

**L'Shon HaTov:
Building Relationships Using Words for the Good**

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Jason:

The past few years, during Erev Rosh Hashanah, we have tried creating a thoughtful, explorative space, instead of a formal sermon. Not to worry, at least for some, we will have sermons during the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Traditional services as well as Kol Nidre.

Dana:

As we enter into 5784, continuing our congregational quest to create our Jewish home together, we also want to explore the power of words, specifically *l'shon hatov*, using good words, in three different ways. After all, it was with words that God created the universe. Words hold power – but a power that we cannot always control or predict, as their impact often depends on the listener.

Jason:

Tonight we focus on *l'shon hatov*, the use of good words as a way to see those around us, both within our community and within our own lives, not through our differences, but our goodness and the blessings that emanate from all.

Jason:

We first start with chevruta, the practice of studying text with a partner, allowing the words of our tradition to inspire conversation, debate, and growth.

Dana:

In Pirke Avot 2:8, an early rabbinic collection of wisdom, the famed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai blesses his students by “listing their outstanding virtues.” Now, one could easily think he is just over-doing it, offering platitudes. Modern commentator Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, however, is clear, Rabbi Yochanan “did not flatter [his students]. He guided them to see their distinctive talents. [For example] Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, the ‘well that never loses a drop,’ had a remarkable memory. Elazar ben Arach, the ‘ever-flowing spring,’ was creative and still needed to be fed by [the metaphorical] mountain waters of his colleagues.”

Jason:

What I take from Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Sacks is the importance of blessing each other. The words we choose are crucial. I know that I have used vague positive statements from time to

time, and I am sure they are received as rather inauthentic, which must have been deflating to the person to whom I was speaking.

Dana:

At the same time, blessings or using positive words about someone else, does not need to be just praise. Rather, a blessing is about honestly seeing the uniqueness of each person. As Rabbi Yochanan did, he listed “outstanding virtues,” but did not flatter. The goal is to find the intersection between blessing, positivity, and honesty.

Jason:

Plus, our words should be specific in a way that highlights the blessings of each person. Just as Yochanan focused on memory or creativity, he narrowed in on how each person excelled. On the flip side, this can be challenging with someone who really frustrates us, or someone who is rude to us. As modern activist and thinker Adrienne Maree Brown writes, “We are socialized to see what is wrong, missing, off, to tear down the ideas of others and uplift our own. To a certain degree our entire future may depend on learning to listen, listen without assumptions or defenses.”

Dana:

While Brown may be right, we also must change the way we share our words with each other! Since words are so much about the other person, our challenge is to remember to frame them for the sake of kindness towards the other, helping them grow. Critique can exist without disparagement, support can exist without advice, and words can help us open a world to engage with others, as opposed to shutting it down.

Jason:

I’ve noticed that too. Sometimes, even when we do it nicely, it seems like our underlying goal is to jump in to say our peace, getting our words on the table, instead of recognizing that being part of a conversation means stepping back as well. I wonder how Yochanan’s students responded to him.

Dana:

Great question, if only Jewish texts gave us that answer. But, in the next verse, Yochanan sends his students away to continue their learning, and then each in turn offers their own teaching. Growth through positive words, encouragement as opposed to disparagement, sharing words that help others feel seen and not made smaller.

Jason:

Now this is all good for a back-and-forth chevruta, and speaking nicely to others. But we should dig more deeply into the much harder scenario, when we are dealing with someone who is using words to harm or to hate.

Often, texts are not the right approach. Rather, we can try a way that is more personal and allows us to be drawn in – storytelling.

Dana:

There is a tale told Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of Mussar, Jewish ethics, who was riding a train. A young person boarded partway through the journey. Full of bravado, the youngster decided Rabbi Salanter was in the seat he really wanted. They began berating the rabbi, trying to get him to move – “you are too loud.” “You are taking up too much room.”

The other passengers were appalled. This was a great rabbi, known for his ethics and kindness, how would the Rabbi respond? Rabbi Salanter calmly rose up, gathered his things, and scooted over. It was only a few seconds before the young person began yelling again, about closing the window since they were cold, and continued on with other meaningless slights against the Rabbi. The rabbi just sat there, calmly reading his book. When the train arrived, there were throngs of people waiting outside to greet the great rabbi. Upon learning whom they had been addressing, the youngster rushed to the rabbi and began apologizing profusely for their words and behavior, begging forgiveness.

“Don’t worry,” explained Rabbi Salanter, “a train can make anyone on edge. I bear no ill will. Why don’t you come and study with me?”

Surprised but curious, the young person accepted. Despite their rocky start, the rabbi invested in their new pupil, adding hours, hiring tutors, being calm and encouraging, and helping with each new obstacle.

After some time successfully learning together, and preparing to return home, the young scholar came to Rabbi Salanter with tears in their eyes. “Tell me, Rabbi,” he cried, “on that day on the train, I was so rude and horrible to you, but you were so kind to me. Why?”

Rabbi Salanter held their hand and explained, “It is easy to say ‘I forgive you.’ But deep down, do we still bear a grudge? In my heart, I was not sure. The only way I could heal my own anger was to see you as you fully are. I developed a love and relationship more powerful than a simple pleasantry or apology of a lone action. I got to know you.”

Jason:

Rabbi Salanter was living the attribute of God that we recite during these High Holidays, “erech apayim – being slow to anger.” He saw the moment as a chance to patiently look inside, contemplate his own reactions, and seek a deeper, more meaningful relationship to his students. Allowing hate to lead will change nothing in this world, but learning to love, especially when it is hard to do so, can.

Dana:

One of my favorite teachers, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, taught “You will be wherever your thoughts are, so make sure your thoughts are where you want to be.” This very much applies to our use of words.

Jason:

Now, let us be clear that there are limitations to the harm caused by words and actions of others, especially in our charged times. We are never excusing words that truly offend, disrespect, or dehumanize others. Those are wrong.

Dana:

Words of hate are always inexcusable. Words to tear someone else down are unforgivable. In our daily interactions, we hold the responsibility of making sure we are thoughtful, considerate, and aware of others. Especially here at Temple Beth Am, the intention of our words should be to lift up others.

Jason:

We have studied text about how we use words to build relationships with kindness, honesty, and growth, and told stories about how we can control our reactions and seek deeper relationships. But we also need time to look inward, to think, reflect, and meditate on how we can apply these concepts to our lives in the New Year 5784 and beyond.

So, we are going to use our final section to look forward and craft positive messages and blessings over others. We will consider four blessings. They will be on the screen and after a bit, the next prompt will highlight, which is an encouragement to move on. However, if you want to spend more time on one, please do so. We will take a few minutes of self-reflection, alongside some beautiful piano.

First, consider what words we use to bless someone that we love.

Second, consider what words we use to bless someone who is neutral in our lives, an important part of our day, but one with whom we may not have too deep of a relationship, yet.

Third, consider what words we would use to bless someone with whom we are angry, frustrated, or even worse.

Fourth, consider the bigger picture and how we use l’shon hatov, words for the good.

(Cue piano. Play prompt slides. 2 minutes, highlighting changes every 30 seconds.)

Jason:

Let us bless what each person has, using words to motivate and inspire, with clear intentionality in our speech, and how those words are received.

Dana:

Let us bless each person for who they are, see their possibilities as opposed to their downfalls, using words of goodness that come out of assumptions of goodness.

Jason:

Let us engage in an exchange of ideas and growth, not retort and attack, using chevruta, storytelling, and self-reflection, with a focus on building relationships and community.

Dana:

Let us enter into this New Year with l'shon hatov to engage others, one word at a time.