Matot | Violent Speech and Violent Deeds

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Homo Sapiens are unlike any other creature. Brushed by the hand of God, we are formed in His image. We, alone, possess intelligence, consciousness, freewill, freedom of conscience, and creativity. With these remarkable tools we are expected to perfect a world which God intentionally left imperfect. Gifted with divine tools, we partner with Him in relandscaping our world.

Chief among our gifts is the power of speech. Most living creatures communicate with one another, however, in most instances, their communication is extremely rudimentary. They communicate basic needs such as the location of food, migratory paths, or reproductive opportunities. Human beings, on the other hand, possess cognitive, creative, and abstract speech. Collaborative speech allows us to share mutual interests and better organize our common resources. Abstract communication allows us to convey theories about religion, science and self-consciousness. Through interpersonal communication we construct deep relationships, which adorn our lives and redeem us from the confinement of solitude.

Speech in Jewish Law

In Jewish law, the power of speech is best exemplified by the laws of oaths or *nedarim*, enumerated in parashat Matot. By verbalizing an oath, we can impose human prohibitions upon otherwise neutral items, thereby redefining the halakhic map. By example, articulating an oath or a *neder* not to consume an apple, converts that fruit into a forbidden item. God may not have banned the item, but human speech can. Such is the power of a human tongue, gifted with divinely empowered speech.

For this reason, the laws governing oaths and the management of oaths were delivered to the heads of tribes, and not directly to the general population. Speech is too powerful to be handled by those who don’t fully appreciate its potency. Wise people, who appreciate the gift of speech, are expected to regulate it in themselves and properly calibrate it in others.

Angry Tongues

Just the same, human speech can turn ugly. Our speech is never more foul than when it turns aggressive and violent. At its best, communication unifies us. At its worst, it becomes weaponized, contentious, and divisive. We inhabit a world which is drenched in acrimony and angry communication. Rage encircles us, whether in the form of road rage, workplace rage, domestic rage, or sports rage - just to name a few of the most popular arenas in which our rage is brandished. Why has speech become so toxic and our discourse so antagonistic?

Anonymity and Invisibility

Ideally the internet should act as a "communication bridge", enabling the seamless and rapid exchange of information and ideas. However, as with every technology, it can also expose the dark side of human nature. In the real world, there are natural "curbs" against verbal vitriol and hostile communication. In the real world we are sensitive to public perception and how our communication is viewed by others. Additionally, in the real world we encounter the "subjects" of our comments and are more likely to be courteous. The internet cloaks us with a veil of anonymity, while it also renders the subjects of our speech, invisible. Without these natural checks and balances which are built into normal communication, we are free to say whatever we want and however we want to say it. The internet has removed "social accountability" which, ideally, should serve as a "brake" against runaway verbal aggression.

Echo Chambers, and Radicalization

Encountering different viewpoints also softens our language. Acknowledging and validating different views makes us less likely to aggressively vilify people who hold opposing views. Unfortunately, and again ironically, the internet shrinks our exposure and limits our encounters. The internet, with its information algorithms, has confined us to echo chambers in which our news is filtered to reflect our own positions and interests. Constant exposure to our own opinions and to those who agree with us, radicalizes our views rather than balancing them. Unconditional belief in our own *absolute truth* invites hostility to those who question those truths and are thereby our enemies who possess dangerous views.

Verbal aggression is addictive. It debases the public discourse, creates a society of incivility, and soon starts to infect our communities and even our personal relationships. And it quickly leads to physical violence….

Violent Speech and Violent Actions

In parashat Emor, the Torah portrays the crime of a Jewish man who blasphemed. Immediately, the Torah restates the laws forbidding physical violence - both against animal and man. These laws had been listed elsewhere, yet they are restated after this affair. Blasphemy is a form of violent speech - in this instance directed against God. Concerned that aggressive language will lead to violent behavior, the Torah cautions against any physical violence. Violent speech always causes violent behavior.

Our world isn’t just tainted by angry speech, it has also become very violent. In the early 2000's we faced the blight of ideological violence driven by militant fundamentalism. Unfortunately, we currently inhabit a world of non-ideological violence, in which violent acts are committed purely to vent anger and frustration. The United States continues to suffer spates of mass shootings and has witnessed a significant increase in the rate of violent crime. In Israel we have witnessed previously unheard-of outbursts of physical violence against policemen, teachers, and medical staff. Violence always escalates, and minor acts of aggression soon morph into large-scale acts of violence.

Civil Communication

Israel is about to begin its fifth round of elections. Elections are polarizing experiences, as politicians exaggerate their positions, attempting to distance themselves from their opponents and gain votes. Often, politicians disparage or even demonize their political adversaries. Sometimes this leads to actual physical confrontations.

Whom should you vote for? That is obviously a very personal question. Perhaps, though, when deciding whom to vote for, we should factor in the level of respect and dignity a candidate displays. Typically, we vote for politicians who reflect our ideologies or who endorse our preferred policies. Perhaps we should also consider the tone and character of their rhetoric. Politicians who regularly insult their opponents and who employ crude and dehumanizing language are critically harmful to our social fabric. Long-term, politicians who conduct themselves with civility and respect for others, may be more beneficial, even if their policies aren’t exactly identical to our own. In a world of rage, insult and verbal aggression, role models who restore civility and grace are absolutely vital to the overall health of society.

Violence guts any society and must be eradicated at all levels. Civility must start in our social discourse. If that discourse becomes toxic and antagonistic, we will find ourselves living very angry lives and suffering contentious relationships. Beware the long-term damage that violent behavior inflicts. In almost all instances, it just isn’t worth it.