

Jewish ETiquette: Away From The Table

Rabbi David Gutterman - David Gutterman. ETiquette is not just for the table

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Allow me to share with you a concept that I call, Jewish ETiquette - and yes, I am deliberately spelling the word this way. Were you to ask what our tradition attributes as the first thing created by G-d, you no doubt would be tempted to go to the first verse of the Torah - the roadmap of creation and our blueprint for Jewish life.

"B'reisheet bara Elokim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz: In the beginning of G-d's creating the heavens and the earth," would be a proper translation. So what was created first, heaven or earth? Or, maybe something else.

Listen to this fascinating rabbinic understanding based upon a careful read and an attentive ear to the verse. Notice that the word, "et" is prominent in the verse. Et is comprised of two Hebrew letters, the aleph and the tav. In modern Hebrew, one can hardly make a move without confronting and bumping into this small, staccato word. It must always appear before a direct object and it defies translation. But enough of grammar - let's discover and uncover something more titlating.

History records that Ben Gurion proposed to the Society of Hebrew Language the nullification of this small, two-lettered Hebrew word on the theory that it means nothing. But Ben Gurion did not grasp this essential Jewish truth. When answering the question, what was created first, a challenging and intriguing rabbinic tradition answered, ET. What was created first was the first Hebrew letter, aleph with the last Hebrew letter, tav - and by extension, everything in between. In a word, what G-d created first in our world was - the alphabet. Through the comingling and conjoining of letters, words were formed, and here's the punch line - words create worlds. Of course the inverse of this equation must also be true: If words create, they can also destroy. If words have the innate ability to 'raise up,' they also have the inherent ability to 'raze down.'

It is, to me, no mystery that the 2000 edition of Time Magazine determined that the most seminal event of the previous two millenia was the invention of the printing press. What is a printing press if not the ability to have words come together to be disseminated far and wide.

So it would seem that Ben Gurion got this one wrong. The word, et, does not mean "nothing" - it means "everything." Indeed, the rabbis in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers teach: "With 10 utterances was the world created." Words not only influence and inspire, they transform, fashion and create. A lovely thought, you may be thinking - an evocative metaphor, but certainly I don't mean this literally, do I? My one word answer is: mokusatsu - that's the 1040 EZ version - here's the longer form version.

In a fascinating book by Richard Lederer entitled, The Miracle of Language, he relates the following World War II incident. On July 26, 1945, the Allied leaders - Truman, Churchill and Stalin gather in Potsdam, Germany to issue the Japanese an ultimatum - unconditional surrender.

The imperial cabinet of Japan issued a reply, mokusatsu. Now, the words of Lederer: "Mokusatsu can mean either "We are considering it," or "We are ignoring it. The man who issued the English language translation of the statement for the Domei news agency used "ignore" in the broadcast monitored by the English speaking press."

On August 6, Truman ordered the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and three days later on Nagasaki. Continues Lederer, "In the 20 days that followed the confusion of mokusatsu more than 150,000 men, women and children were lost. One word misinterpreted."

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue," declares the wisest of all men, King Solomon in Proverbs. It would seem even literally. This week the Torah speaks of a manifestation known as tza'ra'at, usually translated as leprosy. Whatever it is, this we know. The Talmud declares that the root cause and etiology of this phenomenon was the sin of malicious speech - lashon hara. Judaism is not only concerned with what we put in our mouths but also with what we put out of our mouths. For a Jew, ETiquette is not just for the table.