



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Shemot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 24, 2010

Shemot

Two Sermons

1) Who are Our Heroes? Page 1

2) Leadership Vacuum:
Do We Care? Page 13



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

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Shemot > Shemot > Who are Our Heroes?

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ABSTRACT

This week, TIME magazine unveiled its “Person of the Year” for 2010, and it is a young Jewish man, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. At age 26, he is worth nearly \$7 billion, and as such he personifies the height of achievement in the materialistic world, the height excellence in the age of the Internet.

Does Mark Zuckerberg stand as a model of what it is to be the best you can be? Pondering this provokes the question: What does define the best in a person? Who would you designate as the true “person of the year” – the ultimate role model for this generation? Who would you want your children look up to?

If being the best you can be means being extremely wealthy, if it means knowing how to exploit the mixture of narcissism and voyeurism underlying the fast growth of social media, then the answer is yes. But if the criteria include fighting for justice in a cruel world, taking responsibility when no one else will, caring about others, being humble but being courageous at the same time, well then, we have other models to emulate.

This week we read in the Torah about the birth and rise of the greatest man in history – the only person who spoke to God “face to face as one speaks with a friend.” This man was born in the worst of times, under terrible oppression, and he became, against his will, the paragon of excellence, the ultimate symbol of faith and dedication.

Why are we told about the intimate details of this man’s life? Because, as his descendants, we each have a part of him within ourselves, and by studying his life we can learn to be the best we can be.

Shemot

Shemot

Who are Our Heroes?

This sermon teaches how the life of Moses can serve as a model for our lives today ... how we can discover the secrets of our own soul and find ways to release them ... how we can reach our highest potential.

WHO ARE OUR HEROES AND ROLE MODELS? LESSONS FROM MOSES, THE PARAGON OF EXCELLENCE

1. Man of the Year

This week, TIME magazine unveiled its “Person of the Year” for 2010, and it is a young Jewish man, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. At age 26, he is worth nearly \$7 billion, and as such he personifies the height of achievement in the materialistic world, the height of excellence in the age of the Internet.

Does Mark Zuckerberg stand as a model of what it is to be the best you can be? Pondering this provokes the question: What does define the best in a person? Who would you designate as the true “person of the year” – the ultimate role model for this generation? Who would you want your children look up to?

If being the best you can be means being extremely wealthy, if it means knowing how to exploit the mixture of narcissism and voyeurism underlying the fast growth of social media,¹ then the answer is yes. But if the criteria include fighting for justice in a cruel world, taking responsibility when no one else will, caring about others, being humble but having the courage to rise to greatness, well then, we have other models to emulate.

²TIME, Dec. 15, 2010.

This week we read in the Torah about the birth and rise of the greatest man in history – the only person who spoke to God “face to face as one speaks with a friend.”² This man was born in the worst of times, under terrible oppression, and he became, against his will, the paragon of excellence, the ultimate symbol of faith and dedication.

Now here is a man to emulate! And this is why the Torah tells us so many intimate details of his life.

2. Introducing Moses

As the Book of Exodus opens, a bit like a theater curtain rising, we see that the stage is set for the hero to make his entrance. The Jewish people have been enslaved in Egypt, and their oppression now includes genocide. The Pharaoh has ordered that all newborn baby boys be thrown in the Nile.³

The Torah suggests that this was a cruel form of population control, but the Midrash fills in a bit of the back-story. It says that the Pharaoh had a puzzling dream which his soothsayers interpreted as predicting the rise of a man who would destroy Egypt. They advised killing all newborn boys as a preventive measure. Thus the Pharaoh ordered that all newborn boys be thrown into the Nile.⁴ At this moment Moses – though we do not yet know his name – is born.

Moses’ mother tries her best to save her baby and manages to hide him for three months until it is no longer possible. Then she makes a basket, waterproofs it with tar, and floats it in the Nile among the rushes near the river bank.⁵

As it happens, the Pharaoh’s daughter comes to bathe at that very spot in the river. She finds the basket and is moved by the baby’s tears. She

²Exodus 33:11.

³Exodus 1:22..

⁴Midrash *Shemot Rabba* 1:18. Rashi on the verse.

⁵Exodus 2:1-4.

brings him home – right into the Pharaoh’s palace – names him Moses (which means “drawn from water”) and raises him as her own.⁶

Thus, while his own people are slaving outside, Moses grows up in the lap of luxury in the home of the very man who has the most to fear from him.

