



Weekly Clergy Message

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Guarding the Tongue Leads to a Powerful Encounter

Tazria-Metzorah

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Be careful what you say in elevators — or waiting for them. We've all seen the signs in hospital elevators reminding doctors and nurses not to discuss their patients' conditions while in public spaces. In Hebrew this cautionary concept is called "*Sh'mirat HaLashon*"— literally "guarding the tongue." In this particular instance, it means preventing unwise speech from leaving our mouths. Unwise for reasons of breach of confidentiality, or the fact that what is said could be hurtful to someone else who is in ear shot. A timely reminder of this important principle occurred as I was waiting for an elevator at the 10th Anniversary J Street National Conference in Washington earlier this week. Timely, in as much as *Tazria-Metzorah*, this week's *parasha*, deals extensively with the ramifications of inappropriate speech.

As Karen and I left our hotel room, heading down to one of many Monday morning sessions at the conference, we were still undecided as to which ones we would attend. The conference had a clergy track and the recommended session at that hour was to be given by Yossi Klein Halevi, a noted Israeli-American author and journalist. A political centrist who writes for the op-ed pages of leading American newspapers, Halevi is a former contributing editor to *The New Republic*, and currently a Senior Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. His session was to discuss his forthcoming book: "*Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor: Meditations on Zionism and Reconciliation*" with Huda Abarquob. A former Fulbright scholar, Abarquob is the Regional Director for the Alliance for Middle East Peace. She is a prominent leader in conflict resolution, social change education and activism, and a committed advocate for building strong people-to-people Israeli-Palestinian relations. We were trying to decide if Karen would go with me or to another session and then we would compare notes afterwards. While waiting for the elevator and debating the issue, a lovely soft-spoken gentleman standing with us spoke up. "I think the 'Letters' session should be pretty good. BTW, and this is the problem of not wearing my nametag—I'm Yossi Klein Halevi." We all had a laugh at the situation, but while riding down with Halevi in the elevator I could not help but think, not that we had any reason to, but I'm surely thankful that, in discussing the issue, neither Karen nor I said anything negative or critical about Halevi.

Halevi's dialogue with Abarquob was profoundly moving and it may have been one of the best sessions that I attended. Both speakers spoke from the heart on what it means for two peoples, living side-by-side, to be trapped in a cycle of denial. Halevi referred to having, for so much of his life, heard the term "Palestine" as an "act of linguistic aggression." Abarquob, as respondent, spoke of "the need to belong to a place that represents you." Both discussed the necessity to reconfigure our approach to peacemaking to be "the approach of an open heart," agreeing that what's needed is an emotional map, not a geographical one. Halevi said that we should be getting out of our comfort zones—not only to speak with our favorite groups, but those who have different opinions. In this, he was referring to Israeli

and Jews with each other, Palestinians with each other and the two groups together. These urgent times call for us to find “partners in anguish — not cheerleaders and not critics.” Halevi further discussed how our daily lives are shaped by our narratives and how we must have mutual recognition of our conflicting narratives. Abuarquob emphasized the need to tell our stories of co-existence and reconciliation. At the end of the session both presenters made a commitment to “taking their act on the road” in both the Israel and Palestinian territories, as well as abroad.

I congratulated Halevi at the end of the session telling him how this beautiful dialogue had inspired an idea that I wanted to share with him. He freely offered me his e-mail to do so. I doubt that had I not been cautious in my use of language earlier that morning, his reception would not have been as generous with me.

I learned a great deal at the J Street conference this year and I hope to encourage some of you to join me in attending one day. Perhaps the most important lesson is that all speech must be carefully watched (guarded) so that it be productive and respectful.