

SHABBAT SERMON

Jonathan Magonet

We are living through what will probably be called one day 'the age of Trump', assuming that we survive long enough to write that history. There are many elements that define this period, but one of them has to be the overwhelming impact of consistent, compulsive lying as a form of public discourse and manipulation. This is not new, but rarely in a Western democracy has it been so deliberate, transparent, corrosive and corrupt. It is so blatant and obvious and so omnipresent that it sucks the air out of any normal political discourse. It can neither be ignored nor successfully combatted without enormous expenditure of energy and resources. Moreover, it is important not only to pay attention to what is being said, but to watch what is actually being done behind this smokescreen of distractions.

This is not my usual way of opening a Bible Week Shabbat sermon. But I have come to it because of the challenges posed by the first Psalm that we began to study this Bible Week. In the second verse of Psalm 120 we read: *'Adonai hatzilah nafshi mi-s'fat sheker mi-l'shon r'miyah.'* 'O Lord, rescue my soul from lying lips and a deceitful tongue.' From the way the Psalm continues there appears to be an obvious source of the Psalmist's distress – the daily encounter with the peoples amongst whom he or she lives, people who live in faraway lands like Meshech or Kedar; people who are deceitful, who hate peace and indeed are even eager for war. But such is the ambiguous nature of Psalms in general that it is also possible to internalise the meaning of the verse: to whom might these 'lying lips' and 'deceitful tongue' belong? Perhaps they could also belong to the Psalmist.

The Hebrew Bible contains serious concerns about the power of speech and the dangers that arise when it is misused. Psalm 34 asks the question: *'mi ha-ish he-chafetz chayyim, ohev yamim lir'ot tov'*, 'Who is the person who delights in life, who desires to see many good days?' (v 13) The question could have many dimensions, but the first response of the Psalmist is surprising, *'n'tzor l'shon'cha mei-ra oos'fatecha middaber mirmah'*, 'Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.' (v 14) The word *mirmah*, translated here as deceit, is a variation of the same word used in Psalm 120 in the phrase 'a deceitful tongue'.

Why is speech, the tongue, so important that the Psalmist considers that its proper use is an essential characteristic of someone who loves life? The reason is stated quite simply and bluntly in the Book of Proverbs: *'mavet v'chayyim b'yad lashon'*, 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue.' (Proverbs 18:21) But the potential of malicious words to cause catastrophic harm is already the theme of our Psalm: 'What do you gain and what more do you acquire, O deceitful tongue? The sharp arrows of a mighty warrior' (v. 3-4). Malicious speech is like a sharp arrow, and a midrash spells out the implications:

The tongue is compared to an arrow. Why? If you draw a sword to kill someone, the intended victim can beg for mercy and the would-be killer can have mercy and put the sword back in its sheath. But in the case of an

arrow, once it is shot and has begun to go on its way, even the shooter who might want to take it back, cannot do so. (*Midrash Psalms 120*)

The rabbis even said that the tongue is such a dangerous weapon that it has to be kept hidden from view behind two protective walls to prevent it doing harm. One wall is soft, the mouth, and the other is hard, the teeth.

The end of Psalm 120 is almost a counsel of despair. 'Long has my soul lived with those who hate peace.' If our life is spent in a world dominated by deceit, by hate speech, anything which undermines human relationships, it can inevitably affect us as well. We may give up hope of changing anything. Perhaps even worse, we may come to believe that we ourselves are immune to such distorted values and assume that only the others are the ones in the wrong, while we are guiltless. '*Ani shalom v'chi adabber heimah la-milchamah*' 'I am peace, but when I speak, they are for war.' (v. 7) As the rabbis warned:

Hateful speech harms three people: the person who speaks it, the person who hears it and the person who is the victim of it. (*Arachin 15b*)

Nevertheless, at the other end of the spectrum of Biblical opinions about speech, two other Psalm verses suggest a more positive understanding. The verses are familiar to Jews who regularly attend synagogue. At some point in the development of the Jewish prayer book these two verses were chosen to form a kind of enclosure around the Amidah, the central prayer of the Jewish service. The Amidah is composed throughout in the first person plural, expressing our collective hopes as we encounter God through the service. But the Amidah is preceded by a verse composed in the first person singular: '*Adonai s'fatai tiftach ufi yaggid tehillatecha*', 'Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare Your praise.' (Psalm 51:17) It expresses the hope that the one who prays may become so attuned to God that his or her words will be fully aligned with God's will. That is a lot, perhaps too much, for an individual to expect each time that he or she prays, but it remains as a constant spiritual hope and challenge. However, the verse that follows the Amidah is, in some ways, even more demanding: '*Yih'yu l'ratzon imrei fee v'hegyon libi l'fanecha, Adonai tzuri v'goali*', 'May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.' (Psalm 19:15) This verse asks that there be a complete agreement between the thoughts that lie within our heart and the words that we speak aloud. God desires consistency and integrity between what we think, what we say and what we do. But striving to achieve this is entirely our personal responsibility.

I do not want to give Trump, his enablers, supporters and surrogates the last word. Paradoxically, what he has managed to achieve, even if completely unintentionally, is to awaken our awareness of exactly the sort of issues played out in this Psalm. When we become lazy and pay no attention to the power of words, their use and abuse, we become alienated from truth, from responsibility and from ourselves. Psalm 120 begins, '*el Adonai ba-tzarata li karati vaya'aneni*', literally, 'To the Lord in my distress I called out and He answered me.' But in the rest of the Psalm there is no obvious evidence that God has answered. So, like the Psalmist, while we wait for God to 'open our lips', we must undertake our personal task, of making sure that the words of our mouth match the feelings and intentions in our heart. The task was well expressed by Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman: 'When we think about the words we use, perhaps it is best to be guided by these three questions: Is it true? Is it necessary? And, most of all, is it kind?'¹

Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
des Innern, für Bau
und Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS



Bistum

Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

¹ Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman, www.myjewishlearning.com/rabbis-without-borders/is-gossip-always-evil/