



Beth El
SYNAGOGUE

Ashamnu bagadnu gazalnu dibarnu dofi.

It is that time of year again when we are called upon to reflect on our behavior over the past year and make an accounting of our ways. Not surprisingly, many of the sins we list have to do with the words we use, or better miss use, like *dibarnu dofi*, we have spread slander, insult and lies. It's not surprising because it is with words that we build relationship. But words can also destroy relations. Given that this is a time to repair relationships, we best start with words.

So, over the coming weeks leading up to Yom Kippur, I'd like to share a variety of teaching based on the writing of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal*. These teachings invite us to consider the words we've spoken and challenge us to raise the level of our discourse, something sorely needed in our day.

But before we even get to the topic of *lashon hara*, we have to talk about truth. We say the world stands on truth. Therefore, before spreading rumors, I have to ask myself, "what do I know to be true, really true?"

Bob Woodward who broke the Watergate scandal is rightly considered one of America's preeminent investigative journalists. But even someone of his stature occasionally makes mistakes. In 1989, Woodward was covering a story about a senator nominated to serve as Secretary of Defense. Woodward got a tip that brought into question the senator's moral standing. Under a strict deadline for the Washington Post, Woodward published the story which naturally lead many readers to conclude that the senator was unfit for office. A few days later, however, Woodward learned that his eyewitness had a personality disorder and was completely discredited.

When confronted about it, Woodward said, "Listen, you report what you get. But I wish I had more time to check on the story."

Jewish law would beg to differ. As Telushkin writes, "ethics dictate that you don't report what you get. You only report stories that you have overwhelming reason to believe are true. In other words, before bandying about words that can destroy another person's reputation, be as careful as if you were holding a loaded gun.

"Dibarnu dofi" means we have spoken sander. But the rabbis point out, *dofi* is a conjunction of *du peh*, two mouths. We are reminded that there are two sides to every story. And unless we know the truth, the whole truth, we should refrain from spreading rumors.

Shannah Tovah!

