FIRST DAY ROSH HASHANAH

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One hundred fifty years ago, during the heyday of Hasidism in Eastern Europe, every Hasid would visit his rebbe during the weeks before Rosh Hashanah. In addition to receiving the rebbe’s blessing, every Jew wanted the rebbe to answer the same questions about which we wonder at this time of the year:

“Rebbe,” they would ask, “What will the new year bring? Will it be for us a year of good health or, God forbid, a year of illness? Will it be a year of joy or, God forbid, a year of sadness? Will it be a year of success or, God forbid, a year of failure? Rebbe, tell us!”

And every year the rebbe would give the same reply, “*Kinderlach*, I cannot tell you because everything is in God’s hands.”

And every year the Hasidim would return home, on the one hand comforted by the constancy of the same response, but on the other hand disappointed by the uncertainty that confronted them.

But one year something different happened. As always the Hasidim came to visit their rebbe before Rosh Hashanah, and as always they posed the same questions they asked every year. But this time, when the rebbe opened his mouth to respond to their questions about the new year, his Hasidim noticed that the rebbe’s voice was strong, even defiant, as he said them, “Every year I have told you that we are powerless to determine what the new year will bring; I told you that everything is in God’s hands. I no longer believe that it is *only* in God’s hands to determine the nature of the year to come. *Kinderlach*, it is in our hands, too, to shape the year that is now approaching. Now go home, and make it a good year.”

The Hasidim were dumbstruck; they were mystified. The rebbe had told them that *they* could help determine the coming year? It was unnerving on the one hand, and empowering on the other. And, so, they returned home, each contemplating how he could make it a better year.

So how do you and I follow the rebbe’s advice that “It is in our hands, too, to shape the year that is now approaching”?

I think I found the prescription, perhaps even the exact text, the rebbe used to formulate his realization that much lies in the power of our hands, and not just our hands, to determine the coming year. I found it in a somewhat obscure rabbinic work, written probably 1400 years ago, called *Midrash Tanhuma*. This beautiful teaching, which I will share with you in a few seconds, succinctly presents us with what I think is a simple, yet powerful, program of how we should conduct ourselves throughout our lives.

According to this teaching, there are three parts of the human body that we can control, and three organs that we cannot. Can you guess which they are?

The three that we can control are …? -- Our mouth, our hands, and our feet.

What are the three that we cannot control? -- Our ears, our eyes, and our nose.

To repeat: according to the Tanhuma, three parts of the human body are under a person’s control: the mouth, the hands, and the feet. Three organs are not under person’s control: the ears, the eyes, and the nose.

Don’t you agree with me that this is a wonderful credo by which to live our lives? I think it is so significant that I am going to discuss this rabbinic teaching in three of my High Holy Day sermons.

Today, let’s talk about the first part of the body we can control: our mouth.

When the sages tell us that we can control our mouth, they mean that two ways: first, we have the power to decide what enters into our mouth, and, second, we control what emerges from our mouth.

In terms of what we place in our mouth, obviously the Rabbis are talking about keeping kosher. We decide whether to eat kosher food or not. While I am not going to devote the rest of this sermon to the topic of kashrut, I do want to indicate that I think keeping kosher is extremely important for several reasons. Besides the obvious reason that God commands us Jews to keep kosher, keeping kosher also teaches us Jews to have respect for life, even for the animal life we take to satisfy our own alimentary desires. It is comforting to me to know that the steer, cow, turkey, or chicken that I eat has been killed in the most painless manner possible; and, yes, I have witnessed up close and personal both kosher and non-kosher slaughter, and, believe me, there IS a world of difference, the gory details of which I will spare you. More than that, keeping kosher is a constant and continuous form of Jewish identity. Three times a day (and even more frequently for some of us), when we sit down to eat, we are personally cognizant that we are Jews. This is a powerful form of Jewish identification which can and does have a profound impact upon one’s children and grandchildren and their Jewish identities.

A few additional comments: First, there has never been a moment in American Jewish history when it has been easier to keep kosher than today. We are fortunate here in East Meadow to have a kosher butcher in our own community, and there are several others nearby in Merrick and West Hempstead, elsewhere in Nassau County and in Queens. But even in parts of the country that lack kosher butchers, one can still find kosher meat and poultry at supermarkets and at warehouse stores like Costco. Additionally, so many foods are kosher-certified today that it is almost impossible to walk down any aisle of any supermarket and NOT find a plethora of kosher goods. Unavailability of kosher food is no longer an excuse for not keeping kosher.

