

# Mosaic Teaching Guide

Series: *The Way of Wisdom*

Teaching Two: *Quotidian Wisdom--A Soft Answer and a Hard Word*

## Proverbs about Words

A gentle response defuses anger,

But a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire (15.1).

Kind words heal and help;

Cutting words wound and maim (15.4).

Gracious speech is like clover honey—

Good taste to the soul, quick energy for the body (16.24).

Watch your words and hold your tongue;

You'll save yourself a lot of grief (21.23).

The right word at the right time

Is like a custom-made piece of Jewelry,

And a wise friend's timely reprimand

Is like a gold ring slipped on your finger (25.9,10).

**Question for Everyone:** On a scale of 1-10, 1 being I hate confrontation and always choose the “soft answer” to 10 I love a little drama and am always willing to offer correction when correction is needed, where are you on this spectrum?

- Introduction: A Soft Answer
- A Soft Answer and Community Stability
- Jesus' Reply: Sometimes Soft but Other Times . . . .
- Ferocious Babbling
- Fred Roger's Hard Answer
- Rosa Park's Hard Answer
- The Source of Wisdom
- Converting the Klansman

When Rabbi Michael Weisser and his wife, Julie, move in their new home in Lincoln, Nebraska, they had no idea that the ring of their new telephone would signal the beginning of a long relationship that would require both hard and soft words, and the wisdom to know when to use hard and soft words. Michael answered the phone, from the callers voice he heard these words “You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph Street, Jew boy.” Two days later the Weissers found a packet tossed onto their front porch. Inside were pictures of Adolph Hitler, caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, African Americans with gorilla heads, and graphic depictions of dead black people and Jewish people.

They came to find out that this was all the work of Larry Trapp, a forty-four-year-old loner who was confined to a wheelchair because of late-stage diabetes. Larry was a Nazi sympathizer and grand dragon of the KKK, responsible for terrorizing local African-American, Asian, and Jewish families. Police knew he made explosives. They didn't know he planned to blow up the Weisser's synagogue. He didn't because, despite their fear and revulsion, the Weissers reached out to Trapp, with wisely chosen alternating strategies of both hard words and soft answers, showing him—through both—more love than he had known in his abused and abusive life.

Trapp's threatening phone calls continued. So Michael Weisser began calling Trapp. Trapp wouldn't answer, so Weisser left messages on his answering machine. “Larry,” he said, “do you know that the very first laws that Nazi's passed were against people like yourself who had no legs or who had physical deformities or physical handicaps? Do you realize

that would have been among the first to die under Hitler?  
Why do you love the Nazi's so much?"

In return Larry left angry taped messages denouncing African Americans, Homosexuals and Jewish people. Each time Weisser replied with a stern message of his own. "Justice is for everybody, Larry . . . . What are you going to say to God on your judgment day?" Meanwhile the rabbi led his congregation in prayers for the grand dragon.

Then one day when Michael Weisser called, Trapp himself picked up the phone. "What do you want?" he shouted angrily. "Well," said Weisser, "I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could take you to the grocery store or something." There was silence on the line. Weisser heard Trapp clear his throat and say, "That's nice of you, but I've got that covered. Thanks anyway." In subsequent phone calls, Trapp told Weisser he was "rethinking a few things." Weisser saw Trapp a few days later on TV, railing against the "Jew media." Furious, he picked up the phone. "This is the rabbi," he said. "It's clear that you are not rethinking anything at all. I demand an explanation for what you are saying!" In a surprisingly soft voice, Trapp said, "I'm sorry I did that. I've been talking like that all my life. . . . I can't help it . . . . I'll apologize.

Through a combination of hard words and soft answers, accountability and grace the Weissers forged a relationship with Mr. Trapp that developed in unexpected ways. Eventually they talked Trapp in to moving into their home for the last nine months of his life. They set up his hospital bed in the midst of their already busy household, caring for him on days when he was in a kind mood and caring for him on

days when he was grouchy. So deeply moved was Mr. Trapp by the Weisser's compassion that the Grand Dragon converted to Judaism three months before he died.

Sometimes the sages will tell us that a soft answer is needed and sometimes the sages will indicate that a hard word is appropriate. It requires wisdom to know to use either and grace all along the way.

Amen.