A few weeks ago, while jogging, I was listening to a podcast called, “Talkin’ ‘Bout My Generation,” with the authors of a book called, When Millennials Rule: The Reshaping of America. It was actually pretty interesting. But then something happened. First one speaker, and then another, began using foul language, matter-of-factly and gratuitously, again, and again, and again. (Unorthodox Podcast: “Talkin ‘Bout My Generation: Ep 54,” August 18, 2016)

I have to admit: as I was listening to the podcast, all I could think of was, I hope nobody can hear what I was listening to! Now, of course, my concern was ridiculous: I was listening on my ear buds, and there was nobody around! But still, I didn’t feel good listening to that podcast. I felt, well, sullied.

I don’t know. Maybe this is a generational thing. But my reaction was, ... “Hmm. This just isn't for me.”

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Language has power, and it has always had power. And just as a good choice of words has power, bad language can have a deeply negative impact on ourselves, the people we’re speaking with, and the people we’re speaking about.

We focus a lot on sins of speech today. Why is that? Well, to the rabbis, the power of speech was a unique privilege entrusted to human beings, not possessed by other living creatures, and it comes with a lot of responsibility.¹

¹ Consider how Rabbi Abraham Danziger, author of Hayyei Adam, describes it in his Tefillah Zakah (“A Prayer for Purity”) recited prior to Kol Nidre: "u‘v’koach ha-dibbur hivdalta et ha-adam min ha-b’heimah”—“with [the] power of speech You distinguished between human beings and animals.” See Rashi on Genesis 2:7.
Our essence as moral beings is profoundly expressed in what we choose to say, and what we choose *not* to say.

Foul language or vulgarity is, of course, one example of what the rabbis called, "*tum’at s’fataim,*" "impurity of the lips,"\(^2\) that can lower the level of discourse to a very base level.

But as *bad* as vulgarity can be, if you think that it’s the worst kind of speech there is, let me give you two words: Big Papi.

In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, when our city—indeed, our entire region—was still aching with shock and pain and anguish, at a time when people were feeling vulnerable, sad and scared, someone who previously had not been known as a man of words stood up and hit one out of the park. David Ortiz stood up in Fenway Park and, in language that would have made my third-grade teacher—and yours—blush, electrified and inspired millions of people. He expressed his devotion to our city with determination, defiance and love.

Now, yes, *he should have used an editor!* But whatever else you can say about what David Ortiz said, it was deeply, and emotionally, **honest.** He spoke from the heart. As the Talmud says, “words that come out of one person’s heart can penetrate another person’s heart.”

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\(^2\) But see how Danziger defines *tum’at s’fataim* in his *Tefillah Zakah:* “*va’ani timeiti et pi bilshon harah, bish’karim, b’leitzanut, birchilut, b’makhloket, u’v’halbanat panim.*” (See *Mahzor Lev Shalom*, p. 203)
In the Jewish tradition, when we say, “sins of speech,” we aren’t usually referring to “using bad words”—though we certainly know what those are—but rather, using language badly—to mislead, to distort, to demean or to hurt other people.

That is truly tum’at s’fataim, impurity of the lips: that is the kind of repulsive language that all too often leads to repulsive action.

Consider the Ashamnu. As we saw a few minutes ago, the Ashamnu is an alphabetical acrostic, with one sin for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Now unfortunately, in our mahzor, the individual sins are not translated literally; they’re translated poetically into an English acrostic: “We abuse, we betray, we are cruel, etc.” This has power to it, but it doesn’t help us understand the meaning of the Hebrew words. If you go through the Hebrew words in the Ashamnu, as I did, you will find that over one quarter of those sins are sins of language, ways in which we can hurt others through language. These include:

**DALED:** Dibarnu Dofi: We have shared demeaning words about others;  
**TET:** Tafalnu Sheker: we have been smearing people with lies [translation by Martin Cohen];  
**YOD:** Ya’atznu Rah: We have misled people;  
**KAF:** Kizavnu: we have deceived other people;  
**LAMED:** Latznu: we have made fun of, we have mocked others; and  
**NUN:** Ni’atznu: we have cursed other people.

That’s at least six sins right there out of 24, or 25%, that are explicitly sins of speech. If you include several others that indirectly involve speech, it is over a third.

If you take a look at the Al Het confessional, it adds up to a similar percentage: 11 out of 44. We’ve got “al het she-hatanu lifanecha b’dibur peh,” “For the sin we committed before you through speech.” That’s fairly general, but then we have “the sin we committed before you “b’vidui peh,”—“through insincere confession,” and “b’vitui s’fatayim,”—“through idle chatter,” and “b’khahash u’v’kha’azav”—“through denial and deceit,” and “b’latzon,”—“through clever cynicism,” and so forth.
These sins of speech that appear in the Ashamnu and the Al Het go well beyond using obscenities; they are examples of using language in a variety of ways to hurt people. First, of course, there’s the outright lie (שקר). It’s wrong to lie, and it is usually stupid, too. (Yes, in the Jewish tradition, we have the notion of the so-called “white lie,” but let’s not deceive ourselves. Lies are almost always bad.) When we lie, we let people know that we can’t be trusted, that our word is worthless. Indeed, our relationships are tainted. As a Hasidic rebe, Naftali of Ropshitz (d. 1827) once said about a man who was a well-known liar, “Not only is what he says untrue, but even the opposite of what he says is untrue.” Wrap your head around that!