The next thing that the Torah tells us is that Moses grows up and goes outside the palace. He sees the oppression of his people, and in particular he is incensed by the sight of an Egyptian torturing a Jew. He comes to the Jew’s defense and ends up killing the Egyptian.⁷

But the very next day, he realizes that he had been seen and that his life is now in danger. Thus he flees into the wilderness where he witnesses seven young women trying to water their sheep and being harassed by male shepherds. As we have already seen, Moses cannot bear the sight of injustice, and so now he comes to their aid, ends up being welcomed into their home, marrying one of them and becoming a shepherd himself.⁸

That’s the opening act, all 22 verses of it. Mysterious beginning but it gets even more so.

3. Burning Bush

Moses is out there tending sheep, when he sees from the distance a strange sight. It is a thorn bush that is burning but, somehow, the fire is not able to consume it. This is the beginning of the second act – Moses’ encounter with God.

In summary, God appoints Moses to go back to Egypt and bring out the Jewish people. God says, “Go tell Pharaoh to let My people go.”⁹

⁶Exodus 2:5-10.

⁷Exodus 2:11-12

⁸Exodus 2:13-22.

⁹Exodus 3:1-10.

You would think that Moses would be honored with such a mission. Yet Moses initially refuses. He has a long dialogue with God – which the Torah relates in detail – how he is not appropriate for the task: the people won't listen to him, he is not capable, he cannot speak properly. God counters his every argument and finally tells him:

“Who gives a man a mouth to speak? ... Is it not I, God? Now go – I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say.”¹⁰

Moses still pleads: “I beg you, Lord! Send someone more appropriate.” But God will not take no for an answer. Moses relents and fulfills his mission.

Torah does not record Moses' acceptance speech, only that he just goes and does what has to be done.

I have taken the time to recap the story, not because it is unusual and very interesting – which it is – but because there is much we have to learn from it that is relevant for us today, here and now.

4. Moses in Each of Us

Because the Torah is meant to be a guidebook to existence, because the larger than life characters that enliven its stories are archetypes of humanity, we can be sure that there is a Moses in each one of us.¹¹ The question is how do we access him and bring him to the fore?

The answer is important to know because Moses is a paragon of excellence and, if we can access the Moses within each of us, we have a chance to truly be the best that we can be.

When we read about Moses, we're really reading about ourselves, and what we are capable of becoming.

Just like us, Moses was a human being, a man of flesh and blood, not some sort of angel. Yet, in the way the Torah tells his story, it is clear

¹⁰ Exodus 4:11.

¹¹ See *Tanya* chapter 42.

that a human being of flesh and blood – through effort and discipline – can reach heights that are beyond anything imaginable.

5. Moses' Secret

What was his secret?

First of all, Moses was a humble man. We see this in his conversation with God when he begs God to send someone more appropriate. At the same time, his humility did not stop him from doing what needed to be done. He did not grovel before Pharaoh – his humility did not cower him.

But because he was humble, he was able to transcend his own personality; he was able to suspend his ego in the face of something that he understood was beyond him.

Most of us have had a taste of that at least once in our lives. We call it “a moment of truth,” or being “in the zone.” For example, when we are completely immersed in a project, we can lose track of time; hours can pass, and we don't even realize it. When this happens, we have crossed the boundaries of our self and are connecting with a deeper reality – so much so, we are no longer self-conscious. Then, suddenly, we wake up. We say, “Hey, you know, I'm hungry.” Or, “Is that the time? What happened here?” What happened is that we experienced a state of self-nullification before something greater, and in that moment we accessed our best self.

This is why Dr. Viktor Frankel, the founder of logotherapy and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, advised:

Don't aim at success – the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same

holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run – in the long run, I say! – success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it.

This is Moses' secret and really the secret of all eternity. When you're dedicated to a cause that's greater than yourself, then you become an extension of that greatness. This is why when you commit to certain values or noble ventures – when you are not driven by self-interest or personal gain – then you have a chance to achieve things that will live forever.

6. What Stands in Our Way

What stands in the way of such grand achievement – of being the best we can be – are our fears and insecurities, and the need to protect ourselves.

Now I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't protect yourself from predators, from people who are manipulative and take advantage of others. But if you are expending most of your energy protecting yourself, you will have no energy left *to be* yourself. Your energy will be used up by the constant state of readiness for war, by the weight of the very heavy defensive armor you will have to carry.

