

Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

I love language and words. Some of the most precious non-Torah books in my home library are my dictionaries, thesauruses, and books that speak about language and the origin of words. Those of you who have listened to my sermons and classes over the years know that I value precise word translations and meanings.

One of the reasons why I'm fascinated with language and the precise meaning of words is because words matter. The most powerful words have helped launch social movements and cultural revolutions. The most effective words have instigated great change in public policy. . The right words at the right time can not only change history -- but change us.

For those of you who also care about words, I'm going to make it easy for you this Yom Kippur. No need to go through books and essays to know what we need to do to get the job done in the next 24 hours. Tonight I'm going to give you the 3 most powerful words and phrases for 5775. These are the phrases that I'd like to suggest you think about as we begin the most important day on the Jewish calendar. These are the words that matter, and can make a difference.

1) There's an old and totally apocryphal story about the nineteenth century French Jewish aristocrat Baron de Rothschild, whose wife was in her bedroom with a nurse, in the last states of delivery while he was sitting downstairs playing a game of cards with his friends. Suddenly they heard her cry, "Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu."

"Baron," said his friends, "go up to your wife. She needs you." "Not yet," said the Baron and continued playing cards. Five minutes later they heard a cry, "My G-d, My G-d." "Go up," said the Baron's friends. "Not yet," said the Baron and returned to his cards. Finally they heard his wife cry, "Gevalt." The Baron immediately rose and ran upstairs, saying, "Now is the time."

The story is, of course, about how Jews in the nineteenth century had to hide their identities. But there's another and simpler message: When we cry from the heart, someone listens.

That's the message of the Yom Kippur Viduy (confession), as today we cry and tell ourselves:
No more excuses.

"No excuses." Of all the messages used in business, politics, and in our personal lives, no phrase better conveys accountability, responsibility and transparency. *'No excuses'* means: I'm going to take responsibility, I'm going to get it done, and I'm not going to blame ANYONE else if I messed up or don't achieve what I promised. *No excuses* is the ultimate expression of accountability -- and accountability on Yom Kippur (and in life) is what we want, more than anything else.

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Why are we so good at fooling ourselves? Why are we such expert Excusiologists?

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, they lay down for the night, then went to sleep. A few hours later, Holmes woke up and nudged his faithful friend. "Watson look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions and millions of stars."

"What does that tell you?" Holmes asked.

Watson thought for a minute and said, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, I can see that G-d is all-powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?"

Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke. "Elementary, Dear Watson. It tells me that somebody has stolen our tent!"

Sherlock Holmes admonishes Watson that he looks but doesn't see. Anyone can look, but you have to learn to see.

Our self-interests hinder our ability to clearly see the facts before us -- which clouds our capacity for clear judgment. As the great Torah mussar ethicist Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said (paraphrased)

"There is a force within us called self-interest. This force pressures us to find excuses not to act, to avoid risk and flee from challenge. We all tend to prefer the easy way out. This inner force is 'bribery,' for it blinds our ability to see the facts as they really are."

It's natural to make excuses for poor performance -- blaming anyone and anything but ourselves. Do any of these sound familiar?

-- It's not my fault

-- It was someone else's fault

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-- Something else came up

-- I didn't have time

-- We've never done it that way before

Here's one of my favorite excuses:

A irritated corporate executive at a conference said: "I'm sick and tired of hearing all this stuff on excellence," he blurted out. "Our company is no worse than anyone else's."

Wouldn't that be a great motto to hand over an organization's entrance point or print on their stationery?

"We're no worse than anyone else."

-- It's true that I haven't been a very good husband and father this year, but I'm no worse than anyone else!

-- It's true I haven't been a very good Jew this past year. I don't come to synagogue very often, I'm not very observant or knowledgeable, but I'm not worse than any other Jew I know!

On Yom Kippur, there comes a moment when we summon the courage to be honest with ourselves. In the Viduy we say, *chatsi, avisi, pashati l'fanecha*. I blew it. No more excuses. That's the moment (like the Baron's wife) when all we can say is *gevalt*. All we can do is cry out. That's what Yom Kippur and the Viduy is. The sound of our tears. The sound of a heart breaking. I did it. I was at fault. *No excuses*.

2) The Middle East has undergone tremendous unrest in 2014, with serious security dangers on Israel's borders. Lebanon is dominated by the Iranian-backed terrorist group, Hezbollah. Turkey is led by the anti-Semitic President Erdogan, who in 2014 declared "no normalization with Israel." In Syria, President Bashar Assad continues to relentlessly murder his own citizens, with a death toll in the civil war above 190,000. In Iraq, ISIS has captured major cities in deadly conquests there and in Syria.

And there's Hamas. Following the brutal murder of three Israeli teens and weeks of incessant rocket fire from Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge. In the days that followed, Hamas continued raining rockets down on Israel's cities -- more than 1000 in one week. In Tel Aviv,

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Jerusalem, Ashdod and Ashkelon, air raid sirens sent millions of Israelis into the closest bomb shelters they could find. All of this followed what happened in June, when our 'Peace Partners' Abbas and the PA announced the formation of a Palestinian Authority unit government backed by Hamas.

But the most serious security danger is Iran. The West seems to be suffering 'Iran Fatigue'; they have either a) lost sight of the magnitude of the Iranian threat or b) fooled by Iran's 'charm offensive', no longer believing in the urgency of confronting Iran's nuclear quest.

