The potential for unintended pain and insult is everywhere.

Last Rosh Hashanah, we reflected on how often people turn another's statement back into a discussion about themselves. Such a "me-focused" response dismisses or minimizes the other person's situation. "Your husband has cancer. I understand. My grandmother was also sometimes sick." We intend to make a connection, but instead, we force their life story to match our own.
"Just wait until you have kids" or "At least you have your health" dismisses someone's individuality to match your expectations of how they should perceive it. "You're too young to…" fill in the blank tells someone that their experience isn't valid or genuine. "Just be grateful you have…" sends the message that their life struggles aren't really so bad. When we impose our own version of the world onto another person, we remove the power of <u>their</u> experience.

This doesn't even include the microaggressions, outright insults, and clumsy offenses that we are subject to every day.

When we hear such things, we often laugh, or smile, or make a joke. Rabbi Shammai taught us in Pirke Avot, "Receive all people cheerfully."
Sometimes, we freeze, unsure of what to say or how to respond. We internalize our pain and keep it to ourselves. On Yom Kippur afternoon, we are reminded from Leviticus, "You shall not hate your fellow person in your heart."[2] We might assume the speaker had the best of intentions. Looking for a positive understanding of someone's words, we can hope they meant well and interpret them without malice, even as the pain is real.

Yet, that passage in Leviticus continues, "You shall not hate your fellow person in your heart, but rebuke your neighbor."[3] Sometimes we need to speak up. How can others know their words bring hurt if we don't help them identify the moment? Many of us had to learn that saying, "All Lives Matter" isn't a statement valuing human equality but one that dismisses the individual claims of people of color who have exclaimed, "Black Lives Matter."
I have been schooled, sometimes kindly, sometimes with rolled eyes, by young adults for using outdated terms and references as I tried, with the best of intentions, to be inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. Even just learning, at one point, to say LGBTQ+. Within the Temple offices, we correct each other when we accidentally use the wrong pronouns to refer to someone who has identified otherwise. This mild

rebuke is not to embarrass but to remind them and encourage each other to be focused on individual needs, not our default mode.

Dear Abby once published a letter in response to a woman who had recently lost her child. A friend reached out soon after, asking about her needs for food and care, but then began to press questions about where the daughter's ashes would be kept. Flustered, the grieving mother made an excuse that she had to go and hung up the phone.

Abby replied, "My thought is that you handled the situation as well as you could since her question left you understandably flat-footed. However, I would have answered her differently. I would have responded, 'Why do you ask?'[4]

Sometimes, people ask with good intentions what is really none of their business. They are curious, morbid, nosy, rude, insensitive, or just bored. We don't owe everyone answers on why we haven't married our longtime partner when we are having kids, or details on our medical and personal life.

Jews are a questioning lot. We ask a lot of questions – even answering a question with a question. But those inquiries can hit on a sore spot. A graduating High School senior shouldn't be assumed they are heading to college. A single person shouldn't have to answer your curiosity if they are dating. Even if we really want to know.

One couple in our congregation was constantly being asked by well-meaning people when they were going to have children. They had had three miscarriages and years of struggle with IVF. Each time, the benignly intended query hit on every painful day of their journey. We meant well, but the words were offered without thought for the recipient and brought real hurt.

The classic Jewish story teaches that a man once went to Rabbi Shammai and asked him to teach him all of Judaism while standing on one foot. Rabbi Shammai was outraged by the impertinent nature of the question and hit him with a measuring stick. This was the same Rabbi Shammai we earlier quoted as saying, "Receive all people cheerfully."

The man then went to Rabbi Hillel with the same absurd request. But Hillel recognized there might be good intention at play and famously replied, "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it."[5] Some say the response moved the questioner so much that he spent the rest of his days studying Judaism with Rabbi Hillel.

At the heart of Judaism, Rabbi Akiva taught, is to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Are our words the kind we would want to hear? Would they bring us comfort when we are in pain? Would they feel intrusive if someone asked those questions to us? For example, we may have an innocent curiosity about someone's experiences, but

they have probably been asked by others many, many times the same question. It can be draining to have to answer over and over again. Perhaps Rabbi Shammai had been inundated with silly questions all day, and the "on one foot" guy just broke him. Are we "me" focused when we talk to others – what our needs are – or can we be "you" focused on what they need?

Rabbi Joseph H. Krakoff, an author and chaplain, thought of it this way. "When we allow ourselves to see things from the other person's point of view, we create the opportunity for profound validation and healing."[6]

We hope most of our words are shared with good intent. When we are pained by others, we can use the moment to educate and expand their world. Instead of filling empty space, we can first reflect on the aphorism, "Be sure to taste your words before you spit them out." Words come easy, too easy. And so does the pain that sometimes accidentally follows. This year, may we be mindful of all our words, remembering the tongue may be the most powerful part of our body after all.

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[1] Adapted from *Yalkut Shimoni* on Psalms, section 721 (found in Francine Klagsbrun, *Voice of Wisdom* pp, 18-20*).*
[2] Leviticus 19:17.
[3] Leviticus 19:17.
[4] https://www.heraldnews.com/story/entertainment/2020/05/09/dear-abby-insensitive-question-leaves/1225517007/
[5] Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a.
[6] https://www.thejewishnews.com/judaism/weekly-torah-portion-embodying-empathy/article_8ab69cb3-7794-5b24-8bcd-3a86cb7e9e01.html