



Torah for Turbulent Times

"Our Power Tools"

To be sure our words matter all year long, but there's something about the High Holidays that puts them front and center on our radar. Perhaps it's the pages and pages (and pages) of spiritually loaded words we see in our prayer books. Or, maybe it's the meaningful melodies sung to the myriad of words. Or this year, the greetings and words that we'll hear and share with family, friends and community over Zoom. Of course, our focus on the words we use is also part of the shift towards introspection, surveying how we've done over the past year. Did we meet all of our commitments? What did we lose and what did we gain? What do we wish we'd have done or not done? Which words do we wish we would've shared and which words do we wish we would've kept to ourselves? With just less than three weeks until Rosh Hashanah, the magnetic force of the Jewish new year is pulling us towards it - to begin anew.

With this in mind, I share a favorite Jewish folktale about someone who needed to seek forgiveness for his words. Perhaps you've heard this one? As the new year approached, the seeker went to the wise man's home, whom he had not spoken so kindly about, to ask for forgiveness. The wise man said he'd forgive him on one condition: that he go home, take a feather pillow from his house, cut it up, and scatter the feathers to the wind. After he had done so, he was to return to the wise man's house. Though puzzled by this strange request, the seeker was happy to be let off with so easy a penance. He quickly cut up the pillow, scattered the feathers, and returned to the house. "Am I now forgiven?" he asked. "Just one more thing," the wise man said. "Go now and gather up all the feathers." "But that's impossible, the wind has already scattered them," the seeker replied. "Precisely," the wise man answered. "Though you seek to correct the words that you've spoken, it's as impossible to repair the damage done by them as it is to recover all the feathers."

Sometimes the damage, small or large, has been done and it feels impossible to make amends. Just like recovering all the feathers, it seems far-fetched. Of course we could declare, "well forget it then, what's the use." But, our words are "power tools," yielding unbelievable power. Indeed, we may not recover all the feathers or be able to repair or correct all the words misspoken. But, if we seek out opportunities to make amends to the best of our ability, then at least we can gather up and repair some of them.

-Rabbi Mark