Unfortunately, this need to protect yourself is a by-product of living in a dysfunctional world, where children grow up in broken homes – that's 68% of children alive today – never feeling quite safe. As a result, the adults coming out of such environments develop layers of armor to protect their vulnerable selves.

As we know, porcupines, with the sharpest of needles, have the most delicate and tender underbellies of all creatures on this earth.

Therefore, the more sensitive a human being, the more protective layers he or she creates. But, at some point, those protective layers can become barriers that inhibit our emotions and block our ability to experience life to its fullest. They can become walls of a prison, and trapped behind them, the spirit withers.

Now, let's note that Moses had similar challenges, if not much more difficult. As a child, he was separated from his mother during his most vulnerable bonding years. Though he grew up in the Pharaoh's palace, he always knew he was different. And the first time he let his guard down, he had to run for his life.

We can imagine that he liked the quiet life of the shepherd – far away from the fray, free from harm. And yet, when called upon by God, he found reserves of enormous strength inside of himself. Dedicated to his mission, he forgot about the need for personal armor. Because he was not concerned about himself, he rose beyond himself.

7. Never Underestimate Yourself

So never underestimate yourself. Underestimating yourself is not humility, at best it is misplaced humility which, in certain circumstances, can also be a form of arrogance. Arrogance doesn't always take the shape of "I can do everything, and I'm the best." Arrogance can also take the shape of "I'm nobody."

Like the joke goes, "Look who thinks he's nobody?!" You must have heard that joke:

Two spiritually-accomplished mystics were busy affirming their sense of worthlessness: "I'm nobody. I'm nobody." And then, to their chagrin, an individual of far lesser spiritual status joined in the chant, "I'm nobody. I'm nobody." The other two were disgusted. One whispered to the other: "Look who thinks he's nobody!"

Chanting “I’m nobody” doesn’t get you there. The balanced stance is to know how small you are *and* how great you can become.

There are people who have illusions of grandeur, and they can talk about how great they can become, but they don’t know how small they are. Then there are people who know very well how small they are, but they don’t realize how great they can become.

8. Your Personal Burning Bush

There’s a point in all our lives when we arrive at the moment of truth. Sooner or later, God will call to each of us out of the “burning bush” and ask us to embrace our mission and achieve greatness. Not literally, of course. The message may be delivered in quite a veiled way. It may come through a cab driver. It may come through a friend. It may even come through an enemy, or through loss or trauma. But, all the same, the message will ask us to reach higher, dig deeper, open wider ... connect to the best part of us, to our soul. It will call upon us to embrace our mission to redeem the “oppressed,” to help free ourselves and others from some form of “bondage” and “enslavement.”

Some of us will respond like Moses. Some of us will demur. And some of us will not even hear. When Moses brought the message to the enslaved Jews that they were about to be redeemed from slavery, they were working so hard they could not hear him at first.¹²

Unfortunately, too many people today are in the same place – working so hard, trying to make ends meet – they cannot hear the message from the burning bush. Long ago, they have forgotten about their best self – their soul – and it sits quietly waiting to be remembered. It makes itself felt in the anxiety that possesses them at times, in the mood swings they are subject to, in the tears they cry for no apparent reason. All these symptoms of disquietude are murmurings of their soul quietly begging for attention.

¹² Exodus 6:9.

It's not so difficult to do something about it. It's actually more difficult to just ignore it. The simple act of acknowledging your soul – that the best part of you exists and is waiting to be actualized – can have a tremendous impact on your life. As the sages say, "Awareness is half the cure of any disease."

Awareness means the opposite of denial. Awareness is acknowledgment. The worst thing for any human being is to be invalidated/ignored, and the soul feels the same way. It doesn't need much – just your attention. It's not like you have to buy it anything. And no rabbi, mystic or Kabbalist can sell it to you.

There's a joke they tell about a man who comes to a rabbi.

-He says, "Rabbi, I hear the Torah has the answer to all life's dilemmas." -The rabbi answers, "Yes, that's true. It surely does."

-“Can you teach it to me?”

-“Of course.”

-“How much will it cost?”

-“It's not mine to sell. It's God's truth. It doesn't cost anything.”

-So they sit down and open up a Torah, and it's all in Hebrew. So the man says to the rabbi, "I can't read Hebrew."

