

Abraham Lincoln was known for his candor. “Honest Abe” he was called, because once, as a store clerk in Springfield, Illinois, he walked miles to return a few cents he had accidentally overcharged. He rode that reputation to the Illinois State House, Congress, the Senate, and eventually the White House.

After the Union’s monumental victory at Gettysburg in July 1863, the Confederate Army was caught in retreat by a Potomac River overflowing from rain. They were trapped, exposed, and vulnerable. The Union Army might have been able to end the war right then. President Lincoln ordered General George Meade to attack, but General Meade, knowing his army was still battered from the Battle at Gettysburg, took some time to gather his forces. By the time they could muster to battle, the river had receded and General Lee’s army was able to escape.

Lincoln was furious. Word of his disappointment got to Meade, who offered his resignation. In response, Lincoln grabbed his pen and wrote to Meade: “My dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of this misfortune... He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with the other late successes, have ended the war.” Lincoln laid it all out for Meade, that he could have ended the Civil War right then. He continued: “Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.”

That beautiful prose might sound reserved and considered to us, but that was Lincoln tearing into Meade, his disappointment boiling up into near fury. Reading Lincoln’s words would have hurt Meade in his soul.

A good thing, then, that Lincoln never sent the letter.

President Lincoln was honest and forthright, but we learned after his death that he had a unique habit: when he was angry or frustrated with someone, he would write “hot letters.” He would pour out all his wrath in words, get it out of his system, and bury the sharp words forever. Then, with a cooler head, he would reach out in a spirit of repair and resolution.

We've all felt the way Lincoln felt, livid with what someone had done. I know i have. We feel the instinct to let our words fly, to hastily write an email or a text filled with all the ire of our disappointment and disapproval, just as Lincoln did. If we are smart like Lincoln, we spew the words out, then press "delete." If we do reply, we do it with calm and consideration, being intentional with our words not to make the situation worse.

Lincoln knew the power of language, to inspire and to harm. At Gettysburg, Lincoln chose words to inspire a nation. A few days later, he chose to hold back words, knowing that words can also tear down a human being. Being intentional with our words, choosing them and choosing when to use them, is one of our deepest moral obligations.

Tonight, as we entered into Yom Kippur, our full day of confession, we began with an admission that we don't always use our words with intentionality. Kol Nidrei is our admission that we do not always live up to our responsibilities with our speech. When we sing and say the words of Kol Nidrei, we admit that we make oaths, commitments, resolves to God that we are unable to fulfill, and we have to nullify them. Why? Because we know that our words have power. If there is doubt as to the reliability of the words that we speak, our souls are tormented. We should not use words frivolously; we should use them with intentionality.

"You shall not swear falsely by the name of the ETERNAL your God," and "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," our Ten Commandments instruct us. In the Book of Proverbs, we read that "One who guards their mouth preserves their life¹," and "Death and life are in the hand of the tongue²." Each of these teachings guides us to guard our words as we would our lives.

¹ Prov. 13:3

² Prov. 18:21

The rabbis go even further; they see our power of speech as our single most essential characteristic, the one that makes us the most like the Holy One. With words God brought the universe into the being, and bestowed upon us the creative power of speech. Our ability to speak is what demonstrates that we are human, and what makes us divine. It is our power of speech that truly makes us created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. It's not that we look like God, or that we can think like God, or act like God. It's that we, unlike all the other animals, can speak, just like God. The power of speech is not just practical; it is spiritual and it is fundamental to who we are. As the Maharal of Prague wrote, "The pure soul alone is not the complete essence of a human being. Rather, the essence of a person is the power of speech that is expressed by...the tongue. For a human is composed of both a physical [body] and a soul. Speech is unique to humanity, since no animal can speak. Speech is rooted in the soul [and yet is...physical...] and therefore it is the essence of the human."³

When we speak, he taught, we share our souls with the world. The words we use touch the souls of everyone who hears them. That is why we have to use them wisely. Gossip, we are told, is as bad as cutting someone with a blade; they both cause the face to flush white as blood runs out. Words can be so dangerous, we read in the medieval ethical collection *Orchot Tzadikim*, that there are times that we should prefer to stay silent. "One who is accustomed to be silent is saved from many transgressions: from flattery, from mockery, from gossip, from lies and blasphemies. For when one is shamed and reviled, if one answers back, then the offender will double their reviling and insults."⁴