Second, as I have shared with you in the past, beginning with my very first Yom Kippur sermon thirty-three years ago, making your home kosher can be a process. Let’s say that at this point in your life, for whatever the reason, you cannot go all the way with keeping kosher. So take the first steps. For example, eliminate from your home and diet clearly non-kosher items like pork products and shellfish. Then, once you internalize that change, stop eating meat and milk together. Then take the next step and start buying only kosher meat and poultry. Once you are comfortable with that, you can take the final step of kashering your kitchen. It is not hypocritical to take a step-by-step approach, IF you are committed to attain the goal of keeping kosher eventually.

Finally, I don’t care how old or young you are: It is never too late to undertake the mitzvah of keeping kosher. And, as your Rabbi, I am here to assist you.

And I want to give a special shout-out to all of our college students who are keeping kosher while away at school. I know that sometimes you have to make sacrifices in order to keep kosher in college, but you have my admiration because you are demonstrating a very strong commitment to Judaism and enhancing your Jewish identity during some of the most crucial years of your life. Kol haKavod to you! And I also want to offer a big “Yasher koach” to our young families who have decided to keep a kosher home, thus ensuring the transmission of Judaism to the next generation.

But in this day and age, we have to admit that having control over what goes into our mouth has other applications as well.

With statistics from the Centers for Disease Control indicating that 35% of Americans are obese, and that another 35% are overweight, and given the medical consequences of obesity, we must control the *amount* and the *nature* of what we put into our mouth. This is especially true of us Jews – not that we are fatter than other ethnic groups. We must be concerned because we believe that we are created in God’s image. As I teach my students in the Hay class – and I hope at least some of them remember this lesson – one of the implications of our being created in God’s image is that our bodies – our physical bodies – are sacred, holy, and special. Therefore, just as we do not mistreat a holy object like a Torah scroll or a prayerbook, we must not mistreat our own bodies, including by overeating so that we damage our bodies by becoming overweight or obese.

In today’s world, controlling what we place into our mouth also pertains to drugs. And before you pooh-pooh my comments by telling me that the drug problem doesn’t affect us Jews, or is not a Jewish issue, let me inform you that it is estimated that every month at least six Orthodox Jews die of a drug overdose; and the reason I mention Orthodox Jews is because the Orthodox constitute the only Jewish community which has taken the problem seriously and for which we have even sparse statistics. Now extrapolate from the Orthodox community to the much larger Conservative, Reform, and non-affiliated Jewish population of this country, and you will have to admit that we, the American Jewish community, can no longer deny that we have a drug problem. Too many of our young people and older adults are not controlling what they are putting into their mouth. And today the issue is not the marijuana that some of my generation may have tried in college. Today’s drugs are many times more potent and powerful than they were forty-five years ago; today they involve heroin, cocaine, crystal meth, prescription pain killers, and more, including drugs that may be sitting in your medicine cabinets at this very moment.

Maybe a young person gets started in college; he or she attends a party – perhaps a fraternity or sorority party – and is encouraged to try something new. The social pressure is great, and maybe the student’s resistance and judgment are already impaired by the alcohol he/she has already imbibed. Today’s drugs are just so powerful that one can become addicted much more quickly than that person ever expected.

Or maybe the drug abuse begins after surgery or other hospital stay when one is administered opiates to reduce the pain, and then becomes hooked.

As hard as it is, we must train ourselves to control what we place in our mouth. That is part of what the Rabbis are teaching us.

But when our Sages convey that we are in control of our mouth, they also emphasize that we are in control of what emerges from our mouth. And here they are clearly referring to the words we utter.

The Midrash, from which the passage about the controllable and uncontrollable parts of the body derives, explains the choice we have concerning what emerges from our mouth. We can choose to utter words of Torah, words of sound advice, words of moral and spiritual inspiration, words of guidance; we can speak gentle words of endearment and comfort; we can choose to speak words of praise and encouragement; we can offer words of prayer or sing God’s praises. On the other hand, we can speak offensive words, words that are meant to hurt, to diminish someone else’s sense of self; we can speak gossip and slander; we can use pejorative or offensive language; we can curse other people or even God. The point is: *we* decide and control what types of words emerge from our mouth. It is with a great deal of wisdom that the Biblical book of Proverbs declares, מות וחיים ביד הלשון – Death and life are within the power of the tongue.

