



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Chayei Sarah

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 10, 2012
Chayei Sarah

**King or President?
Messenger or Broker?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Note: This sermon – which addresses how we see ourselves and our leaders – is relevant to Rabbis anywhere in the world, even those uninterested in the US presidential election. It uses the election as an example, but you can easily omit those references.

While we’ll leave it to others to analyze the implications of this week’s bruising presidential election, let us address a bigger question: What is the role of a president: Is he a messenger of the people or is he a broker? Can he have his own agenda or is he solely representative of his constituents?

The same question can be asked of each of us: What drives our lives – self interest or a higher calling? Do you see yourself as a messenger on a mission, or a broker, or none of the above?

With President Obama being re-elected, in a very close and hard fought race – demonstrating how this country is split almost evenly; and with the challenges that we face in this highly volatile world, there are some fascinating lessons to be learned from this week’s Torah portion about the role and responsibility of our chosen representatives – the president and other elected officials, as well as our own personal obligations.

The unique and unprecedented role of an American president is that he has no power of his own. The first president, George Washington, refused being called “king,” so as not to give the wrong impression and open the door to the potential abuse of his position, so painfully experienced under monarchs of old. Therefore, with President Obama again at the helm we wonder: What type of leader will the president be this time around? Will he represent our needs and goals without self-interest, or having a freer hand now, will he bend his position of power to his own purpose? Will he be a dedicated emissary or a broker?

In this sermon, we examine the first messenger ever sent – which is documented in this week’s Torah reading – when Abraham sent his servant Eliezer on a mission that would shape the course of history. Was Eliezer a faithful messenger, a *shliach*, totally dedicated to the cause, or a *shadchan*, a matchmaker with his own agenda?

KING OR PRESIDENT?

Messenger or Broker?

Post Election Thoughts about the Role of a Leader

1. Post-Election Thoughts

“Daddy,” a little girl asked her father, “do all fairy tales begin with ‘Once upon a time’?”

“No, sweetheart,” he answered. “Some begin with ‘If I am elected.’”

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Two friends with radically different political views – one pro Obama, the other pro Romney – are on their way to the polls on Election Day, each trying to no avail to convince the other to switch sides. Finally, one fellow turns to the other and says “You know, we’ve argued about this for months, and we’re obviously going to vote for different candidates. Our votes will cancel each other out anyways, so why don’t we just call it a draw and go home instead?” The other fellow agrees, they shake hands and part ways.

Another guy who overheard the conversation approaches the dealmaker and says with admiration, “That’s a real sportsmanlike offer you just made!”

“Not really,” the fellow says, “Just this afternoon I’ve already done this three times.”

2. What is a Leader?

Elections have a way of bringing the best and the worst out of us. No matter who you voted for there are many lessons to be learned from this and every election.

While we'll leave it to others to analyze the implications of this week's bruising presidential election, let us address a bigger question: What is the role of a president: Is he a messenger of the people or is he a broker? Can he have his own agenda or is he solely a representative of his constituents?

The same question can be asked of each of us: What drives our lives – self interest or a higher calling? Do you see yourself as a messenger on a mission, or a broker, or none of the above?

With President Obama being re-elected, in a very close and hard fought race – demonstrating how this country is split almost evenly; and with the challenges that we face in this highly volatile world, there are some fascinating lessons to be learned from this week's Torah portion about the role and responsibility of our chosen representatives – the president and other elected officials, as well as our own personal obligations.

We shall examine the first messenger ever sent – which is documented in this week's Torah reading – when Abraham sent his servant Eliezer on a mission that would shape the course of history. Was Eliezer a faithful messenger, a *shliach*, totally dedicated to the cause, or a *shadchan*, a matchmaker with his own agenda?

Let us begin by defining the very definition and significance of being a *shliach* – an emissary, a messenger.

3. Mission Statement

Nothing can function properly without a defined purpose. Every business – or any type of venture as a matter of fact – must have a mission statement, defining its goals and objectives. Without a clearly visible target, an arrow could be aimed and land anywhere, so there must be a clear direction to anything that matters in life. Without it, there is no focus or efficiency, no accountability or accomplishment.

Many, if not most, failures can be traced to a flawed point of departure – a mission statement which is vague, generic or unrealistic. Of course, sometimes the reason for the failure is faulty execution, or the wrong tools, or missing resources. But more often than not, the initial mission statement did not consider all the factors necessary for successful implementation.

If, for instance, you set out on a mission to fly to Jupiter (unrealistic), or to create an artificially intelligent robot (vague), or to write a successful adventure novel (generic) – without spelling out how you intend to succeed – your mission is fatally flawed from the start and is bound to fail.

Why then are we surprised that our lives are not working ... that we are not happy ... that we feel anxious and fearful ... that we wander about aimlessly and feel ineffective? If a business cannot function without a mission statement, how can we?

