

Yom Kippur Morning / 5770
Rabbi Benjamin David

For a number of years now, Rabbi White and I have sat by the side of individuals from our community as they breathed their last. I have watched as in their final days our dear members have faded from wakefulness to sleep, pulses slowing to a stop, loved ones shedding tears large and heavy as they held each other's hands close and held memories close and attempted to utter a goodbye.

A rabbi's job is to provide support and courage, sharing the words of our tradition in a manner that will bring a hint of light to the dark, some softening of the pain.

I often wonder: Can words heal? I mean, in the end, can words change what is? Can words, just words, alter how we feel or how others feel?

Referring us to the powerful words of prayer and the powerful words of study and the power of words of compassion, Judaism answers YES.

The world was created with words. The Israelites were freed from Egypt with words. We can build and we can destroy with words. They are so strong, maybe even stronger than we realize.

This summer I read a book titled *The Four Things that Matter Most* by Dr Ira Byock. The book, though not a Jewish book per se, reinforces the rather Jewish idea that words are sacred and can be used for immeasurable good.

Dr Byock is a palliative care physician, which is to say that he cares for those who are dying.

His book is about what we need to say when loved ones are at the end. What do you say? What can I say? Dr Byock has a strategy. He writes four phrases above his patient's bed and everyone who comes to visit is encouraged to say all four.

The four phrases are: I love you. Thank you. Please forgive me. I forgive you.

And with these will come, if not closure, then the beginning of closure, if not peace outright, then the beginning of peace.

As he says: These four short sentences carry the core wisdom of what people who are dying have taught me about what matters most in life.

It seems so simple. Love. Thanks. Apology. Forgiveness. It seems so obvious. But it's not obvious and it's not easy, even at the end, or especially at the end, when we just want to say the right thing, when we know time is running out, when we're just grasping. We're just walking emotion and prayer and hope.

I have come to believe that, for every single one of us, saying these four phrases, *while there is still time*, is not only important, it's a mitzvah. It's a must.

I love you. Perhaps the most loaded, the most critical, the most impossibly elusive three words in the English language. I love you. You and I, I and you, we are connected by love.

In speaking with a couple that had just celebrated their seventieth anniversary, I just had to ask: What's your secret? The husband said it's no secret: We say I love you every night before bed.

For seventy years those three syllables reminded them of who they are.

Those words, as no other words could, managed to capture seven decades' worth of family and challenge and loyalty, seven decades of story and true partnership.

A few weeks ago I again heard the 9-11 recordings. I think of the one word that all of them shared, the one term that linked every passenger aboard United Flight 93

and everyone inside the other two ill-fated planes and the two crumbling towers and all of us in the days afterward, when we seemingly had nothing at all but each other, when we had nothing else save that one precious word: Love.

Maybe that's all we have. Period.

So why do we wait? How much do we assume when we wait? We say those three words and we trade a bit of me for we. We give voice to the us that is marriage, that is parenthood, that is friendship.

We say 'I love you' and we tell those in our life: I am here, I am with you. I am not waiting to say it. We cannot wait to say it. So that they know it and so that you know – *you are sure* – they know it.

Thank you. Jewish tradition teaches that we should begin every day not with the *Shema*, not even with Torah, but with the word: *Modeh*. Thank you. I am thankful to You my God: for granting me another day, for giving me another chance, for allowing me to get out of bed and put my feet on the floor and make this day into something.

Thank you for being with me – me of all people – as you were with Joseph on his journeys and Moses and Miriam on theirs. Just as they were not alone, I am thankful to You O God that I am never alone.

Of course the Hebrew is ambiguous, as the Hebrew always is, and we might translate it to mean: Thank you to the people in my life. Thank you to my spouse, my partner, my parents, my grandparents. Thank you. You guide me and you listen to me and you share your time with me. And I'm not taking that for granted. Thank you for helping to make me into me. I'm not taking it for granted.

Thank you for being kind to me, just being kind to me in this world that can so often be so unkind. I'm not taking it for granted.

We Jews, we must have an attitude of gratitude. Look where we've been. Look at what we've endured. Look at our community now. Look at the blessings. There are so many blessings. Thank you, two simple words, help us give voice to that endless sense of appreciation.

I am sorry. Yom Kippur is about atonement. More than it is about responsive readings or fasting, Yom Kippur is about extending a hand to those who we have wronged. In the face of our stubbornness, it is about breathing deep and reaching out and saying: I am sorry. I was wrong. I am admitting now that I was wrong.

We watch athletes and celebrities apologize amidst press conferences and camera lights. We read the apologies of politicians. Theirs is public, perhaps forced, often scripted. Our apologies should be the opposite: intimate and sincere.

Like the apology given by Joseph's brothers as they bow low before their sibling in humility. They had thrown him into a pit, sold him into slavery, told their father he was dead, let him sit in a prison in the heart of Egypt.

Their words cannot change what was, but they can change what will be.

These mighty warrior brothers who had made Joseph feel so small, never do they seem as mighty as when the Book of Genesis draws to a close and they achieve the real victory that is reconciliation.

Their apology will literally allow the Jewish story to be written. The Torah cannot go on without it. What will your apology allow? What door will be opened?

Every one of us owes someone an apology. Today is the day we make that apology.

And, finally, I forgive you. A 2006 study noted that those who forgive are not only happier, but are healthier than those who hold grudges. We carry those burdens heavy on our shoulders. Who among us has not been hurt? I know there is anger.

In some way each one of us is Joseph, thrown into a pit of pain, bruised by what others have said, aching because of how we were treated, humiliated, what they said, what they didn't say, the pain they caused us or, worse, the pain we caused ourselves. We are Joseph, not sold off, but shrugged off, embarrassed, saddened. We are Joseph, wallowing behind bars of confusion and resentment, sometimes a seemingly impossible despair.

And we are Joseph, you and I, we are the children of Joseph, and thus it is our practice to forgive.

Joseph's words heal all those gaping wounds, his own and his brothers'. The Talmud teaches that the forgiving words of one, in an instant extinguish the hateful words of ten. Imagine what our forgiving words might achieve.

Let's say what must be said. Let's give voice to our love and our gratitude, our apologies and forgiveness. All of us, husbands and wives, partners and parents, sons and daughters, grandchildren, our time is limited, and so for their sake and for ours, we must speak.

Amen.