If you think about it, there are three classes of beings to whom we talk.

The first group contains just one person – ourselves. How many people here today talk to themselves, maybe not out loud, but at the very least internally? I know that the popular adage states that, “People who talk to themselves are either crazy or have money in the bank,” but, to be honest, everyone talks to himself/herself. And, by the way, a study published in a scholarly journal about a year ago demonstrated that people who do talk to themselves are considerably smarter than the average person. So go ahead and chat away to yourself.

But when you talk to yourself, I want you to keep a few points in mind.

First, do not be too hard on yourself, and I am being very serious here. I know there are people in this room of all ages who beat themselves up verbally. They say to themselves that they are worthless, that no one cares about them, that everything they do is wrong. If you are one of these people, please do not think ill of yourself. You *do* have worth, we *do* care about you, and you have something to contribute to others by being alive. You made some mistakes? Made some wrong decisions? Made some erroneous choices? – So what? We all make mistakes; we’re human; none of us is perfect. God understands that we are imperfect; that’s why God gives us second chances. That is part of what these High Holy Days are for. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur encourage us to focus on wiping the slate clean, and resolving to make better choices and decisions in the coming year. And never put yourself down. Remember, you were made in God’s image; the spark of divinity rests inside of you. You are important; you do have a purpose in life. As it says in Pirkay Avot, the part of the Mishnah that I call the “Book of Quintessential Jewish Wisdom”: אין לך אדם שאין לו שעה – There is no person who does not have his purpose.” And, yes, the world would be diminished if you were not in it. And, yes, you have a place here at the East Meadow Jewish Center because we do care about you. You should never feel alone.

Rather, all of us should speak words of encouragement to ourselves. We should build ourselves up, not tear ourselves down. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be self-critical; every person ought to be self-reflective; every person should evaluate his/her actions. Again, that is part of the function of the High Holy Days: each of us is bidden to engage in his/her own חשבון הנפש – spiritual self-evaluation: if we find ourselves lacking in certain areas, we must strive to improve during the coming year; if we reckon that we are performing appropriately in the moral, ethical, and spiritual aspects of our lives – great; we must strive to persevere. Yes, we must be self-critical, but we must realize that we also have to praise ourselves when we do well. However, we must not allow our self-praise to lead to arrogance or hubris. Nor must we ever speak to ourselves in such a way that we justify the wrongs that we have committed. The Biblical book of Proverbs is keenly aware that we humans tend to justify our actions to ourselves; twice it states, “All the ways of a man seem right to him,” but Proverbs also states that those who do so are fools, deluding themselves into a false sense of security.

So, by all means, speak positively to yourself. As the great sage Hillel enunciated, אם אין אני לי מי לי? – If I am not for myself – if I am not my own biggest supporter, my own biggest booster – who will be?

The second collection of people to whom we speak are other people – the members of our family, our friends, our colleagues, our acquaintances, even strangers. And we must control our mouth when we speak to them.

The Talmud demonstrates profound insight when it states that words can hurt more than blows. Physical wounds can heal, even broken bones can mend, but the pain inflicted by harsh words never is diminished.

That is why we must be careful with, and control, what emerges from our mouth. We must speak respectfully to all people; our words should be encouraging, sincere, and truthful.

As you know, Jewish tradition condemns those who use words to lie, deceive, gossip about, or harm other people. I have in years past shared with you the story of how Rabbi Akiva told a man who wanted to repent from the sin of gossiping how impossible it was to achieve: only if he would tear open a feather pillow on a windy day, and then gather all the blown-away feathers could the sin of gossip be atoned. The Talmud states that liars are as sinful as idolaters, that those who humiliate others through words are the equivalent of murderers and have no place in the world-to-come, that those who slander or even listen to slander should be thrown to the dogs, and that Gehinnom (Hell) opens its mouth wide for those who use lascivious speech.

And in this, the Age of the Internet, we know that hurtful words do not emerge only from our mouth; they emanate from the fingers we use for typing as well. How many people – especially young people – have been hurt, damaged, bullied, or even pushed to commit suicide by cruel and insensitive words placed on Facebook, Snapchat, or some other form of internet communication, through texting, sexting, or the like?!? Is it not a blot on our society that we allow such personal devastation to occur!?!