Armed with a sense of purpose, we feel we belong, we feel focused, driven and confident.

So nothing is more critical than knowing why we are here ... the purpose of our existence ... the mission of our life's journey.

4. The First Messenger

The first messenger ever – which is documented in this week’s Torah reading – gives us some important clues for how to define our own focus in life.

And oddly enough, the lesson comes from a non-Jew, Eliezer, whom Abraham sends on a mission that would change world history – to find a wife for his son Isaac, the future patriarch of the Jewish people.

Now the question is this: How did Eliezer approach this mission?

Did he consider himself Abraham’s messenger or emissary (a *shliach*), so selflessly and absolutely dedicated to his assignment as to be an extension of his master?¹ Or did he consider himself more of a matchmaker (a *shadchan*) with his own agenda and interests?²

5. Two Levels of Commitment

Before examining whether Eliezer was a *shadchan* or *shliach* – matchmaker or a messenger – I would like to focus on these two approaches which define two levels of commitment: one total, the other conditional.

For the matchmaker is a hired gun, whose loyalty to his mission is commensurate to his compensation and personal gain. While the messenger has no self-interest; he is completely dedicated to his mission,

¹As the Talmud states (Mishne Berachot 34b. Talmud, Kidushin 41b): *Shlucho shel odom ke'moso*, “A person’s messenger is [considered to be] like the person [the initial sender] himself,” an extension of the dispatcher.

² *Tosafos Ketubot 7b*.

with no personal strings attached.

This is similar to the difference between an employee and an employer. A paid worker will never be as dedicated as the owner of the business. The worker may do his job faithfully during working hours, but at the end of the day, he will return to his own life, while the owner will be thinking and dreaming about his business, not only “nine to five,” but all day and all night.

Now there are those rare employees who do not work for the paycheck but for the cause. As a great Rebbe once said: “A true soldier is a soldier even when he sleeps.” A true soldier is always on duty.

When one is completely dedicated to one’s mission, there is no room for any other agendas.

6. The New President (Optional)

And that brings us to this week’s election.

What type of president did we just vote into office? In this highly volatile world, how will President Obama relate to being the leader of the free world, especially now that he doesn’t have to worry about re-election? How will he deal with so much unchecked power in his hands? Will he remember that he is supposed to be our elected representative – our emissary, our *shliach*?

The unique and unprecedented role of an American president is that he is supposed to have no power of his own. The first American president, George Washington, refused being called “king,” so as not to give the wrong impression and open the door to the potential abuse of his position, so painfully experienced under monarchs of old.

Therefore, with a newly re-elected steward at the helm we wonder: What type of leader will the president be this time around? Will he faithfully represent our needs and goals without self-interest, or having

a freer hand now, will he bend his position to his own purpose? Will he be a dedicated emissary or a broker? Or neither?

7. Why am I Here?

We too need to ask ourselves this question about our own lives: “How am I doing on this score? Am I serving myself or a higher cause?”

It may sound like a simple choice, but it’s not.

Most of us feel that we should serve a higher cause, but, despite that – the pressures of life being what they are – we end up following our own needs and self-interests, with a nod here and there to a cause beyond ourselves. We spend most of the time at work, making money, occasionally volunteering for some charity or community group.

Now, of course, some would argue that even selfless, full-time dedication to a cause has a hidden selfish interest. And that, even in the best-case scenario, service to a cause greater than the self is usually intermingled with, if not overwhelmed by, the undercurrent of self-interest that drives so much of life’s activities.

But even if that were true, we still have before us the same two options: Will we serve ourselves, or will we serve a higher cause? Most of us mix the two, making the former the dominant force.

But upon further consideration, these two choices are actually quite complex. Even after accepting that our life is a mission to serve, we can still take on that challenge either like a matchmaker or like a messenger.

[Of course, there is also the option (if you can call it that) to live without a deeper mission at all – to be neither a matchmaker nor a messenger, and exclusively serve yourself. With material success you can distract yourself and deceive yourself into thinking that you are “on top of it,” even while your soul flounders about. But that “life choice” deserves its own discussion. Here we are assuming the axiom of a life mission beyond material indulgence.]

8. To Serve the Master

Says the Talmud that, really, it is all about being like a messenger, for “I was created for no other reason than to serve my Master.”

If we could all say – “I am here to serve not myself but God, i.e. a cause greater than myself” – if we could make that statement the basis of our life’s mission, would we not feel free and fearless? Would not the complexities of life suddenly fall away and a clear path blaze before us?

Why then are we driven to serve anything else, especially our own material needs?

Explain the mystics that this is because God has concealed His presence from us. Our own internal missions, etched into the very DNA of our souls, are obscured by the chaos of material existence. The superficial dominates over the real. We are consequentially driven by existential insecurity, fear or other survival instincts, which in turn feed the “concealment” of our divine connection and essential mission.