-“I see. Well, Hebrew lessons will cost you five thousand dollars.”

9. Melody of the Soul (Call to Action)

The *Zohar* says that each of our souls emits its own particular song, its own melody. So how come we don't hear the voice of the soul? Because the dissonance of our busy everyday lives drowns it out. We can't hear subtlety amid the din of outer noise. Our challenge is to lower that noise – the turbulence, the static – to allow that subtle, gentle sound to emerge ... to allow our special music to play and be heard.

To do that, we need to create a sacred space within us, a special time of no disturbance each day.

It can be anytime – morning, evening or during the day. My suggestion is to do it just before you go to sleep. Instead of falling asleep with the television on or a newspaper on your nose, go to sleep reading something that’s not part of the mundane activities of your day, something from a higher place – a poem, a song, a Psalm. Maybe a chapter of a spiritual book. Anything – as long as it’s something soulful.

Sanctifying these short moments will make a big difference. If you allow all the worries of your day carry over into your sleep, they will cause you to have a restless night. But when you create a spiritual buffer, then your sleep can be a source of spiritual rejuvenation. You will wake up with renewed hope, with a new confidence, open to new possibilities.

Ultimately, it’s up to you to nourish your soul, the Moses within, the best part of you. It’s in your control, and it’s your destiny. And when you do you will become the best you can be. Don’t allow society and peers ever undermine your potential. You have enormous reservoirs of power, waiting to be released. You can achieve greatness.

Let us individually and collectively declare to stop searching for “models” and “heroes” out there, and begin seeking for the “hero” within. Let us teach ourselves and our children that the true “person of the year” should be ... you and I.

In conclusion, let me borrow some words from Dr. Seuss:¹³

And will you succeed?

Yes! You will indeed.

It’s 98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed. [I’d say 100 percent guaranteed].

So ...

Be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray

¹³ *Oh, the Places You’ll Go* by Dr. Seuss (New York: Random House, 1990).

Or Mordechai Ali Van Allen O'Shea

You're off to great places!

Today is your day!

Your mountain is waiting

So ... get on your way!

AMEN!



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

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

Shemot > Shemot > Leadership Vacuum:
Do We Care?

December 24, 2010

ABSTRACT

When we see an injustice, do we consider it our responsibility to act, or do we look to our leaders, elected officials or experts to right the wrong? And if that is the course we take, who exactly are these leaders? Where are they to be found?

In these turbulent times with all our current upheavals and uncertain future, one thing that glaringly stands out is the lack of serious leadership. We may have excellent administrators, troubleshooters, crisis managers and commentators. But seriously missing are leaders that offer us vision, clarity, courage, strength and direction. Not just the ability to put out fires, but to ensure that the fires don't start in the first place. In short, leadership that offers a confident sense of destination and set of objectives to guide our every step in achieving those goals.

Where are we headed and where do we want to head? If anything positive can come out of these uncertain times it is the clarity that we have been taking for granted our gifts and prosperity, without a sense of direction and long-term vision. Now we have the opportunity to change that. But in order to do so, we need leaders.

As long as true leaders are absent, into the breach can step anyone who has a mind to. Witness the recent havoc unleashed by the Wikileaks. Whether you agree with the need for secrecy or not, our accelerating technology has clearly exposed the vulnerabilities - and amplified the consequences - of an open society lacking strong and responsible moral leadership and focus. Today, super-motivated individuals can take advantage of the

Shemot

Shemot

Leadership Vacuum: Do We Care?

latest technology and the viral spread of information via the Internet to hobble governments and banks, successfully undermining their ability to have confidential communications that are vital to the functioning of any society. In short, it is extremely easy today to spread anarchy via the world-wide web, as Thomas Friedman put it in the New York Times.

This sermon – using the lessons contained in the current Torah reading – dissects the anatomy of true leadership, identifying action, vision, courage, compassion and humility as essential leadership traits. And it proposes how we can apply these lessons to our present times, how we can discover these traits within our leaders and most of all within ourselves.

1. Harry Truman Story

On April 12th, 1945, while World War II was still raging, Harry Truman, then the vice-president of the United States, was asked to come see Eleanor Roosevelt, the president's wife. When he was ushered in, Mrs. Roosevelt gently informed him that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had passed away.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Truman asked after a moment's reflection.

"Is there anything I can do for *you*?" Mrs. Roosevelt replied. "You're the one in trouble now!"

Why do I tell you this story?

Because it's hard to be a leader, especially the leader of the free world – and anyone in a leadership role today must certainly feel that he or she is in trouble now. And because it's a good way to frame our current challenges, which are fundamentally linked to the leadership vacuum we are experiencing in our generation.

So what do we do? What do we do, when we feel we are sailing in a small boat on a storm-tossed sea and the captain is struggling to stay the course at the helm? What do we do when we feel he is clueless, steering us in the wrong direction, or, worse still, has abandoned ship?

In these turbulent times with all our current upheavals and uncertain future, one thing that glaringly stands out is the lack of serious leadership. We may have excellent administrators, troubleshooters, crisis managers and commentators. But seriously missing are leaders that offer us vision, clarity, courage, strength and direction. Not just the ability to put out fires, but to ensure that the fires don't start in the first place - in short, leadership that offers a confident sense of destination and set of objectives to guide our every step in achieving those goals.

Where are we headed and where do we want to head? If anything positive can come out of these uncertain times it is the clarity that we have been taking for granted our gifts and prosperity, without a sense of direction and long-term vision. Now we have the opportunity to change that. But in order to do so, we need leaders. How do we find them?

2. Moses, the Greatest Leader

The greatest leader that ever lived, according to the Torah, was Moses. And in this week's Torah reading, we discover how he first acquired his leadership skills. This is how the Torah tells it:

When Moses grew up, he began to go out [of the Pharaoh's palace] to his own people, and he saw their hard labor. [One day] he saw an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Hebrews. He looked around, and he saw no one. He killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.¹

³Exodus 2:11-12.

3. And He Saw No One

Now biblical commentators offer various opinions as to what happened here. Generally, it is agreed that Moses – who until now had been raised as the adopted son of the Pharaoh’s daughter – has become aware of the terrible plight of his enslaved brethren. Going out among them, he saw their suffering, and when he encountered an Egyptian beating a helpless slave, he was moved to act.

First, though, he looked around “and he saw no one.” Some would suggest that he looked around to make sure no one was watching him. But, in fact, only two verses later we learn that people were watching. And why is that the Torah makes such a point of the fact that “he saw no one” – literally, “he saw no man”?

He saw no man who cared. He saw no man who would stand up for the rights of this poor suffering slave. He saw no man who would object to this vicious beating. Present were only other cowed slaves. He looked around and saw no one who would take responsibility.

When he saw that no one was going to act, he realized that he must.

That is the first quality of a leader – when he sees a crisis, he does not wait for others but takes the initiative and acts. He would prefer not to take on a leadership role; he would prefer leading a quiet life out of the limelight. But when he sees that no one else seems to be doing what must be done, he realizes the responsibility rests with him, and he doesn’t hesitate to act.

4. A Challenge for Everyone of Us

Now, before we continue to examine what other great leadership qualities Moses embodied, I must point out that this very first criterion of leadership that the Torah identifies applies to every one of us.

If we witness an injustice and nobody is doing a thing, we are all challenged to act.

Unfortunately, studies show that a majority of people will walk on by when they see a crime. They don't want to get involved, they don't want to get in trouble, they don't want to get sued. This phenomenon is so famous that it has a name in psychology – it is known as the “Genovese Syndrome.” It was so named after Kitty Genovese, who was stabbed to death in 1964 in a high-rise apartment courtyard while many residents of the building watched. Since then – and many more similar incidents later – countless studies have been conducted, proving that the pattern of un-involvement is closer to the norm than we'd all like to believe.

Furthermore, other studies have shown that silent bystanders lend power to a perpetrator and magnify the feelings of hopelessness of the victim, while one voice can be the catalyst that motivates the crowd to intervene.² Why does it require such courage to be the one voice?

As Albert Einstein put it, “The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.”

Moses did something about it.

Moses had the courage to be the one person who acted. When he witnessed one man being beaten, he did not dismiss it as insignificant – he did not say, what good would it do to save one slave among tens of thousands?

Instead, he immediately acted – as it turned out he risked his life by doing so – and this courageous act was the first trait of his leadership that the Torah documents.

²*Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* by Stanley Milgram (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). Some of his early experiments have been replicated numerous times, most recently by the BBC documentary *How Violent Are You?* (May 2009) and *Dateline NBC* (April 25, 2010).

