The Power We Give

It begins, I suppose, with a person called - well, I don't like saying the name if I can help it. No one does. People are still scared. See, there was this wizard who went bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse.

If you can name where that quote came from, 10 points to your house.

Yes, it's from Harry Potter. I had actually never read the Harry Potter series until this past year, when Shiri became enthralled to the point of obsession. She never read them either of course, she had just heard about the stories from her friends with older siblings. I figured she'd want to read it at some point (perhaps judging by the fact that her go-to dress-up outfit is always Hermionie Granger) and that I should read it first so we could discuss it and I could know where all the scary parts were. So off I went on the Hogwarts Express, so to speak.

If you've read the books or seen the movies, you know that the character who draws you in, the one that keeps you turning the pages and excited for the next chapter isn't the title character. It's someone who most of the other characters don't even want to acknowledge by name. The character who holds the most attention and seemingly the most power is called Lord Voldemort. If you're not familiar with the plot, Voldemort is the supervillain of the story, and so terrified is the wizarding community that they don't call him by name, but instead refer to him as "You-Know-Who" or "He who shall not be named." The fear, the danger, the violence mostly centers around the one character everyone is afraid to talk about.

It's the sort of superstition we see all over the place, not just in fanciful fiction. It might be as innocent as not wanting to say something for fear of jinxing it. We'll be discussing home repairs, and Duncan will say something like, "At least our old refrigerator hasn't died yet." That's when I shoot him the death stare and quietly mouth obscenities at him that you don't often hear from rabbis. Of course those words don't actually affect the operation of our appliances, but why take any chances, right?

This "let's not talk about it" fear can also take much more sinister forms. We don't want to admit there are problems of racism, gender bias, patriarchy, anti-Semitism in the basic systems that govern and guide our lives. But what happens is that by refusing to name it, own it, and then deal with it as it happens, we let it reach a boiling point, and it causes much greater damage.

I feel at this point I should acknowledge, as you may have heard from various sources, Harry Potter's author J.K. Rowling has been outspoken and somewhat controversial about her viewpoints on current issues. While I don't agree with many of the stances she's taken, I think we can still say she was successful in providing us with this metaphor about what can happen when our problems and fears go undiscussed.

However, she's not the first storyteller to use this device. Our very own core narrative shares the story of Amalek. The Amalekites, as told in the Torah, were a nomadic group living in the Sinai desert and the part of the Negev that was south of Judah. We know very little about them outside of what is specifically mentioned in the Torah, but we do know that the Amalekites staged a sneak attack on the weak and defenseless lagging at the rear of the migrating Israelites. It was an attack that showed Amalek to be uncommonly ruthless, and by today's standards would certainly be considered a war criminal.

When we read about Amalek in chapter 25 of Deuteronomy, we encounter the following: "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt— how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

"Blot out the memory." "Do not forget." Is it me, or is that confusing? It seems contradictory. How do we simultaneously remember Amalek while blocking out his name? It seems incongruous that we'd be able to do both. It's not like Judaism doesn't give double directives. We have plenty of those in the Torah, the one that comes to mind first, "*shamor v'zachor*." This phrase from "*Lecha Dodi"* comes from both iterations of the 10 Commandments. In Exodus, we are to *zachor* Shabbat, remember the Sabbath, and in Deuteronomy, we are to *shamor* Shabbat, guard the Sabbath. Though the two versions aren't identical, we can do both of these things. We can actively guard or keep, and we can remember. But with Amalek, the ideas of blotting out and remembering - they seem to be in direct violation of each other. Why would the Torah encourage us to remember and forget?

If this sounds familiar, it's because it should, but it's not from the Torah. We're given a similar instruction on Purim, when we're commanded to read the Megillah and say the name Haman, while also drowning out the name. So perhaps this tradition of Purim can help shed some light on how we can both remember and blot out.

At Purim we're taught to blur the lines between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai. And this isn't just about getting drunk, it's about telling a more complete story, one with representations of both good and bad. We don't want to focus solely on the evil, and yet to revel in the victory without being able to reflect on the lesson learned would be a disservice to future generations.

This blurring of the lines and of the names also forces us to really examine who is to blame. For example, we don't generally throw King Achashverosh into either the hero or villain column, but by allowing Haman to craft his extermination plan, is he not also guilty through his silence? To stand by is the opposite of to speak up, and no matter how advanced and connected our world becomes, we never seem to learn that lesson.

Haman, Amalek, Voldemort - we give them power when we only follow one part of the instruction. When we blot them out and then subsequently forget them, or when we remember them but don't do anything about it. How many times have you heard you have to learn from your past so you don't make the same mistakes in the future? We say the name, and we drown it out. We call out injustice, and we shout it down.

Tragically, we've become too good at just the "drowning it out" part without the "calling it by name" part. As we were thrown into the insanity of COVID-19, it revealed not only how broken our healthcare system is, but made abundantly clear cracks in our education system, our expectations of family work/life balance, our housing markets, and access to food.
Then on top of racial and economic disparities made worse by the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered. While it was on one hand the latest evidence of unchecked police brutality, it also became the boiling point for the issue of systemic racism.

I'd like to hope that maybe we've finally reached the point where we're not leaving off half of the equation. Maybe we're starting to do more than just remember, we're starting to blot out. Maybe we're not just shouting "boo," we're actually learning from the past.

Let's be clear, though. Merely saying the name of the problem doesn't make it go away. As in the case of Lord Voldemort, having Harry say his name wasn't enough. It was only when Harry Potter was brave and bold enough to continue to say the name without fear that he was able to finally get enough buy in from the whole wizarding world to actually stand up and do something.

Social media has allowed us to become a passively reactionary society. What I mean is we rush to react and label people and actions we don't agree with. But without any real change or even discussion behind it, engaging in this kind of virtue signaling doesn't count as "saying the name of the issue." These things don't help anyone, they only drive bigger wedges between us.

I'm not suggesting we stop calling out injustice. I'm suggesting we call out these issues, these fears, these hypocrisies by name, and then back up those words with real data and real actions. It's helpful to remember that not every issue affects me individually, but that doesn't give me license to ignore it. We simply cannot pretend that problems don't exist because we don't say their names. That just allows the issue - and the fear of the issue - to grow. My Harry Potter quote at the start was from one of the early chapters of the first book. By the end of the first book, Harry learns a valuable lesson. Professor Dumbledore tells him, "Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

This year, in 5781, we must continue to name the problems. We must relentlessly call them what they are. Don't give them more power through silence. Voice with voice, hand in hand, we will work to achieve greater justice. Blot out AND do not forget.