

Kavanah – Lashon HaKodesh – Words Create and Destroy

Part 1 – all together

“According to the Hebrew Bible, God made the world with words. God just spoke and the world became reality. (The Aramaic for ‘I create as I speak’ is *avara k’davara*, or in magician’s language, *abracadabra*.) . . . This does not protect words from the numbing effects of overuse in any religious tradition. . . . We need to dust off the words, shake away the accretions, wonder again about what they originally might have meant and enable ourselves to live in the word.”

— From Lawrence Kushner, *the Book of Words*

Vayomer Elo-him yehi or va-yehi or - And God said, “~~Let there be light,~~” and there was light.” God spoke and the universe was created. With words we create worlds; we create light; we destroy worlds; we spread darkness... All with words.

The following is a *madrash* from Vayikra Rabah 33:1:

A rabbi sent a student to the market with the general instruction, “Buy the best thing at the market that one can eat.” The student returned with a tongue. Later, the rabbi asked the student to go back to the market to buy the worst thing that one could eat. The student again came back with a tongue.

“What is with you?” asked the rabbi. “I’ve asked you to buy both the best and the worst, and you come back with a couple of tongues.”

“That’s true,” responded the student. “After all, cannot a tongue be one of the best things in the world and be one of the worst?”

Part 2 - Chevruta

Jewish tradition teaches that our words are powerful. Our words have the ability to lift people up or to bring them down.

With our words we have the power to create, to inspire, to give life to ideas and to our ideals which will influence the lives of our campers for their entire lives.

The way we pronounce or emphasize certain words can shut a person down or make someone feel singled out; for example the word “but” can negate someone (I think that’s great but I have another idea...) or the tone used when saying “you” (YOU always do this!)

With a partner think about the following questions, one at a time, and share your thoughts with your partner:

What words can you use to facilitate a welcoming experience for your campers?

What words might you need to remove from your vocabulary before the campers arrive?

Take a moment to think to yourself about a time in your life when you faced a new challenge, achieved a goal, or completed a big task. Did the words of other people support you during this time? If so, what were those words? What words could have helped you but you didn’t hear them? Please share with your partner.

How will you respond to a camper who says to you, “I’m not opening my siddur, I don’t believe in these words.” How will you respond to a camper who asks you, “Do you believe in this?”

Camp Ramah in New England 2010 Educational Themes

Camp-wide Educational Theme: *Lashon Hakodesh*, literally the Holy Tongue or Holy Language. We approach this concept with the understanding that the words we use have meaning and represent who we are as individuals and as a community. CRNE is a place for Jewish children to discover new aspects of their identity and new interests; the language used by campers and staff can facilitate or hinder these discoveries.

Concepts and Essential Questions:

1. *Thinking consciously about the language we use in camp*
 - How do the words staff and campers use create a safe space in the bunk?
 - How can words create comfort, friendships and a positive camp experience?
 - How can words be used negatively to hurt or alienate campers?
 - Will a negative camp experience damage a person Jewish identity?
2. *Evaded issues: Talking about the things we don't talk about (body image and self-esteem).*
 - How do words facilitate our campers' experiences?
 - What topics are we uncomfortable confronting with our campers?
 - How do we talk about the opposite sex with our campers?
 - What words do we use to describe ourselves, our co-counselors and our campers?
3. *Hebrew – the language of our people*
 - In what ways is Hebrew already central to the Ramah experience?
 - How can I utilize Hebrew as a means to unite my bunk?
 - What challenges do we face as American Jews working with Hebrew?
 - How can our bunk and *edah* programming integrate the Hebrew our campers learn and use in other areas of camp?

Staff Educational Theme: *Brit - Covenant*. The theme of *Brit* connects to the larger camp theme of *Lashon Hakodesh* in that the words our staff members use, the stories they tell, the values they demonstrate will have positive or negative effects on our campers' experiences.

Concept and Essential Questions:

Brit - the commitment we make to our campers to be the best staff we can be.

- What is a covenant?
- How do we demonstrate a commitment to the values we believe are important?
- What does it mean to say that camper care is the primary responsibility of a counselor?
- How can our words have a positive or negative effect on the experiences of our campers?
- In what ways do our words influence our campers beyond the immediacy of the moment?