

The Power of Torah and Words

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5784

As many of you know, I live in Natick, about 55 miles from Temple Emanu-El. I've come to appreciate the time I spend commuting because I listen to audiobooks. I have always felt like there is not enough time to read all of the books I want to read or that have been recommended to me, so now I have a dedicated time to listen to these books and revisit stories and characters I dearly love.

Recently I listened to *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman. Gaiman is a masterful storyteller; his tales take me to a different universe, or really a variation of the one we live in, and his way with words is **sublime**.

The Ocean at the End of the Lane tells the story of a man who returns to his hometown to attend a funeral and is drawn back to a farm near his childhood home where he then remembers the strange, frightening, and magical experiences he had there in his youth with the people who lived at the farm. On my commute, as I listened to the story, I found myself profoundly moved by certain scenes.

I want to share with you part of one of them that touched me because it resonated with my relationship to Torah and Jewish sacred texts. In this scene, Neil Gaiman describes the power of magical words like this:

“I have dreamed of that song, of the strange words to that simple rhyme-song, and on several occasions I have understood what she was saying, in my dreams. In those dreams I spoke that language too, the first language, and I had dominion over the nature of all that was real. In my dream, it was the tongue of what is, and anything spoken in it becomes real, because nothing said in that language can be a lie. It is the most basic building brick of everything. In my dreams I have used that language to heal the sick and to fly; once I dreamed I kept a perfect little bed-and-breakfast by the seaside, and to everyone who came to stay with me I would say, in that tongue, ‘Be whole,’ and they would become whole, not be broken people, not any longer, because I had spoken the language of shaping. And, because Lettie was speaking the language of shaping, even if I did not understand what she was saying, I understood what was being said.”

-The Ocean at the End of the Lane pp. 56-58

I first heard the Hebrew language when I was 21 years old. I heard it at a Friday night service. Not long after that, I heard Torah and haftarah chanted. When I first heard Hebrew, it was a language I **did not know**. Sometimes Hebrew sounded like talking, and sometimes it was singing, or more like singing. The tunes were new to me, but somehow they felt familiar, and often the words rhymed and had a sort of rhythm. Even though I did not understand the **literal** meaning of what was being said, whether in a prayer or from Torah chanting, I

understood what was being said. I recognized the language as one of creative **power** and **truth**.

These ideas are fundamental to Jewish mysticism. The Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Formation or Creation, is a book of Jewish mysticism whose origin and dating are unclear and debated by scholars. This book describes how everything came into existence, and how God created the universe by means of language. It says, “God has engraved, hewed, weighed, converted, connected, and created with these 22 letters every living being, and every soul yet uncreated.”¹ In other words, God used the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to make everything.

This mystical text is not the only place in our tradition where we encounter the idea of words bringing things into existence. In our morning liturgy, we recite “Baruch sheAmar v’haya haOlam,” Blessed is the one who spoke and the world came into being. At the beginning of our Torah, in the first chapter of the book of Genesis, we read, “God said let there be XYZ,” followed by the creation of whatever God spoke. “Let there be light, and there was light.” “Let the earth sprout vegetation, and it was so.”

God’s words created, and those words are recorded in our Torah. Our Torah tells us this story. Our Torah is, in fact, a collection of **our** stories: our spiritual history as a people and the principles by which we strive to live. It explains something about who we are, where we came from, and who we wish to

¹ Sefer Yetzirah 2:2
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Rabbi Ashira Stevens

become. In short, Torah both tells about our creation and is a guide for our ongoing formation and shaping. I believe that Torah creates and shapes us when we engage with it, learn from it, and choose to live by its words.

When I first heard someone leyning Torah, I felt as though they were telling me the story according to how they understood it, and I wanted to be a storyteller like that. I wanted to understand the words of Torah for myself and so that I could share the way I read them with others. I thought learning how to chant Torah would open another door – a door to Jewish tradition, a door to somewhere sacred, maybe even a door to the Ineffable.

