

Thought for the Day: “Before I say a word, I am its master. After I say it, I am its slave”

by Akiva Wagner - Friday, January 25, 2019

<https://chiefrabbi.org/all-media/thought-day-i-say-word-i-master-i-say-i-slave/>

Ahead of Holocaust Memorial Day, the Chief Rabbi warns of the corrosion of the quality of our public discourse.

“Before I say a word, I am its master. After I say it, I am its slave”

This insightful comment, by the 11th century Spanish Rabbi, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, is particularly pertinent in the age of social media.

This week, I found myself scrolling through the comments posted in response to the BBC’s coverage of the extraordinary funeral we had held for six victims of the Holocaust – the first, and almost certainly, last such funeral ever to be held in the UK.

“What is the Holocaust?” One user asked. “It’s a made up story,” replied another, “to keep the world sympathising with the world’s most cruel people, who are fully devoted to not letting the world have peace.” This was but one among hundreds of similarly disturbing comments. Disturbing, but sadly, no longer surprising.

This has become the new normal.

When dramatic expressions of moral outrage achieve the most attention, people compete to express themselves in ever more outrageous ways, in order to be heard above the crowd. A downward spiral ensues, leading to the corrosion of the quality of our public discourse.

The 19th century scholar, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter taught, “not everything I think should be said, not everything I say should be written and not everything I write should be published.” But today, at the press of a button, countless thoughts are published without any concern for the consequences.

The Talmud identifies three categories of lives which can be destroyed by derogatory speech:

First, the victims of verbal abuse themselves. Second, the perpetrators – one hateful comment may lead to another and before long they may not recognise the people they have become. The third category are the bystanders, who are also negatively affected. When we see others choosing to offend and insult, it can quickly lower our expectations of decent people. And as witnesses, we are complicit in that abuse, because without an audience, hateful words are far less harmful.

We have become more demanding of social media companies in tackling hate, but we should also

demand more of ourselves, the users, who take interest and sometimes even find entertainment in destructive exchanges online.

This Sunday will be Holocaust Memorial Day, marking 74 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. A crime against humanity which began with hateful words. How soon we forget the lessons of the past.

As the celebrated historian, Yehuda Bauer put it, “Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”

PDF generated by Kalin's PDF Creation Station