

The Power of Language in a Flat World: What Judaism Have To Say?
By Rabbi Susan Leider

To Dell Computers - To whom it may concern:

Today I received shipment on my new Dell laptop. This product was ordered, shipped and delivered more quickly and efficiently than any other laptop I have ever purchased from your company. It was a mere 17 days from the moment I phoned Dell's 800 number, to the moment I signed for the UPS package.

I am writing a book about current affairs on my new laptop. For this book, I would like to ask your company to trace for me the entire global supply chain that assembled the pieces that built the laptop. I want to know every part that went into this computer, what country it came from and the names of the people who put it together along the way.

Thank you – I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely, an enthusiastic Dell customer.

When the author of this letter got his response back from Dell, this is what he learned:

The manufacturing of the components and the assembly of his computer involved the following countries: the Philippines, Costa Rica, Malaysia, China, Korea, Taiwan, Germany, Japan, US, Mexico, Singapore, Thailand, Great Britain, India, Israel, Ireland and Brazil - 17 different countries either represent the country of origin for components or are the home of companies responsible for manufacturing or shipping of parts.

The person who actually posed this question to Dell is author and journalist Thomas Friedman, in his book, The World is Flat, Friedman discusses how technology and trends in our world are affecting us. He points out that some of us would go to work at the office and work on projects with people who commuted to the same office we did, or maybe we would have a conference call with people across the country or take an occasional business trip to the East Coast, Asia or Europe. But in a flat world, many of our lives are intricately intertwined with colleagues or collaborators in Korea, Brazil, India or Germany. We correspond via email on a daily basis, or access shared files on a computer which allows us to create, collaborate and work together as if we were sitting one cubicle apart. In a flat world, technology is a great leveler and it allows us to interact in a collaborative way regardless of where we are on the globe. The bounds of our community are no longer just our physical neighborhoods. According to Friedman, if we are communicating with people around the globe, collaborating on projects together, we have an incredible opportunity to build relationships together.

I share this story with you because it illustrates how we are all inextricably linked to each other. Yes, it is just a computer. We want our Dell computers and we want them cheap. But the manufacturing of the computer is merely a catalyst for bringing us closer to each other so that we can develop interests in each other beyond the manufacturing of the computer. Through collaboration, we are exposed to each other's culture. We can become interested in each other's lives and develop relationships with each other. We begin to think about how our actions affect those in the world.

Our exposure to a greater slice of humanity provides an opportunity to embrace the fundamental Jewish idea that we are all made *b'tzelem elohim* – in the image of God. Each person is unique and instead of envisioning the “other” “over there,” our collaborators become real people with specific names. They have families and a history and opinions and stories to share. We begin to care about one another even after we have completed the joint project together. We come to realize and appreciate that we are all inextricably linked in the world through the power of language. Our humanity is bound up in each other.

But this collaboration can make the world a complicated place. Life is just not that simple anymore. Whether we realize it or not, more and more, we are talking to people, or typing to people all over the world. In certain parts of the United States, when someone drives up to a McDonald's drive-thru to place their order, (not anyone in this room of course!), they are not placing their order with the person standing in the restaurant. They are speaking with a centralized office in India that takes this information in from McDonald's all over the world.

We are all connected by the power of language, and the power of language has been injected with steroids, as Friedman calls them. In a flat world, the web, the internet and cell phones function like steroids – speeding the transmission of information in general, whether for good or for evil.

In some cases, we are talking and communicating with people all over the world more and in other cases, these steroids allow for us to talk more and more with people just like ourselves or listen more and more to people just like ourselves. With the customization of information that is available on the web and even on cable TV, fewer and fewer of us are exposed to the same information and more and more of us are watching or reading to listening to information tailored to our opinions, our interests and we are slowly but surely transforming the public square into private cubicles.

