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Script for BBC Thought for the Day
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The Power Of Speech

Good morning.

Last week I had the delight of being a guest of the Oireachtas – the Irish Parliament – at the inaugural Speakers of the Isles Conference at which Speakers of a number of neighbouring parliaments came together to compare notes on core issues and challenges for parliaments today. The irony was not lost on any of us that the one thing Speakers do not do in parliament is speak: but they facilitate speech by others, and they listen.

This is the time in the Jewish year when we focus on the contrasting creative and destructive powers of speech. Last week on the Ninth day of the month of Av we marked the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple, which the Rabbis say was brought about primarily as a result of slander and unpleasant speech. In seven weeks' time at the Jewish New Year we will commemorate the creation of the world, which the Torah describes using the metaphor of God speaking: "God said let there be light, and there was light," conveys the sense that God used the power of speech to bring the world into being. The seven-week period between these two events is described as the seven weeks of

comfort, heralded by the reading in synagogues last Shabbat of Isaiah's pronouncement "Comfort ye, my people", which Handel made known to so many more through his magical oratorio. But the root of the Hebrew word "nachamu" is not comfort, as much as change of direction. These are seven weeks in which we try to change ourselves, and a key focus of change is in our attitude to speech, concentrating on using it creatively rather than destructively.

A recurring theme at the Speakers' conference last week was that we live in a world where more people have a voice than ever before. The internet, through social media and in other ways has enabled people to speak across international and social borders of all kinds. But so much of the content appears to be destructive: everyone shouting at once and nobody listening to each other. People using dialogue to put each other down, and not to build each other up.

Parliamentarians as much as anyone need to remind ourselves constantly that speech is both intensely valuable and creative as part of a real conversation, and intensely destructive as a mere chaotic cacophony. But this is a broader life lesson too – as for God so for humans, our most creative and precious faculty is our ability to speak to each other; and our greatest challenge is to use that faculty to create and not to destroy.