5. Compassion/Empathy Toward Others

What moved Moses to act was another quality that he possessed, a quality essential to a leader – compassion.

Later on, after he fled Egypt, Moses became a shepherd, tending the flocks of his father-in-law Yitro. The Torah focuses on this fact.³ Why? Because a shepherd – and especially the way Moses served as a shepherd – captured his profound sensitivity and compassion, the qualities which caused God to single him out. As the Midrash relates:

One little lamb had wandered off from the pack. Moses noticed it was missing and went searching for it. When he found it, he realized that the little lamb had gone off to find water. He said, “I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be tired.” So he picked her up and carried her back. When God saw this, He said, “Because you showed such compassion in tending the flock of a mortal man, you shall become the shepherd of Israel, of the flock that is Mine.”⁴

6. Humility

In this week’s reading, the Torah relates the famous encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush, when God announced to Moses that He had chosen him to lead the Israelites out of slavery to the Promised Land.

And how did Moses respond? He declined. In every possible way Moses tried to convince God that he was not worthy of this mission, that God should choose someone else more appropriate. When God would not accept any of Moses’ arguments, Moses brought up his speech impediment, pleading: “I beg You, Lord, I am not a man of words ... I find it difficult to speak and find the right language.”⁵

³Exodus 3:1.

⁴Midrash Shemot Rabbah 2:2.

⁵Exodus 4:10

Can you imagine: God has explicitly chosen Moses to lead the Jews out of Egypt, and Moses declines! Most everyone would jump at the opportunity. Yet, Moses shies away and tries in every possible way to avoid this position.

And why did God choose a “man of no words?” A leader who is serving as God’s spokesman to Pharaoh, should be someone who can eloquently present the case for freeing the Jewish people.

Would we ever choose a leader who does not speak well? Who does not sound good on television? Who is not eloquent and charismatic? Who does not have a commanding presence (fueled usually by a large ego) that one can spot miles away?

And yet that is whom God chose as His leader – a man who is called “the most humble man on the face of the earth.”⁶

Why is humility so important in a leader?

First because it is the key criterion of objectivity. A humble man has nothing to prove, no ego position to protect, he is fully committed to truth without self-interests clouding his vision.

Second, because an egotistical, charismatic leader can become a demagogue, the center of a personality-cult, thus harming his followers’ relationship with God. A true leader must be utterly selfless – serving as a transparent channel between God and the people.

God chose Moses precisely because he didn’t want the job. God did not want someone who vied for such a position of power. Only one who ran the other way, recognizing the awesome responsibility that such a position entailed.

7. A Leader Who Cannot Speak

Okay, you say, I’ll buy your point about the importance of humility. But a leader who cannot speak? How is he going to communicate with the people?

⁶Number 12:3.

God Himself answers the question. When Moses argues, “I am not a man of words,” God replies with the memorable words of this week’s Torah reading:

“Who gives a man a mouth to speak? ... Is it not I, God? Now go
– I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say.”⁷

In other words, God wanted a spokesperson who did *not* speak his own words, but the words of God. He wanted someone who was completely selfless and devoid of ego, so that he served as a mouthpiece of God’s words.

And what happened with the words of this “man of no words?” As it turns out, Moses’ words live on forever – like no other words in history.

Today, the most revered book that humankind possesses preserves all Moses’ words. More than 3,000 years later, we are still reading what he said, and his words have shaped the course of history. The Torah is called *Torat Moshe*, and it repeatedly states, “Moses spoke ... Moses said ... Moses told...” Indeed, the entire fifth book of the Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy is called *Devarim*, meaning “Words,” and it begins: “These are the words that Moses spoke...”⁸

These words that Moses spoke are with us still, and we pore over them, analyze them, debate them. These words have become the foundation of civilization and the most cherished ideals of society today.

And all – words coming from a man of “no words!” The words of this man of “no words” have become immortalized more than those of all the greatest orators in history.

Why? Because every orator says what is on his or her own mortal mind. And everything mortal has its limits. Moses, on the other hand, was a man of “no words” of his own; his mouth was an extension of God’s mouth and his words were an expression of God’s words. And therefore, these words live on forever.

⁷Exodus 4:11.

⁸Deuteronomy 1:1.

8. A Story of Three Rabbis (Optional)

But we are not Moses, you might argue. But we can be. At least, we can sometimes get close.