What will happen? The Haggadah says, 'In every generation they arise to destroy us, but Hashem saves us from their hand. But how will all this play out? At this point, no one knows. Word number 2 for today and the coming year is: Israel. Hashem is running the show, but it's up to us to do our part, which means the following four things.

1) We shouldn't lose sight of our ability to influence the decision makers in our nation's capital. Pro-Israel activism achieves results. It ensures that the US - Israel relationship has overwhelming support in Congress -- from backing Israel's right to self-defense, to securing billions of dollars for critical security programs like Iron Dome and encouraging joint US-Israel initiatives in business, energy, high-tech, medicine and more.

We at NHBZ have a close, working relationship with AIPAC. Come with me to the AIPAC policy conference this coming March. Support AIPAC and the work of many other pro-Israel advocacy groups, both nationally and locally.

2) Speak up for Israel. By writing letters, regularly calling our legislators to encourage their support for Israel, we can insure that the legitimization of Israel will never go unchallenged. And educate yourself on how to talk about Israel.

3) One of the most effective, productive committees in NHBZ is our Israel Committee. Ably led by Rich Woolf, the NHBZ Israel committee reflects our congregation's unabashedly passionate pro-Zionist orientation. We have speakers and promote pro-Israel fundraisers. This past year we've had the wildly successful programs 'Slices for Soliders' and 'Shaving Israel.' Get involved with our Israel Committee.

4) Prayer works, and Israel needs your prayers. When the Kohein Gadol emerged from the Holy of Holies, he recited a prayer for the well-being of the people.

"And concerning the inhabitants of the Sharon he would say: May it be Your will, O G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that their homes not become their graves."

When we leave the synagogue after Yom Kippur, we'll celebrate the coming year and the opportunities we hope it will bring. But like the Kohein Gadol of long ago, will we remember the people of the Sharon and all of Israel --- those people whose lives are

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really in danger during the upcoming year? As the events of July 2014 showed so clearly, all of Israel faces very real threats. Do you pray daily for the welfare of Israel? If not, this is the year to begin.

Word number 2, then is *Israel*.

3) Joe and George went fishing. Joe was an experienced fisherman, George wasn't. Every time Joe caught a big fish, he put it in his ice chest to keep it fresh. Whenever George caught a big fish, he threw it back. Joe watched this go on all day and finally got tired of seeing George waste good fish. "Why do you keep throwing back all the big fish you catch?" Joe asked.

George said, "I only have a small frying pan."

Sometimes, like George the fisherman, we throw back the big plans, big dreams, big jobs, big opportunities that G-d gives us. Our imagination is too small. We laugh at George who didn't figure out that all he needed was a bigger frying pan; yet how ready are we to increase the size of our dreams?

Yom Kippur is a time to dream again, when we and all of creation is renewed. With the beginning of the New Year we should sense no limitations. After all, even Cubs fans have hope in spring training!

"Imagine" is still the most powerful word in the English language because it is inspiring, motivating, and has a unique definition for each person. When you want to inspire yourself, imagine is the language vehicle -- and our first word for 5775.

A shocking statement appears in Talmud: *Anyone who goes for seven days without dreaming is a wicked person.* What does that mean? And why seven days?

We can understand someone who goes six days without dreaming -- without thinking what life is about, your purpose in life, imagining what you'd like to achieve, what you'd like to accomplish. During the week we find ourselves caught up in the rat race, struggling to earn a living during the six days of striving. But then the seventh day -- Shabbos (and Yom Kippur!) -- arrives, and it's a time to dream.

There's an old saying that goes, 'If you can dream it, you can do it.' One of my favorite stories about the power of 'imagine' is told about actor and comedian Jim Carrey.

Before his career took off, Jim Carrey wrote a check to himself in 1987 in the sum of \$10 million. He hopefully dated it Thanksgiving 1995 and added the notation, "for acting services rendered." He visualized it for years and in 1994, he received \$10 million for his role in "Dumb and Dumber." Today, most top athletes and performers use the power of visualization to

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perform at their peak.

Nobel prize-winner Jonas Salk was asked how he went about inventing the polio vaccine. His reply: "I pictured myself as a virus or a cancer cell and tried to sense what it would be like."

Being able to dream, visualize and imagine is crucial because it's a tool for the creation of our future. Albert Einstein once said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." What did he mean?

When somebody asked Einstein what question he would ask G-d if he could ask one, he replied, "How did the universe start? Because after everything after that is just math." After thinking for a while, he changed his mind. He said, "Instead I would ask, 'Why was the universe created?' Because then I would know the meaning of my own life."

Memory is past. It's finite. Vision is future. It is infinite. Imagine who you want to be in the coming year. What am I here for? What can I achieve and accomplish in life? Where can my marriage and relationship with my family be? Where can I be in my career? In my relationship with Hashem? What kind of Jew do I hope to become? Just imagine.

Word # 3: *Imagine*

Conclusion:

The cosmetics company Elizabeth Arden makes a skin cream called Visible Difference. If you want to know whether it really works, you'll have to ask someone else. But *Visible Difference*: It's a great marketing ploy. It suggests that you will see a noticeable difference after use. It's also a great tagline for Yom Kippur. When we say we're going to change -- a month from now, next Yom Kippur -- will there be a visible difference?

If tshuva is done right, you should be able to see the change in yourself and so should others. When it comes to Yom Kippur, it's all about the returning, the recovery of relationships between ourselves and G-d, ourselves and others, ourselves and the person we diminished when we fell short of who we could have been.

How can we make a visible difference in ourselves this coming year? Three words or phrases:

- 1) No excuses
- 2) Israel
- 3) Imagine