But part of that essential mission is awareness that this is the state of being. When we reach this awareness, we can embrace the commitment to battle the concealment, and dedicate our lives to a higher cause.

9. Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal is to be like a messenger not like a matchmaker.

A matchmaker is a dealmaker – bringing together two parties and getting a cut for his efforts. He serves a purpose, and quite often serves a greater cause, but he ultimately remains an outsider, or at least reserves that right. He is donating his services, retaining his right to fulfill his self-interest needs.

³ Talmud, Kidushin 82b.

A messenger, by contrast, is completely dedicated to serve the mission, with no other agendas. He is completely committed.

10. Surgeons and Pilots

Another way to look at this is to compare surgeons and pilots. What is the difference between them?

When people find themselves in need of surgery, they are very cautious and search around for the best possible surgeon. Why? Because their lives are at risk, and they want to ensure that whoever is cutting them open is the best qualified expert in the field.

Why then is it that when the same people book an airline flight, with all the risks of air travel, they don't go searching for the best pilot in the world?

The answer is because the pilot is flying together with the passengers on the airplane, and he is exposed to the same risk as they are. The surgeon, on the other hand, does not lie down on the operating table with his patients. If the surgery doesn't go well, he remains intact.

Matchmakers are like great surgeons. They can be excellent networkers and shrewd business administrators. But they are ultimately "outsiders," who do not jump into the "same boat" with their clients. This is why we search for the best surgeon.

Messengers are like pilots - they may not always be the best, but they are in it with us. Our problem is their problem. Our celebration is their celebration.

As some non-profit leaders like to remind their donors: You may be a chicken that donates an egg from time to time, but the chicken remains intact. But I am like the cattle, whose very life is taken to serve a juicy steak. My life is on the line.

11. The Paradox of the Messenger (Chassidic Story)

In truth, the role of a messenger is a paradox:

On one hand, the messenger must be an independent entity, with his own mind and heart. On the other hand, at his own choosing, he must decide to dedicate himself to serve the mission of the master, thus becoming his extension.

The 19th century Chabad Rebbe known as the Tzemach Tzedek would often travel to St. Petersburg, the capital of Czarist Russia, on matters pertaining to the betterment of Jewish life in Russia. Once, the Tzemach Tzedek was unable to attend an important meeting, and instead he sent one of his loyal disciples. Before embarking on his journey, the messenger asked the Tzemach Tzedek: “What do I do if I have a doubt how to resolve a particular issue?” The Tzemach Tzedek replied: “Follow your own thinking.”

Rabbi Shmuel, the Tzemach Tzedek’s youngest son, was present during this conversation. When he heard his father say “follow your own thinking” he thought to himself that the messenger must be missing something in his dedication, hence the directive to “follow his own thinking.”

A short while later, the family of the Tzemach Tzedek, while sitting together at a meal, noticed a sudden change in the Rebbe demeanor – he was clearly sensing something. He told them, “It’s the matter in Petersburg” (*Er mattert zich in Peterburg*). He sensed that the messenger was struggling with a dilemma on his journey. Then the Rebbe smiled, “Good, good. He resolved the issue exactly as I would have.” (*Gut, gut. Er hot mechaven geven.*)

Rabbi Shmuel finally understood that contrary to his initial speculation, the messenger was actually far more committed and connected to the Rebbe.

12. True Dedication

A messenger who is truly dedicated is *not* someone who does not have the independence to think on his own. That is a puppet or a fool.

But true dedication means that an independent thinker chooses to commit himself to a cause greater than himself, to be a messenger of a truth higher than himself, and in effect, becomes an extension or a channel of that higher truth.

And that brings us to the original question: Was Eliezer, whom Abraham sent on a mission to find a wife for his son Isaac, a messenger or a matchmaker?

Eliezer servant of Abraham could have been a matchmaker. But he ended up being a messenger, who was completely dedicated to his master's will.

He made it his mission to bring Rebecca and Isaac together, with no other agenda. As a result, Isaac and Rebecca built a life together – a life that would shape the future of the entire world. They became the parents of Jacob and Esau, and came to perpetuate the legacy of Abraham – laying the seeds for all the generations to follow till this very day.

13. Are You a Messenger or a Matchmaker?

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic Movement, explains that Eliezer's mission to join Isaac and Rebecca in

marriage reflects the general mission of each of our lives:

To fuse matter and spirit, to join body and soul into one seamless union.

Let us use this Shabbat – when leaders are chosen and defined – as an opportunity to embrace our personal mission – to fuse heaven and earth, faith and reason, soul and body, spirit and matter. To do everything in our power to illuminate and warm ourselves and everyone we meet with the beautiful light of Torah and mitzvot.

Our mission is nothing less than that. And we are doing it, whether we know it or not. The only question how – are we doing it as matchmakers or messengers?

Let's pray we make the right choice. Amen.