In a flat world, some of may find these changes exhilarating and some may find them exhausting. Some of us are excited about these changes and others fearful of what the future can bring. But what does Judaism have to say about how we are connected through language? What can the cumulative wisdom of our tradition and our history teach us as Jews about facing the information explosion that is a part of this new world? How does this flow of information affect how we perceive of ourselves? How others perceive us?

Many of our parents taught us the value of having a good reputation. In Jewish sources, we find multiple examples of the importance of this idea. The *midrash* (*Midrash Tenachuma Ve-ikhel*): tells us:

שלושה שמות נקראו לו לאדם :
אחד - מה שקוראים לו אביו ואמו,
ואחד - מה שקוראין לו בני אדם,
ואחד - מה שקונה הוא לעצמו.

You have three names: the name your parents bestow on you, the name by which others call you, and the name you earn yourself through your conduct.

Yes, this is true today. But consider the twist that Google has put on this *midrash*.

Google, the most powerful search engine on the web, allows us to access information about almost anything or anyone and to do it fast - anyone, including people who are looking for a job. In some cases, this is the first step an employer takes after receiving a resume. Yes, the employer will probably type in the name your parents gave you.

But what comes up in the search? Is it the name that others have given you? Is in the name that you have acquired for yourself? How are these “names” different from each other?

From a Jewish perspective, the best way to deal with a world where anyone can Google you, and find out just about anything they want to about you and your life, is to simply live your life in a transparent and honest way. As it is stated in the Talmud (Brachot 28b), *d'u lifnei mi atem omdim* - know before whom you stand. Live as if God sees your every action. Live in private as you try to live in public.

Rabbi Meir taught in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16a), that everyone is judged on *Rosh HaShanah*, but Rabbi Natan says: A person is judged in every hour.

And so we should live every month, every day, every moment as if it were *Rosh Hasahanah*. As if we were being judged on our actions all the time. As if someone had a webcam of our entire lives.

But the second line of the *midrash* says, “the name by which others call you.” So if this is the name that is based on your actions, then fine. One could say that you get what you deserve, right? But in a flat world, what comes up on the Google search, could be a name or reputation that someone else has “created” for you. Consider the following “testimonial” from a Google user:

My friend and I met a guy at a restaurant. My friend was very taken with him, but I was suspiciously curious about this guy. After a few minutes of Googling, I found out that he was arrested for felony assault. Although I was once again disappointed with the quality of the dating pool, I was at least able to warn my friend about this guy’s violent past.

This testimonial can be held up as an example of protecting innocent people from criminals. This testimonial champions the quick information found on the web, the way it empowers people to take care of their own safety, and it can confirm our hunches. But when we take a second look at this testimonial, we ask the following questions: How does this woman know that the information she “googled” was accurate? Can we really rely on the information we find on the internet? What if this information was posted erroneously to the web? What if it was posted maliciously to the web? What if this person was found guilty, was prosecuted and served his sentence? What if he had done *teshuvah*? How do we deal with the veil of anonymity that the electronic world makes possible in spreading malicious gossip?

Many of us are familiar with the classic Jewish story about the feathers in the pillow. A woman went to see the rabbi around Rosh Hashanah and she said, “Rabbi, I need to

apologize to you – I have said some things about you that were unkind and I am sorry.”

He said to her, “Please take this pillow and take it out into the town square. Cut the pillow open and let the feathers inside spread out over the square.” She did as he said.

He then asked her to retrieve the feathers and put them all back into the pillow. She said, “Rabbi, that is impossible!” He said, “Just as you cannot retrieve the feathers from the square and put them back in the pillow, so too you cannot retrieve the things that you said about me.”

Now just think about those feathers in an electronic world. In an electronic world, we see the incredible power that uploading, or publishing information on the web has had on our society means life and death to us. When anyone can upload and post information, we are all authors, we are all publishers. With the powerful reach of language democratized, the verse from Proverbs “Life and death are in the power of the tongue,” can now be taken literally. Information can be spread and read in almost in the blink of an eye.

