

Yom Kippur Morning 5779
Because I said I would

My Grandfather, of blessed memory, had a giant dictionary that I remember flipping through as a kid. It had those indentations by each letter, a kind of tab to get to the letters easily. The outer edges of the pages were some kind of gold color. It seemed like something out of a wizarding library. I have it in my office...a reminder of him and the marvel of the English language.

Every year, several times a year now, Webster's Dictionary adds new words to the growing lexicon of English words. It always amazes me what gets added as I don't know who is approving the words, how they got approved and what were the ones that got rejected.

Take for example, and I am sure some of you are feeling this right now, "Hangry" – being angry because you are hungry; or "TL;DR" – an acronym for "too long; didn't read". Then there is the classic "Schnoodle" – a dog breed crossed with a schnauzer and a poodle and my personal favorite thus far in 2018 – "Ribbie" – for you non-baseball fans that's the way those in the know call an RBI – Runs Batted In. All are now a part of our dictionary.

Speaking of words, remember that bit by George Carlin of blessed memory, those 7 words you can't say on t.v.? If you haven't heard them, well, see me later. Apart from not being able to say them here there are clearly some you can now say even on public t.v.

So there are strange words you can say, bad words you can't say and I have discovered a few more that we probably shouldn't say – a list George Carlin would laugh at, one I call the 7 words we all say, but probably shouldn't. Ready?

Always. As in, "you always do that" or "you always say that". Sound familiar? Really? Always?

Never. As in, "you never listen" or "you are never around." Really? Never?

Nobody. As in, "nobody cares" or "nobody understands." Nobody?

Everybody. As in "everybody has one" or "everybody is doing it."

Constantly. As in "you are constantly critical" or "you are constantly on the phone".

Only. As in, "I'm the only one" or "If only I could have..."

Must. As in, "you must be joking" or "you must be sad".

We are all guilty of using these words of extremes to get our points across, to yell our thoughts and emotions at others, to assuage our bruised egos, to call for help. The way we communicate and the words we use matter – really matter, now more than ever in this polarized and partisan environment in which we find ourselves. Words matter. Words matter to Jews especially on a day like today, where the only thing we have to use to safeguard our souls and our destinies are the words we speak out loud and the ones we offer in our hearts.

Last night we offered the most significant of words, "Kol Nidre" all our vows. If you recall we said, out loud and I am paraphrasing here, "God, may all our vows and oaths, that we utter from this Yom Kippur to the next, if we find we can't keep them, please don't hold us to it."

It's as if we are saying, our words – especially our promises – don't hold us to that, if we can't fulfill them. It's a startling pronouncement that has significant personal and communal ramifications.

For centuries, the Kol Nidre formula has been used against the Jewish community. Anti-Semites, Nazis and other hate groups have seen this pronouncement as proof that the Jewish community cannot be trusted to keep their word. Of course, they don't understand the true intent of Yom Kippur, the prayers in general and the Kol Nidre formula in particular; they totally misunderstand what is actually being said. Kol Nidre is not about not keeping vows per se, it's really about human frailty and our relationship with God; it's about asking God to understand that we are trying, that we are human and that we will make mistakes. Kol Nidre is about the relationship we have with God and God knows we are human, that we are bound to fail, that we are striving to be better.

God sets the standard for using words and establishing God's promises to the human family. When God speaks, God calls creation into being. When God makes an oath, God never again sends a flood that destroys the whole earth, God frees the Israelites from Egypt, God, brings the Israelites to the Land. When God calls out to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, the prophets and various others, God is present. God establishes God's record of keeping God's word in the form of a Covenant; I will do my part, says God and be there and protect you. You do your part by following my plan. This relationship is the standard for how we communicate with each other and the Divine.

The early test of this covenant-promise keeping is in the famous story of Jacob in the aftermath of his stealing the birthright from Esau. Fearing for his life he runs away and, pulling up for the night, dreams of a ladder extending from heaven to earth with angels going up and down on the ladder. When Jacob wakes up, he realizes God is with him on this journey and then famously says, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. I'm not sure why Jacob thought God wouldn't be there for him, and of course, God is there.

It's not unusual. How many times have we said, "God, if You help me with this one thing, I promise I will..." It reminds of that joke of a person driving in the parking lot looking for a space and the driver says, "God, if you find me a space I promise I will be the best person, I will give a million dollars to Temple, I will give up all my bad habits..." and all of a sudden a space opens up right then and there. To which the driver then says, "Never mind, I found one!"

Or how about, I promise I'll clean my room; take out the garbage; be home for dinner; be on time. I promise I will make your game, your concert, presentation. I promise I won't let you down. And what about the promises we make to ourselves – I promise this year I will...lose weight, stop smoking, exercise, drive calmer, be nicer, be happier.

We write them down, we pray hard, we pinky swear, we cross out hearts, we try hard, we fall short, we disappoint and are disappointed – over and over and over.

Martin Buber called human beings the promise - making, promise - breaking, promise - renewing animals. The reason we keep offering these promises is because we want so badly to change the status of the current situation, to be in control of our environment even though we know we really aren't, and we are willing to offer any cock-eyed idea in order to make it happen, even when those promises are unrealistic, unreachable and even unthinkable.

Hanna Arendt once said that promises are the uniquely human way of ordering the future – making it predictable and reliable to the extent that it is humanly possible. In other words, making promises is a way of creating a world that, while disorderly and uncertain, can be made whole and filled with shalom, one promise at a time.

During our holidays, Rabbi Boxman, Cantor Avery and I have been seeking to share with you messages that this new year and this time especially provides us with an opportunity to experience this moment as a “Brand New Day”. On Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Boxman and I spoke about bringing light to the darkness and about courage. Last night I spoke about experiencing a brand-new day when we let go of the things we were never intended to carry.

Today, is a day about promises and the world we can create when we deploy the light that God has implanted within us to be courageous, to be freed from the constraints of that which drags us down in order to be fully present with those around us who need our help, care and concern. I am absolutely convinced that the power to transform our world, to take back the control over the chaos around us to the extent that it is humanly possible, can happen when we transform our mere “promises” and elevate them to the realm of covenant. And here's how...

Remember back in Genesis, when God calls out to Abraham to “Lech-Lecha” to go forth to the land that God will show him? In that one scene it appears that God makes 5 promises; I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you; I will make your name great; I will bless those that bless you; I will curse those that curse you. In truth, God is actually making 1 big promise, 1 big covenant – I will be with you. Period. In my humble rabbinic opinion, this is the meta promise of the entire Torah – God will be with us. With us when we make mistakes. With us when we do all of the litany of things we have prayed thus far today. With us when we succeed, with us when we fail, when we transgress, when we think we don't deserve God's blessing – God's promise to us is that God is and will be there. In fact, I believe this is the one thing God wants us to do, not to do for God, but to do for each other.

Today, the holiest of days, let's not make a list of promises that is way too long and unattainable; ones we have promised before, ones that haven't any real chance of success. Today I suggest to you 3 that most definitely will work and are packed with the power to transform.

The first is making a promise to God, right here, right now, and that promise is to let God in – into our hearts, our very beings. This takes real effort to study, to pray, to believe that God loves you and is with you every step of your way. I know this difficult and strange and a rabbi talking this much about God might not be comfortable for some, but Judaism always has God at the center. God is the Commander offering all of those 613 commandments and the thrill of a life of faith is like none other. God we promise in this New Year to let you in.

In letting God in, we make the second promise, this time to ourselves; to live a life of Godliness – to live in such a way that we become aware of the beauty and the majesty around us. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called this “radical amazement” – an awareness that everything around us is imbued with God’s presence – people, places and things. This effort is at the heart of what Martin Buber called the “I-thou” moment. The realization of the divinity in the interactions that we have every single day. While we can’t spend every moment of every day in that divine moment, there exists at least the potential to experience Divine moments every day.

Did you every have that conversation you swore only lasted a few moments when in fact an entire afternoon is gone? Did you ever stare at the sunset long enough to feel that everything else around you have disappeared and it’s only you and the sun? Have you ever met someone and knew instantly they were your soulmate? Best friend? Brother from another mother? That is “I-thou” and making that effort to see – to really see – to really pay attention, is something we can promise ourselves to do this year, right now.

And finally, today is the day to make a promise to others; not to be nice to everyone, not to be polite, not to do the dishes or clean the garage. Don’t get me wrong, those aren’t bad things to promise. No, what I am suggesting here is that we make a promise to others to protect them and to defend them. As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, it takes courage to step forward and be noticed caring about a particular issue, to be noticed caring about a particular person. Carrying that courage a step forward today we make a promise to our loved ones, to our friends, to our neighbors, to our community and to those we haven’t yet met, that we will protect you and defend you – we will show up and demonstrate our covenantal responsibility of doing God’s work in this world. Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give” and today we can give a very special gift - the gift of our promise to be there, because we said we would. Because our words matter. Because our presence matters. Because if God can be with us, then we can certainly be with others. How can we do that? Here is one example.

This past Shabbat I mentioned that I attended the funeral for a stranger; a stranger to me, but one who had unfortunately become well known in our city and across the nation. Botham Shem Jean was killed in his apartment by a Dallas Police Officer 2 weeks ago. A strange and terrible tragedy indeed. Bo, as he was called was an impressive young man, a man of kindness and smiles, of generosity and of Godliness, what we in the Jewish community might call a mensch. I did not go to the funeral to protest or advocate for a particular outcome of the case.

I didn't go to represent Temple Shalom or the Jewish community. I went because my heart was broken over the senseless death of someone's child. I went because his family is hurting. I went because I wanted his family and his community to know that there are people in our city, whom they do not know, who care – lots of people who care. I didn't speak to his family, nor offer words of comfort to them directly. But I did pray and I did sing loudly and if you've ever been to an African-American church, you know how powerful the singing can be. I made a promise to them without them even knowing, that I would do my small part in protecting them and defending them in their moment of hurt and sadness and need by letting them know someone cares.

When we let God in, when we live our lives like God demonstrates for us over and over and when we make a promise to others we make a life worth living. As Albert Einstein said, "Only a life lived in the service of others is worth living." And here's the thing. While it is helpful and meaningful to give like that, there will most definitely be a time, when we are going to need that same promise from others. If others can make that promise to us as we did for them, then what an amazingly bright and powerful brand-new day we have created.

3 promises. Let God into our hearts. Let God into our everyday experiences and be God's example of presence to those in need. Because words matter. Because creating covenant matters. And because we said we would. What a beautiful Brand-New Day indeed.

Amen.