

Temple Beth-EI
September 2015 Bulletin Article

Dear Friends,

One of the Torah's most surprising areas of focus is the words we speak. We are commanded to be faithful to our promises, not to take the name of God in vain, and not to tell tales. We are told that one who perjures themselves in court is subject to the penalty that was to be given to the person who was accused of the crime. Indeed, when it comes to the power of words, our rabbis went so far as to teach that one who slanders another ought to be seen as being guilty of murder, for their words have "killed" the reputation of another. And once spoken, words are almost impossible to take back. Though they may appear to be ephemeral and fleeting, the words we use have lasting impact, so we are commanded to be thoughtful in how we speak.

...so the other day I was speaking with Cantor Rudnick and she challenged me to pay attention to the words I use at services. One phrase in particular, she said, is most problematic - the phrase: "Please Rise." What about those in wheel chairs, or those who are unstable on their feet? When we ask the congregation to rise we are singling them out, leaving them behind, unintentionally excluding them from our worship experience. Is there a way to speak to the congregation that is more inclusive for those with disabilities?

At first it seemed like an impossible task. How is it possible to ask the congregation to rise without causing those who can't from feeling excluded? But rather than focus solely on the issue of phraseology, I decided to tackle the question from another angle. I started thinking about the reason we stand for certain parts of the service in the first place.

The reason we stand for certain prayers is to help us focus on what we are about to say. It's a signal that these prayers are important and demand our attention. The act of rising reminds us that we are gathered together, not to socialize with our community, but rather to stand in the presence of God: to open our hearts, to reflect on what matters in our lives, and perhaps even to grow. Standing is meant to serve as a reminder that turns us back to the task at hand.

After considering the function that standing serves, I came upon an answer to the Cantor's question. If the purpose of standing is to help us prepare for sacred moments, then rather than ask the congregation to rise, I can simply invite the congregation "to prepare." For those who can prepare for powerful moments of worship by standing, they will continue to do so. But for those who are not able to stand, or for whom standing has become a distraction, taking them out of a prayerful space and focusing their attention instead on the frailty of their bodies, then they will be welcome to prepare for these sacred moments by lifting their hearts, their minds and their spirits to a higher plane, rather than their bodies.

So when I see you next at worship, and the time comes for one of those important prayers, expect me to ask you to prepare. I trust that you'll know the best way do so.

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun