

“WHEREAS, the need for mindfulness about how we speak is of critical importance today in the midst of the world around us; and WHEREAS, the ancient texts of Judaism hold timeless lessons for humanity about the imperative of guarding how we speak about others, The State of Colorado, by order from Governor Jared Polis, has declared November Clean Speech Month.”

Clean Speech Colorado is a community-wide initiative, bringing the Colorado Jewish community together for a month-long initiative to educate, inform, and raise awareness around the Jewish ideal that our words have power to foster community growth.

Why stop at the Jewish Community? Why not expand this idea to all of us, no matter what denomination or religion, race, creed or gender. Because at its core, Clean Speech starts with us. Not with those we elect, not those appointed, not those who control social media, we, as individuals, are in control of our words and our actions.

The Torah teaches that words are our most powerful tools for social change. Words can repair and destroy worlds – and people - in the blink of an eye. In addition, “There’s a verse in the Torah, in the book of Numbers that states the commandment to refrain from speaking to someone in a way that causes them anguish or pain or embarrassment or fear — you could summarize it as any kind of discomfort.”

Blaming others for divisiveness, for rioting, for actions unseemly, that means we are not taking responsibility for us. One-on-one, we need to really practice kindness, not just give it lip-service. We need to apologize not just for our words we spew but for the pain or anguish they may have caused. We need to think before we speak and we need to look at others before we look at ourselves. When someone uses words as a weapon, we need to speak up and tell them thoughtfully and respectfully that that is unacceptable. We should teach our children better and we should model that behavior for all around us.

As youth, we are taught that “Stick and stones can break our bones but names will never hurt us.” Middle schoolers know this isn’t true, we know it isn’t true. They do hurt and they can destroy confidence and wreck havoc on one’s mental health. And yet every day, whether it is physical looks, political stance, disabilities, orientation, people are demeaned and dismissed and derided.

I find as I get older, that I am even more surprised at peoples’ behavior, their words and their actions. As a parent, I tried to teach my children how much words matter and that kindness trumps all. As a teacher, I try to model that as well. If only that was a priority and focus for individuals we all come into contact.

While words matter, so does silence. Not speaking up can be as destructive as the words that flow forth. Neimoller said it best:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

My sincerest apologies for pointing out that trying to hold a meeting on the holiest of days for Jews might not be a good idea. I recognize that for many meeting is so very important in this time of isolation and quarantine. I apologize if my pointing that out hurt anyone; however, holding a meeting on that day, hurt mine as well. I said it, knowing I would not come. Is silence better? I am not sure I know the answer.

And so today is another day of mask wearing and distancing, another day of nothing being normal. We all are feeling weary and unsure. So maybe, just maybe we can remember this, these words to live by: “Keep your words soft and sweet -- you never know when you'll have to eat them.” (Thank you Rabbi)