The Power of Words

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Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 7:30 PM, EDT, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time. He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com

The Haggadah is a prime example of using words to convey Jewish history and tradition. The word Haggadah means ‘telling,’ and we ‘tell’ the story of our liberation from bondage with words of praise and study. But like most things, words are a two-edged sword. They can sustain a nation and its heritage and, as the Haggadah reminds us, they can cause great suffering.

In the *maggid*, the narrative section of the Haggadah, there is a Midrash on four verses at the end of Deuteronomy (26:5-8) that summarize the Exodus story. The second of these verses reads:

> The Egyptians did evil to us and afflicted us
>
> They laid heavy work upon us.

The simple sense of the verse (the peshat) is that the second half explains the first half. That is, the ‘evil and affliction’ that the Egyptians did refers to the ‘heavy work’ that they imposed on us.

The Midrash quoted in the Haggadah, however, sees each of the expressions in the verse as referring to a distinct part of the story. "The Egyptians did evil to us" is taken as a reference to what Pharaoh said to his people about the Israelites. The Haggadah quotes a verse:

Come let us be cunning with them,

Lest they multiply

And should war happen, they would join our enemies… (Exodus 1:10).

I have often wondered why the Midrash sees this as "doing evil to us." After all, the Egyptians hadn't yet done anything to afflict us. What evil is there in words?

The Midrash, however, is calling our attention to a subtle part of the story that might otherwise get lost in the greater drama, namely, the role of words in the process of enslavement. Pharaoh portrayed the Israelites as potential traitors, who in the next war might join Egypt's enemies. This provided the legitimacy for the oppression and slavery that followed.

This tragic pattern repeated itself often in our history, as words that demonized us were followed by bloodshed. In the Middle Ages, accusations of "Christ-killers" led to terrible discrimination against the Jews, as well as to pogroms and expulsions. In the last century, the Nazis paved the way for the Holocaust by calling Jews "vermin" and "sub-human."

There is often a temptation to ignore words, especially extreme words, and to dismiss them as the ranting of lunatics. But history shows that there is a price to pay for this denial and for the lack of response that it enables. Once ideas take hold in the popular imagination, they are hard to dislodge.

We are witnessing this in our own generation. Anti-Semitism is being mainstreamed via accusations of apartheid and genocide regarding Palestinian Arabs. False accusations against Israel have led directly to justifying, or at least "understanding," the suicide bombers who for decades killed innocent civilians, and then the war that Hamas launched on Oct. 7.

The Haggadah's point about the power of words calls us to be aware of how we use them: to reserve them for the purpose of enhancing life and creating blessing, and to be wary of inappropriate condemnation. Mindfulness about our words is part of walking with God.

Of course, there is still good and evil in the world. Some people are truly dangerous, and there is a terrible price to pay for not taking action to protect ourselves. As we found out through the appeasement that led to the Second World War, we ignore warning signals at our own peril.

In the Jewish tradition, when we hear allegations we do not need to wait for absolute proof before taking precautions; by then it might be too late. The Talmud teaches that while one may not accept *lashon ha-ra* (negative reports) as truth, one is obligated to take precautions based on such reports. (For a fuller discussion of this, see Talmud Niddah 61a; Rambam,

Rotzeach 1:14; *Mesillat Yesharim* by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, chap. 20.)

This nuanced approach is very typical of Jewish teaching, which seeks to balance the various concerns in a moral way. We are not to condemn based on negative reports, nor are we to be sitting ducks who don't act until it is too late.

On this night of celebrating our liberation, we recall that our bondage began with evil words. Remembering the power of words, the Haggadah calls us to use words only to enhance life and to bring blessing.

POSTSCRIPT

I recently saw a remarkable Facebook post by Mustapha Ezzarghani, a Moroccan Muslim who is the president of the Moroccan-Israeli Friendship Association. He speaks about how words are being used to fuel hatred of Jews. As I read it, I thought how similar his description is to what we have been discussing about the power of words. I am including, below, selections from his post, edited slightly for clarity and brevity. You can find the entire post at: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18FjUrjzsT/. It is well worth reading, as are many of his other Facebook posts.

"I never imagined that one day I would be sitting in America, this country that opened its doors to me, watching a man like Tucker Carlson speak about Jews in a way that feels so painfully familiar. Familiar not because it is American, but because I have heard its echo before, in another language, in another continent, in another life.

"I grew up in Morocco, a Muslim country with a deep and complicated relationship with its Jewish history. And I learned something very early: antisemitism rarely introduces itself honestly. It disguises itself. It speaks in clever language. It pretends to be about politics, about power, about 'questions.' But beneath all of it, there is always the same old poison: the belief that Jews are somehow too influential, too present, too dangerous.

"As a Moroccan Muslim, I reject this story. Because I know what happens when these ideas are left unchallenged. I have seen how they spread quietly in conversations, then loudly in crowds, and eventually violently in actions. I have seen how a people who lived for centuries among their neighbors can suddenly become 'the other,' the enemy within.

"I know how quickly 'criticism' turns into dehumanization. I know how easily people convince themselves that they are just asking questions, while repeating the oldest hatred known to humanity.

"And to those who think they are simply engaging in 'honest discussion,' I say this: history has already heard your arguments. It has buried them. And it will not forgive those who choose to revive them.

“To my Jewish brothers and sisters in America: you are not alone. Not in this country, and not in this moment. There are voices, Muslim voices included, that see clearly what is happening and stand firmly against it.”