And the potential for destruction and hurt is exponential because the internet moves faster than the wind. The feathers carried on the wind from one *shtibl* to another are now dwarfed by our technological ability to convey vitriol, lies and *lashon hara*, evil speech with a mere several keystrokes. And the keystrokes are as difficult to retrieve as the feathers.

Each one of us in this room has a tongue and each one of us has fingers. We all have the power to make the world a better place or to destroy it with these parts of our body. In

the morning service, we say the words, “*Baruch She’Amar,*” and we recall that God brought the world into being not through massive physical power, but through speaking. In the Biblical mind, God’s words made the universe exist. We make worlds with our words and we break worlds with our words. And this begins with the self, and the family and your world, which is inextricably linked to the greater world. The next time we are standing in line at Trader Joe’s and we want to talk with our friend or spouse about that annoying person at work, we shouldn’t do it. The next time we are watching the news on TV and the feathers begin to fly from the screen, we should turn it off. The next time we are sitting in front of your computer and we open an email that someone forwarded to us that has disparaging information about a human being, hit reply and we should ask that person to not send us these types of email in the future. We need to be relentless with your children about these boundaries. No, it is not ok to post something on Facebook that is bringing another human being down. No, it is not ok to sit around and to malign teachers, even if we don’t agree with them.

Judaism charges us with being guardians of our tongues and of our fingers, which are merely an extension of our ability to speak. It teaches us that life and death are in the power of the tongue. The feathers from the pillow can destroy. The woman who helped her daughter send nasty electronic messages on MySpace ultimately spread feathers that could not be stuffed back into the pillow – the recipient of those messages eventually committed suicide. And what can we do about this? What hope is there in the world?

The hope lies in language. The hope lies in the fact that we are talking to people all over the world, whether you realize it or not. As local becomes global, and global becomes local, we as Jews are held to increasingly high standards in the way we talk to each other, about each other and in the way we interact with others beyond the Jewish community.

Beyond the Jewish community, the task of harnessing the power of language is a daunting one. As some of you may realize, there has been quite a bit in the news lately about the concept of “community organizing.” (If someone from Beth Am wants to pass this on to Rudy Giuliani– no problem.). The definition of community organizing is a process by which people living in proximity to each other, are brought together to act in their common self-interest. And the way this happens, is by meeting face-to-face with each other and with others in our neighborhoods and in our communities in our region. And through these meetings, we develop relationships, we collaborate. Through dialogue, we work toward consensus, and pool our power to affect change in the world. It is the opposite of *lashon hara* – instead of using language to pull people down or to destroy, we are using language to *l’taken et ha olam*, to engage in repair of the world.

And if we do this one-on-one, in our families, in our communities, in our neighborhoods, we can create a ripple effect, as the good use of language literally repairs our world.

At Temple Beth Am, Tyson Roberts is helping us do just that. Tyson heads our Social Action Committee and he will be working with an organization called One LA, to bring

these opportunities for dialogue to Beth Am and to bring us beyond the boundaries of our shul to engage with the larger community. I hope that you will contact him to express your interest in being involved with these efforts which capitalize on our connections with each other and with the power of language. His efforts will help to underscore just how intertwined we really are with each other and with the world.

It may not surprise you to know that Thomas Friedman is a Jew and he has a rabbi too! When Friedman told his Rabbi Tzvi Marx about his book, The World is Flat, his rabbi told him that the “flat world,” reminded him of the Tower of Babel. The message of this story is: The heresy is not that humankind works together – it is to what ends. God didn’t banish people from the Tower and make them speak different languages because they were collaborating, but rather it was because they were trying to become God through building the tower. They were using their energy and their language to a destructive end. But collaborating so that humankind can achieve its full potential is God’s hope.

It is God’s hope that we realize these words said at the end of every Amidah, every standing prayer, that we say: “Keep my tongue from evil, my lips from lies. May the words of my mouth be acceptable to you my Rock. *Oseh shalom bimromav , hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu v’al kol Israel v’imru Amen.*