

Have you ever heard of Spin Magazine? I know it sounds like an opinionated news journal, but it isn't. The word spin is used nowadays to describe the way pundits and spokespeople try to influence our interpretation of news stories. They spin a story, which is to say, they retell it in such a way as to make their side sound better. But back in the good old days, disk jockeys used to spin records, and that's the world Spin Magazine covers – popular music and the recording industry. There's another magazine that also covers pop music, among other things – Rolling Stone. Just as some subscribers read Playboy for the articles, some people read Rolling Stone not for the album reviews or concert critiques, but for its perspective on the issues of the day. And thus it was a reporter for Rolling Stone magazine who got the scoop of the week interviewing General Stanley McChrystal and his staff. Here's an army officer, trained to fight, trained to lead, who has killed, and had others killed,

and yet a few unguarded remarks made to a rock & roller outweigh everything he has accomplished and performed in his entire career.

That, my friends, is the power of words.

Should McChrystal have been more careful? Sure, but military guys under loads of pressure need to be able to let off steam. Did the reporter, Michael Hastings, have the right to report conversations that were assumed to be private? I've learned the hard way there's no such thing as off-the-record when speaking to some journalists.

Should the editors of the magazine have run the article? That's a good question. As much as I value a free press and believe it is necessary for a healthy society, I wish the media showed more restraint and discretion. The classic example is that somehow, no newspaper ever printed a description or picture of President Franklin Roosevelt relying on crutches or his wheelchair. Perhaps they felt it would have been demoralizing during wartime. The classic counter-

example is that no newspaper ever printed a description or picture of President Kennedy with his countless paramours. Perhaps they felt they needed to stay on good terms with the White House. The McChrystal controversy doesn't make our efforts in Afghanistan any easier, but it sure sells a lot of magazines. And it was all just words. At least in Playboy the scandals include pictures!

It says in the Koran that we Jews are the People of the Book. Clearly we are aware of the power of words. Our religion is based on it, and nowhere so clearly as in this week's Torah portion, Balak. Balak was king of the Moabites, and he knew a war was coming against the Israelites. He sent for the prophet Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam was a foreign prophet, and King Balak believed his words alone could weaken his enemies. But Bilaam, though not of our people, could only speak the words God directed him to. Instead of cursing us, he blessed us, on three separate occasions, in beautiful

poetic language. The most well known of Bilaam's verses is Ma Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov Mishkenotecha Yisrael— How goodly are your tents, o Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel. King Balak was furious. He feared that Bilaam's words of praise would come true and lead to the defeat of his people. And the Torah tells us that when the battle inevitably came, Israel did indeed defeat the nation of Moab. Was it Bilaam's blessing that made that happen, or was the prophet only announcing an outcome that was already pre-ordained? Let's remember that this was an Israelite story. How could the writer of the Torah know what words were shared in the Moabite camp between Balak and Bilaam? Rather, an unknown Israelite poet composed the magnificent verses that have come down to us and set them in the mouth of the main character of this story. The point? To teach us that words themselves affect our lives more than kings, more than weapons, more than mighty armies.

Months ago, a book was recommended to me by Sylvia Kennett, our new temple president. The author is Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, and the title is “Words that Hurt; Words that Heal.” In the opening chapter, Rabbi Telushkin asks, Could you go twenty four hours without saying an unkind word about, or to, anybody? Then he makes this comparison: if you couldn't go 24 hours without a drink, you would have to admit to being an alcoholic. If you couldn't go a day without a cigarette, you would be addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you couldn't go 24 hours without saying unkind words about others, then you've lost control of your tongue. That's perhaps what happened to General McChrystal – he lost control of his tongue, and allowed his command group to do the same. I understand. I feel the same about myself – and you rarely have to wait a full 24 hours for me to give you proof. For some of us, the issue is gossip, or dishonesty, or the failure to say what ought to be said. The subtitle of Telushkin's book

is, “How to choose words wisely and well.” Sylvia gave me the book because she thought it would make a good teaching text, and I agree. But she might also have had in mind that I, and many of us, would benefit from examining the power of our speech and our choices in using words. When Lunch and Learn resumes in August, our topic for the month will be Words that Hurt, Words that Heal. I encourage you to read this book with me and to join in our Wednesday noontime discussions. I am excited about how we can learn to improve our communications in our congregation and in our lives. There's a type of speech we all use that is the perfect antidote for words that hurt. It is the language of prayer. When we read the words found in our prayerbook, we are modeling speech at its very best. Prayer is the language of praise, of hope, of gratitude. Seldom is heard a discouraging word in a Jewish worship service. If we can stick to a purely positive script in reference to God, then we can

surely keep it just as positive when it comes to God's creatures. It's rarely sticks and stones that break our bones. Far too often, it's words that hurt us. We all long to hear praise, hope, gratitude, acceptance, respect. Yet so often we listen to voices of anger, hate, discord, and spite. In prayer we quiet the language of hurt and practice words of uplift. No finer example can be found than in the Prayer of Mar, with which we close the silent prayer every time we pray. What we see and hear is the prayer of a man struggling to steer his thoughts from curses to blessings. For Bilaam, it was easy – God literally put the right words in his mouth. For the rest of us, it is a daily struggle to defeat an enemy stronger even than a Four Star General. Please turn with me to page 180, and let us read together out loud the lines we have each read so many times silently by ourselves. Please join me in Mar's prayer:

“My God, guard my speech from evil and my lips from deception.

Before those who slander me, I will hold my tongue; I will practice humility.

Open my heart to Your Torah, that I may pursue Your Mitzvot.

As for all who think evil of me, cancel their designs and frustrate their schemes.

Act for Your own sake, for the sake of Your Power, for the sake of Your Holiness, for the sake of Your Torah;

So that Your loved ones may be rescued, save with Your power. And answer me.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, Adonai, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

Amen