Words carry the power to create a universe, to fill a heart with love, to heal a nation in mourning. But our words can hurt the people we love the most. Sometimes our words disappoint and disparage those who look to us for reliability and support. So, we must be extremely careful with

³ *Netivot Olam*, "Netiv HaLashon," Chapter 2.

https://www.sefaria.org/Netivot_Olam%2C_Netiv_Halashon.2.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

⁴ *Orchot Tzadikim*, Chapter 21. https://www.sefaria.org/Orchot_Tzadikim.21.6?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

what words we use, and when. That is why Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin, in his collection *Cheshbon HaNefesh* wrote, “Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect, ‘What benefit will my speech bring me or others?’”⁵ Choosing our words to maximize the benefit we bring to those around us is core to our emotional and spiritual well-being. It is how we preserve and cherish the holiness with which we have been created.

More than ever before, our daily lives are inundated with words. For generations, our tradition was passed down orally, because there were no books, no computers, no devices. The Torah scroll was state of the art technology in its time. We made it our practice to read from it publicly on Mondays, Thursdays, Shabbat, and Festivals so that our people, most of whom could not read, would learn our tradition. The printing press kicked off a new era of rising literacy rates, as pamphlets, newspapers, and books, became easily available. If we think about the two hundred years since Rabbi Leffin and President Lincoln, our lives have slowly been increasingly lexically inundated, saturated with words and words and words.

Then came the telegram and the telephone, allowing two people to share words with each other across a distance. Then radio and television came to deliver words and ideas to the masses. Three channels became 5 became 50 became 500. TVs gave way to computers, which brought us the internet; the internet migrated to smart phones. Smart phones platformed social media, and now, it's words upon words upon words upon words.

William Shakespeare was one of the greatest wordsmiths in human history. The phrases he penned are still used every single day, some so famous and common that people don't even realize they are quoting from him. For his time, he was well read, immersing himself in language.

⁵ Cheshbon HaNefesh, 96:2.

https://www.sefaria.org/Cheshbon_HaNefesh.96.2?vhe=hebrew|Warsaw,_1894&lang=en&with=all&lang2=en

But, as the writer Pico Iyer noted, we today read or hear more words in a given day than Shakespeare did in his entire lifetime.⁶

The numbers are truly staggering. In Shakespeare's, Leffin's or Lincoln's time, people would read a few dozen books in a year. They read by candle, much like we are this evening. They let the flickering lights warm their spirits and calm their souls in ways that no screen can. A century later, in the early 1900s, those few dozen books rose to fifty. By the 1980s, we were reading, seeing and hearing enough words to fill 40 newspapers a day, nearly 3,400 pages worth of newspapers, letters, and the evening news. That quadrupled by 2007⁷. And now? Americans consume an average of 12-13 hours of media every single day, a non-stop deluge of words. Some of them are beautifully penned, poignant, and deeply meaningful. There is still poetry, love songs, great novels, and compelling history. But so many of the words we consume are, at best, noise. We no longer live in the world of Shakespeare; we live in the world of Snapchat.

The sheer volume of words isn't even the worst part. The worst part is that we have given over to the media companies control over what we read, hear and see. We have allowed them to keep us coming back for more, day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute. The algorithms are designed to reward us with likes and follows, like a slot machine paying out. They validate our sense of self by showing us people who love the same things we love, and perhaps even more powerfully, people who hate what we hate. The algorithms even learn how to keep us from turning away. Whenever we close an app, they remember what we were looking at, whatever made us think, "Ok, that's enough, I'm done." And then make sure we don't see that again. Everything is designed to keep us scrolling through more and more, chasing that hit of dopamine that comes from watching puppies jump around in the snow, or the latest fashion trends for middle-aged dads. A few

⁶ *The Art of Stillness*, Pico Iyer. Published 2014.

⁷ <https://summeroff.substack.com/p/the-information-avalanche-how-much>; Substack of tech analyst Vladimir Summeroff.

years ago, Bill Maher famously called out the social media companies, comparing them to the tobacco industry. “Checking your likes,” he said, “is like the new smoking.”⁸ Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, just agreed to pay \$12.7 billion to avoid facing that accusation in court.⁹

But the social media platforms are only offering us something that we have shown we want, over and over again. We shouldn’t be asking how they keep us hooked, but we should also be asking ourselves what makes us log on in the first place? Is it loneliness? Boredom? Is it to cover up the thoughts running through our heads? Studies suggest some of it isn’t even intentional. Cal Newport, in his book *Digital Minimalism*, described it like this: “At the slightest hint of boredom, you can now surreptitiously glance at any number of apps...for an immediate and satisfying dose of input from other minds.”¹⁰ I’m one of those people who, without feeling or hearing a message alert, will check my phone anyway, just to see if I missed anything. I’m not alone. In 2019 Consumer Affairs reported that the average American checked their phone 39 times a day. Now, it’s 205.¹¹ We are obsessed with filling our minds with words.

Proverbs, *Orchot Tzadikim*, and countless other teachings in our tradition warned us to be careful how we use our words, and to err on the side of safety and silence. Their warnings came in a media-quiet world. In our cacophonous media environment, we should heed their warnings not only for the words that come from our mouths, but also for ones we let in through our eyes and ears.

If he were alive today, Rabbi Leffin would not only have warned us about the words we speak, he would have written, “Before you open your eyes and ears, ask yourself, ‘what benefit will

⁸ <https://youtu.be/KDqoTDM7tio?si=Y0pEi6fbML222HeI>

⁹ The total settlement was \$18 billion, 70% of which Meta is responsible.

<https://finance.yahoo.com/technology/ai/articles/meta-18-billion-settlement-could-005623595.html>

¹⁰ *Digital Minimalism*, Cal Newport. Published 2019. Page 101.

¹¹ https://www.consumeraffairs.com/cell_phones/cell-phone-statistics.html, accessed 9/19/2026.

this YouTube video bring me?” We have to remind ourselves that we are in control. We can choose to ignore the notification. We have the power to stop scrolling.

Tomorrow morning, we are going to read: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live, —by loving the ETERNAL your God, by heeding God’s commands, and by holding fast to [God]. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure.”¹²

Choose life. Proverbs told us that death and life are in the tongue, in the words we choose. They are also in the ear, in the eye, and in the mind. In a world when words can touch our souls so readily and so easily, our ability to negotiate how we let those powerful words **in** is a most important task. We have the power, and the responsibility, to choose what words we welcome into our lives.

We can delete the apps, or turn off the notifications- the people we love and the words that nurture our souls aren’t going anywhere.

We can set timers, limits, and blockers- our favorite accounts will still be there waiting for us after we’ve given ourselves a break.

We can even just put the phones down and put them away.

Pico Iyer had a novel suggestion. To the companies he worked with, he suggested they create for their staff regular time and space for quiet contemplation. He guided them to side a time every week when everyone disconnects from their devices. I’m so glad he reminded the world of something we Jews have known for 3000 years, the power of Shabbat. That taking a break once a week to unplug and power down from the hustle and bustle, to be present for those right in front of us, not wondering what someone across the world might post, is good for us, for our minds and our souls.

¹² Deuteronomy 30:19-20

Kol Divrei - Choosing All Our Words
Sermon for Kol Nidrei 5787
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

We have the power to choose to fill our minds with words that are rich and deep, not fleeting and frivolous. Words of Torah and tradition, of prose that raises our heartrate, and poetry that makes our soul weep. Words of love and friendship, of insight and innovation. Those are the words we should choose to let into our lives, and do our best to keep the noise out.

When we uttered the words of Kol Nidrei, we asked that the vows we make in the coming year that we could not bring to fruition be set aside, and that we be forgiven for our error of words. This year, let us choose words that are intentional and deliberate, meaningful and holy.

Let us choose to speak them, write them, hear them, and read them. Words that uplift our spirits and give our souls life.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, may this be God's will.

Aleinu, p. 116