

Power of the Word – Part II

By Brigitte Battat

Recently, I watched a Hallmark movie (*Finding Normal*), an experience that I would have considered demeaning in my previous existence, since their theme centralizes on people falling in love. Yet, these are often stories about the fellowship of men, tales of Americans compelled by circumstances to travel to remote, isolated towns of the USA. In such places, the receptive individuals discover the meaning of community, family, friendships, kindness. The movie ends with a monologue spoken by a character who is the judge/doctor/preacher of Normal, a small town in the State of Louisiana: One may choose to live with a word that whispers or a word that shouts.

And this is what I encountered as I relocated to various parts of America and tried to absorb their attributes. Each corner of this large country has its distinctive culture, local education, and sense of humanity. There, I realized that I would prefer to continue my life in a place where the Word is whispered. And that such a word is often more effective than the one that is shouted.

An event that took place one Friday evening inspired me to write and speak about the power of the Word. That Friday evening, I decided that the Word's most important role is the establishment of relationships with human beings, its ability to communicate and strengthen ties with members of the human race.

Phase One - Savage Gods by Paul Kingsnorth

I am starting with the summary of a book entitled **Savage Gods**, because the author's various phases in life resemble mine in some respects. In Paul Kingsnorth's book, Savage Gods are powerful words, capable of hurting feelings, expressing love, describing complex emotions.

Paul Kingsnorth grew up in an environment characterized by the Shouting Word: His father, a successful banker, demanded that his son would follow in his footsteps and forcefully expressed this request.

Initially, Paul lived in a world dominated by the Shouting Word. He became an environmental activist at Oxford University, in the template defined by the global corporations and politicians. He traveled the world in an attempt to establish a place where he would feel at home.

In later years, he married and had children, a phase in life that compelled him to consider practical alternatives to his ideology and evanescent adventures.

Today, Paul Kingsnorth considers that environmental problems can be alleviated by reducing general consumption and living a simpler life, an existence that is

less defined by a cornucopia of mass-produced objects. Consistent with this new outlook, he moved with his wife and two children to a smallholding on the Western coast of Ireland, where he expected to feel at home and retrieve the power of the Word for his books. This was his goal after years of alienation, of displacement in society at large. Instead, he suspected that his writing tools were failing him. Thus, Paul Kingsnorth called into question his foundational beliefs about the power of the Word. Furthermore, he thought that such convictions set him at odds with culture itself.

I came here [Ireland] to belong somewhere. I came here, at last, to have a home. I wandered the world driven by this severance, thinking I needed a home, thinking that the work of being in a place would still my unquiet mind.

In *Savage Gods*, Paul Kingsnorth asks: What does it mean to belong? What sacrifices must be made in order to truly inhabit a life? **Are words powerful enough to paint the truth of the world — or are they part of the great lie which is killing it?**

Phase Two – God’s Word

One Friday evening, approximately two weeks ago, I was invited for Shabbat dinner. Little did I know that this event would provide an opportunity to learn about the power of the Word within the framework of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, a fortuitous moment provided by the participants at the event.

The Old Testament / Genesis 1

In *Genesis 1*, God speaks, and things come into being that were not there before, beginning with the universe itself.

God saying implies orders given to create the world. The Word is “God says” and it symbolizes the most powerful force in all of creation. The declaration of His will is not simply noise which notifies us what God would like to happen—it is what will happen.

In the Hebrew Bible, each of God’s Words – most likely a whispering Word – gives birth to new elements. Thus, his Word makes light that is differentiated from darkness. His Word creates water and the expanse over the water, and God’s Word names that expanse Heaven. God’s Word creates dry land, and makes the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth.

God’s Word is founding luminaries in heaven and living creatures. And then His Word produces the ultimate organism: the man in his image and the woman.

A document that is thousands of years old emphasizes the power of the Word, a Word that possesses the ultimate constructive command. It establishes the foundation of religions, traditions, cultures, the future of humanity.

The New Testament / John 1

Here, power of the Word is more explicitly pronounced:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Phase Three – Ahad Ha'Am

Ahad Ha'Am considered the importance of the Hebrew language – the Word -as a component that would cement a nation for the Jews in the Land of Israel. In an essay on the subject, Ahad Ha'am wrote the following:

Language functioned like a physiological organism, processing experience on an unconscious level and making it available on a conscious one. It did so for peoples no less than for individuals, the difference being that the individual mind has no choice but to submit to the linguistic usages of its times...

Ahad Ha'am's paradigm for an Israel as a nation was to create a country which would be a source of strength for communities all over the world. He perceived Judaism, or Jewishness as an organically evolving body of tradition and behavior selectively adapting to its environment; his view of Tradition as the creation of a “national spirit” deserving of being valued and preserved for its own sake even if not God-given. And he considered the Hebrew language to be a vital ingredient.

Conclusion

Throughout life, my perception has been that words express our reactions to the environment of our sojourn. The Word, however, is far more than a mode of interaction: It is the basis of language, the core of tradition, the glue of a nation. Knowing the Word is being at home.

Today, I exist in an environment defined by isolation, a world of individuals rather than communities, entities who utilize social media, Smartphones, and other similar ingredients eagerly adopted by Homo Sapiens.

Nevertheless, my contact with the Friday night family at the Shabbat dinner that took place two weeks ago, taught me that these moments when we allow ourselves to communicate, to look into other people's eyes, is what empowers the whispering Word and enables it to have a meaning.