

Yitro 5781

Words Create Worlds

Who heard this week about the Jewish space laser?

This new urban myth has its origins in a Facebook post from 2018 authored by first-term Georgia representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, which recently came to light again. It's always worth reading the original of any text (the original has now been taken down but copies are out there), In a long post she implies that the California wildfires were deliberately started with 'what looked like lasers or blue beams of light' to profit the Rothschilds, Pacific Gas and Electric, Solaren (an energy company) and a selection of California officials, the majority of whom happen to be Jewish.

These ideas quickly condensed into a three word phrase - Jewish space laser. Of course the Jewish internet promptly exploded. My predecessor Rabbi Ethan Linden posted:

I am disgusted. If Representative Greene found out about this program, it means someone on the Secret Weapons Committee, Space Laser Subcommittee must have talked. (I am on Media Domination, Half-hour Dredmery Subcommittee, so you you know it wasn't me.) I mean, seriously, what part of SECRET global plot do people not understand? When the Illuminati find out about this leak, heads are going to roll. Or, more likely, be vaporized by our space lasers.

Jessica Arnold replied: *Ethan, have you brought your concerns up to the directors in the 'control-all-the-media' Thursday happy hour zoom?*

Will Samuels added: *There are actually two Jewish space lasers but one we never set foot in.*

And Liba Kornfeld posted: *Dear husband - I believe you may be bored and I have some ideas of ways to fill your time. Love, Me.*

So the Jewish space laser is a joke.

Or is it?

There is a core Jewish idea that words create worlds. The Torah describes how the Holy One's speech brought the world into being, and every day in our prayers we reiterate that idea with the *Barukh She-amar* prayer that introduces the psalms of the morning. The *Sefer Yetzirah*, the earliest known book of Jewish mysticism, describes how the Holy One created reality by combining the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet with ten numbers. The word *abracadabra* comes from Aramaic and means 'as I speak, so shall I create.' And the Hebrew word *davar* itself means both 'word' and 'thing,' as if to teach that the word for something and its actual existence are simply different perspectives on its reality.

The first translation of the Torah into Aramaic describes the moment where the Holy One breathes into the first human as a moment which transforms the inert clay into a *nefesh memamela* - a speaking soul. From that moment on we, too, have the power to create with our speech.

Rabbi Lauren Berkun Eichler takes this idea further. Since words create reality, we can't take them back, even if they were mistaken. There's a good example of this in the Megillah which we'll soon be hearing - even after Haman is exposed, King Ahasuerus can't simply recall his decree to kill the Jews but must instead issue another to countermand it.

If we stand back for a moment, we can observe the realities our own words create.

The way we talk to ourselves matters. One of the saddest things we encounter in cases of dementia is that when a person loses their filter, we can overhear how they talk to themselves. Sometimes we are more savagely critical of ourselves than we would ever be of another human being (or a pet). And on some level of reality, that means that we consider that we really are that bad, that stupid, that hopeless. Words can create or destroy our personal outlook.

The way we talk in our relationships - in person and online - matters. Even though it is easier not to make assumptions about each other when we are face to face and can check in with each other, we take it upon ourselves all the time to decide what another person is thinking or feeling. It's partly for this reason that when we drafted the Synagogue's best principles, we made sure to acknowledge our respect for each other, even when our views do not converge, and undertook to foster a culture of honest discussion, honorable disagreement and *lashon tov*, appropriate speech and reasoned discourse. Words can create or destroy community.

And the way we talk creates a wider world - the world of our principles. This morning we read the first ten utterances from Sinai. They are notable in that only half of them are about the power that handed them down; the others set out the first principles for a moral society, a collective with a conscience. Perhaps all that thunder and lightening was intended to embed the divine speech deep into our senses - half for the Holy One, half for us, both capable of creating something so real that it can't be eradicated. Words can create or destroy morality.

And that's why we need to be just a little bit careful about those space lasers.

PJ Grisar wrote this week in *The Forward*:

The laser theory resembles the original definition of a big lie, first described as a distortion of truth so outrageous no one could believe someone would be audacious enough to make it up... Conspiracy theories, both bizarrely novel and steeped in centuries of prejudice, now have a voice in government....But that's why I think poking fun at these conspiracy theories — or challenging them with facts — is actually imperative.

We've no shortage of words to describe what we think about the idea, and no shortage of memes to poke fun at it. So I hope that nobody on this call is using the space laser today - obviously we can't do that on Shabbat.

But my Zaida used to say, the best way to deal with this kind of rubbish is to put on your hat and go to shul. And that means something a bit different to joking. It means moving past how we talk about ourselves and each other and realizing that speech can, and does, affect morality. Trust me - there are

people out there who believe that you and I are complicit in some plot to take over the world. Trust me - there are people out there who believe that only they have command of the real facts. And trust me - there's someone out there who still believes the Jews have a space laser.

And beliefs like that stick, and are resistant to humor.

So in the week that we read about how words created a new reality for a people just escaped from slavery, we might also want to consider how each of us might put on our hats and go to shul. How will we uphold our tradition, our heritage, our identity this week? How will we be ambassadors of morality? How will we use our words and our actions - our *devarim* - to contest a big lie with a greater truth?

It's okay to laugh. It really is. We need to.

But ultimately we must use our words and our actions to create a better world.