Our sages are correct: Life and death are truly within the power of the mouth, and we must control the words that emerge from ours. We must use our mouth to bring encouragement, counsel, comfort, and life to others.

The third entity to whom we should be speaking is, of course, God. After all, one of the reasons we are here in synagogue today is to pray to God.

I know that prayer is difficult; I know that prayer is hard. We Jews pray in a language that most do not understand, and, although we have English translations in our prayerbooks, they are opaque to us. Maybe deep down some of us may not believe in God, or may not believe that God actually hears and responds to our prayers; nonetheless, we know that this is the right place to be on Rosh Hashanah, and we want to make the effort to pray.

There are two types of Jewish prayer that should emerge from our mouth The first consists of blessings. You know, the prayers that begin ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם....

What are we doing when we utter a blessing? What we are doing is bringing an element of the divine into this world.

Whenever we pronounce or sing a blessing, we are bringing God and Godliness into the world. We are making a moment in our lives special, sacred, and holy. We are connecting ourselves to that which is eternal and infinite. We are making that moment pregnant with meaning and potential.

Because this chaotic world of ours needs to create as many sacred moments as possible, we must find as many opportunities as possible to pray a blessing: lighting Shabbat candles, making Kiddush, saying motzi over challah; saying a blessing before and after we eat; upon seeing a rainbow or other beautiful, awe-inspiring, or numinous natural wonder; upon drinking the wine, smelling the fragrant spices, and holding up our fingers to the candle at Havdalah; even upon emerging from the bathroom. The Sages of the Talmud suggest that each person should try to place himself or herself in situations so that he/she recites one hundred blessings a day. Why so many? – Because our Rabbis realized that we need to bring as much Godliness as we possibly can into this world of ours, and because they realized that allowing blessings to emerge from our mouth makes us kinder, more caring, more sensitive, more spiritual, and ultimately better human beings.

And then there is prayer in its many varieties – petitionary, in which we ask God for something, like good health, a job, success; praise, in which we proclaim God’s greatness; thanks, in which we thank God for bestowing His kindness upon us.

As you know, according to our Jewish tradition, words of prayer to God are to emanate from our mouth three times a day, every day. But isn’t that boring? Can’t saying the same prayers over and over again lead to rote recitation instead of fervency?

The same question emerges whether a Jew davens every day, only on Shabbat, or only on the High Holy Days. “But Rabbi,” I hear periodically, “It’s the same prayers every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.”

It’s a valid challenge. That’s the problem with a fixed liturgy; it doesn’t change very much. While our ancestors found comfort in a nearly immutable liturgy that links Jews throughout the world and throughout the ages, fixity does not accord with our modern emphasis on spontaneity and newness. But maybe that’s the point.

Don’t you find it curious that although we might dislike sameness in our prayers, we have no problem accepting it in other aspects of our lives? How many people gladly work out for hours on the same exercise machine several times a week, or play the same video games, or listen to the same music endlessly, or mindlessly repeat functions on a computer to succeed at work?!? But as a colleague of mine pointed out, the difference is that the fitness and professional worlds have succeeded in creating a more vivid picture of the end goal of these repetitive actions. We are surrounded by images of how you will look at the end, how these rote and repetitive actions will give you a ripped or sexier or healthier body, a higher degree, or a corner office.

Prayer – even when it is repetitious – also gives us an end-goal: it is a relationship with God and a better us.

As the great Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “Prayer is our attachment to the utmost… Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy.

“Prayer is a way to master what is inferior in us… Prayer teaches us what to aspire to. Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs.” Through prayer, we become better people. And, who knows? Perhaps by saying prayers and blessings we can make this a good year.

My friends, the great twentieth-century Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr composed a short prayer that speaks to the issue of control. This simple prayer, known as “The Serenity Prayer” has been adopted by many twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, but I think it can speak to all of us on these High Holy Days. Here is the prayer; you can say it along with me, if you know it:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

But courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference.

One part of the body that we do control is our mouth. If we have been putting into our mouth items we should not, then it is within our power to change that. If our mouth has uttered hurtful words, we have the power to change that, too. And if our mouth has been devoid of blessing and prayer, we can decide to remedy that situation as well.

May God grant all of us the courage to change what enters into and emerges from our mouth for the better, so that, as the rebbe said, *we* can make the coming year a good one.

Shana tova.