Then, there is malicious language (לשון הרע). Malicious language may be true, but its purpose is to discredit, to demean, to tear down—rather than to build up.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks details the many different ways we can do this: We can engage in “character assassination, insinuation, the spreading of suspicion, the sowing of unrest, derogatory talk, depreciation, back-biting and bad-mouthing.” (Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor, p. 173; note.) When we use language maliciously, we undermine the pillars of our society. We treat others as objects, not as other human beings worthy of respect.

There is yet another kind of bad speech: … silence—(שתיקה), the absence of speech, when speaking is called for.

What does it say about ourselves when we fail to speak up for someone who is being mocked or put down or treated poorly? The rabbis say, “shtikah k’hoda’ah damei”—“silence is akin to assent.” Our failure to speak turns us into accomplices in verbally harming other people—without ever opening our mouths.

There’s an insightful, powerful saying in Hebrew: Mavet v’hayyim b’yad lashon: Life and death are in the power of the tongue. (Proverbs 18:21) This saying recognizes that we can do a lot of damage with the wrong choice of words.

What should we do in the face of the very real damage that we can cause through improper speech? Take a vow of silence? Some people thought so.
There used to be a Jewish pietistic practice known as the *ta’anit dibbur*—a fast, a *ta’anit*, from speaking, *dibbur*, comparable to the fasting from food that we’re all engaged in today. This is based on the famous saying in the Mishnah by Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel: “I have found nothing better than silence.”

Silence is hard. Last March, a group from our shul went to Kripalu. One of our meals in the dining hall was a designated silent meal. Just one of our meals. For me, that was long enough! It lasted maybe 45 minutes, but it was hard! By the end of it, I was ready to say something! Anything! I know a number of people, including some rabbinic friends of mine, who participate in silent retreats that last for several days. They find them meaningful. But even people who have practiced and have championed the idea of a *ta’anit dibbur*, a talking fast, recognize that sometimes “it is more important to speak kind words than to be silent.”

Choosing your words so that they are kind words—that’s a choice we have to make each and every day. A friend of mine was once asked to officiate at a funeral for a woman who had had five children. He met with them and they told him: “Look: We have frankly nothing kind to say about our mother. If you say anything nice about our mother, we are all going to walk out of the funeral.”

What do you do in a situation like that? Well, that was the beginning of a conversation. By the end of it, those children had shared words with my friend that were honest and true and which nonetheless gave credit to their mother for ways she had taught her children life lessons. None of the woman’s children walked out on that eulogy.

We need to know when to be silent and when to speak.

We should not be silent as we witness the deterioration of the level of discourse all around us. We should not tolerate it. We should speak up and protest when we hear of lies or deceit or contemptuous speech passing as acceptable discourse; we should condemn them, and we should stand up for truth and decency. In general, we should condemn disrespectful disagreement as well, and champion civil and respectful discourse.

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As corrosive as evil speech can be, that’s how redemptive good speech can be.

Redemptive speech may not even require a lot of words. Tomorrow afternoon, we’ll be reading the Book of Jonah in shul. Jonah has a weighty challenge: to prophesy against the city of Nineveh and convince them to repent. He does everything possible to avoid this responsibility, but finally, finally, he assumes his prophetic burden and gives a speech consisting of only five words: “Od arba’im yom v’ninveh nehpachet”—“In forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown!”—only five words! —and yet, as we know from the Book of Jonah, those words were responsible for saving the city, all 120,000 people within it, and their animals as well.

We need to use language—good language—to support and strengthen one another, not to diminish or demean one another. Let’s refrain from saying the wrong things, and let’s be sure to say the things that need to be said. Let’s apologize when we should; let’s tell our loved ones we love them—frequently—and let’s use speech to express thoughtfulness and kindness and sharing.

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I’m sure that much of what I’m saying here tonight sounds reasonable. And I’m sure that many of us will want to try to speak better in the year to come. But within a day or so, certainly a week, our memories of this day will have faded. How can we maintain our resolve?

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has a helpful set of recommendations in this regard. He says we should set some modest goals. For example, he says, let’s resolve not to engage in gossip or malicious speech at least once a week, say, at our Friday night Shabbat dinner. Maybe we could resolve not to engage in such speech for two hours every day. (He takes pains to urge us to choose daytime hours to fulfill this.)

Above all, let’s use common sense. Let’s not say everything that comes into our heads. As the great Jewish humorist Sam Levenson once said, “It’s not so hard to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say ... and don’t say it!” (Telushkin, p. 139)

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As we begin 5777, let’s hope for a year in which (a) in our personal relationships and (b) in our society at large, good language is a blessing to us all, a year in which our language is honest and loving, edifying and uplifting.

That’s the vision that the prophet Malachi had. At the end of the book of Malachi, looking to the future he said:

אָזָה נִדְבְּרוּ יִרְּאֵי יְהֹוָה אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ
ויִשְׁמָעֲו יְהֹוָה וַיִּכְתֵּב סֵפֶר זִכָּרוֹן לְפָנָיו
לְיִרְּאֵי يְהֹוָה וּלְחֹֹֽשְׁבֵי שְׁמֹֽוֹ

Then those who revere God will respectfully speak and listen to one another, and God will pay attention and will listen to them, and they will all be written in the Book of Remembrance.

(Malachi 3:16)

What a beautiful High Holiday vision: When we do it right—when we speak and listen to one another with mutual respect and appreciation and affection—God pays attention. God listens. And we’re given credit for it. What more could we ask for?

Shanah tovah u’m’tukah: a good and a sweet year to all.

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4 This interpretation of Malachi 3:16 is based on Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith, by Rabbi Norman Lamm, p.151, accessible here: [http://tinyurl.com/gub6byz](http://tinyurl.com/gub6byz).