I was 26 when I first chanted Torah in public. I read a few verses from Parashat Pinchas in the book of Numbers. This portion does not open with a particularly comfortable story; it begins with an incident of violent zealotry which God seems to reward. As I prepared the verses, I thought about how I wanted to chant the words: which words would I emphasize; when would I chant more quietly; which parts would be louder. How would I tell the story in such a way to express my own discomfort with the violence while holding on to the sanctity of Torah? Despite the difficult content of the verses I had chosen, chanting them gave me an opportunity to tell the story in my voice and highlight what was important to me.

In those early days and months of chanting Torah, I often did not know exactly what I was saying. Much like the narrator in Gaiman's book, even though

I did not always understand what I was saying, I still perceived something of the essence of those words. I knew instinctively that the Torah is written in the language of what **is**, in the language that has the potential to create and form.

Even the recitation of words can have its own power. As I started chanting Torah more often, my hand would shake as I read. This shaking happened nearly every time I chanted for several years. My hand would shake so much that the yad would point to the wrong lines, rather than to the words I needed to read. Initially, I chalked this up to nerves and decided to read without a yad for a long time. I felt frustrated about not using a yad. People who noticed that I wasn't using one often looked worried or scandalized, and I was annoyed at myself for not getting my nerves under control.

I shared my frustration with my best friend. He offered a different way of thinking about my trembling hand. He suggested that what I called nerves was actually an indication of how important I felt it was to share our stories accurately. Yes, I had some stage fright too, but most of the shaking was not from a fear of performing. Rather, because I value what Torah has to say so much, and because I know how much power our words can have, my hand would shake from a sense of awe from the responsibility of storytelling. My friend suggested that I didn't believe Torah to be "just words."

He was absolutely correct.

Of course I was nervous about making mistakes, and I still am. However, I'm not nervous because of what I think people will think of **me**. Because these stories are written with words that can create or transform us or the world, I want to make sure the story I'm telling when I chant is actually the story as our tradition has preserved and transmitted it over the millenia.

Take a moment to think back to a time when words you heard or read touched you deeply. Perhaps, like me, a novel spoke to you. Maybe there is poetry which resonates with you. Or maybe you have received a love letter which profoundly moved you.

It is entirely possible that the words you remember reading or hearing only hold significance for you. That does not lessen their importance or meaning. Remember the power expressed by those words. It is that feeling I am trying to describe to you. That is what Torah, in the broadest sense of that word, is for me, and that is what I, as your rabbi, hope it can be for us together.

Words from our sacred text tradition – whether they are from the Torah, from our prayer books, or even from much more recent teachings and stories – are not “just words.” These words have tremendous potential for guiding, shaping, and transforming us, and in turn, our world.

Over the next few days and again at Yom Kippur, we will recite, sing, and hear **many** words. Some of them are quite ancient and others are more modern. Some will be in Hebrew, and others will be in English. Regardless of the

language, origin, or age of these words, you might not understand each and every one of them. You might find it challenging to relate to some of the metaphors and language used.

Even when we don't know what the words mean, or when we struggle with what they **do** mean, these words are more than "just words." These words have the ability to enter our hearts, give us a new perspective, and inspire us to grow spiritually and within our community.

So I offer this loving challenge as we move through our High Holiday season. When you don't understand something, pause for a moment. Notice how the sounds of the words affect you. Does the melody sound familiar, even if the tune is new to you? Does the rhythm of the words resonate with you, as though you and they are somehow on the same wavelength?

When you feel uncomfortable with the meaning of the words or find yourself not liking them, try to sit with that discomfort, to explore it. Try to understand where this discomfort comes from, what is inside it, and what it is trying to teach or say to you. Imagine having a conversation with the challenging words to come to a new understanding or appreciation of them and of the perspective they might offer.

Practicing this awareness, this intentional engagement with our words, can make each of our experiences of our services more personal and more meaningful. Going back to the novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the

language used is never identified or labeled. Nevertheless, the narrator perceived it to be powerful and understood something personal from the words. My deep hope is that you will understand something essential and true from our sacred words, that our words will give you something special just for you to take into the new year.

May the sacred words we encounter during these High Holidays enter our hearts, move our spirits, and guide us to find new blessings together in the coming year.