I'd like to illustrate this with a true story of three rabbis who were asked to appear on a panel discussion on the End of Days. And from the audience – which was composed of several hundred young people – someone asked this question: “If the world as we know it ends tomorrow, what will happen to the Jews like most of us in this room who are unaffiliated, who are still struggling with what it means to be Jewish, who maybe don't even attend synagogue? What will happen to them?”

The first rabbi said, “God will have mercy.” The audience heard this as a condescending answer, and they actually booed him. Did you ever hear 500 people boo somebody in a room? It's not pleasant.

The second rabbi was not about to make the same mistake. He said, “I also would like to know.” Basically, he passed the buck.

And meanwhile, the third rabbi was praying his heart out. He knew that this question deserved a profound response. Five hundred young Jewish people had just heard two glib answers to such an important question. And they were going to walk out with the impression that our rabbinical leaders have no clue. So he was silently asking God to help him select – at a moment's notice – from the vast amount of wisdom he has absorbed during his yeshiva studies and give him the right words that would speak to the heart of this audience.

He opened up by quoting one of his teachers, “If you are asked a question and you don't have an answer, tell a story. And if that doesn't work sing a song.”⁹ “So,” he said, “I'm going to tell a story and if that doesn't help I may have to sing.” The crowd laughed. It was good as a warm up but it wasn't going to fly all by itself.

He then told a story about a Hassidic Master who was asked by one of his supporters why he devoted a disproportionate amount of time to uneducated, unobservant Jews. Would not his devout, learned students

⁹Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi.

be more worthy of his time? In answer, the Master asked the supporter, who was a diamond merchant, to bring him several diamonds of varying value. When he did so, the Master laid them out on a table and told the merchant, “Now I am going to choose the one that is most precious.”

He chose a stone, and he asked the merchant, “Am I right?” The merchant replied, “With all due respect, no. To the naked eye, it may look like the most lustrous but, to the trained eye, there is so much more to diamond valuation – the cut, the color, the clarity...” The Master smiled, “If that’s the case with stones, how much more is it true with souls? To the naked eye, a man may appear one way, but the trained eye sees the soul which is priceless.”

Having related that story, the rabbi then said, “We do not understand the mysteries of the soul’s journeys. We do not know why some souls are born into happy homes while others are born into broken homes. We do not know the challenges and trials each one of us is subjected to. Only God knows. So we cannot judge which people – which souls – are greater. The Midrash says that at the end of his life, Moses was shown by God all the events that would transpire until the end of days.¹⁰ And Moses, who was such a humble man, was humbled by the struggle of the souls in our time. For the souls today have not seen the miracles that his generation saw. These souls who are trying their best today – precisely because of the unique challenges of modern assimilation – humbled Moses more than anything else.”

And the rabbi concluded with this: “I will tell you what I was taught. If the Messiah comes tonight, the souls with the greatest challenges will march first and lead the rest of us. And by tomorrow morning they, and all of us, will understand that the healthiest and most powerful way to actualize as a human being and as a Jew is through Torah and its mitzvahs. That’s what I was taught.”

There was a tremendous emotional reaction to what he said, because he spoke from the heart, and he spoke with love. Though a few minutes before he had no idea how he would answer the question, he rose to the occasion because God put the right words in his mouth.

¹⁰Sifrei and Rashi on Deuteronomy 34:2.

The lesson to us all is clear: If you are able to put aside your ego and share the wisdom that has been passed down to you, then you have the right to speak and God will give you the ability to do so. Then others will listen to you and be affected by your words. Because, as the saying goes, “words from the heart, enter the heart.”

9. Leaders We Deserve

So fluent speech is not the necessary criterion for a leader. If he lacks words, God will supply them, but he needs to have the other pre-requisite traits – courage to act, empathy/compassion for the people, humility and a clear vision where he is leading his followers.

Where, today, do we find a leader like that? They seem to be nowhere around.

As long as true leaders are absent, into the breach can step anyone who has a mind to. Witness the recent havoc unleashed by the Wikileaks. Whether you agree with the need for secrecy or not, our accelerating technology has clearly exposed the vulnerabilities – and amplified the consequences – of an open society lacking strong and responsible moral leadership and focus. Today, super-motivated individuals can take advantage of the latest technology and the viral spread of information via the Internet to hobble governments and banks, successfully undermining their ability to have confidential communications that are vital to the functioning of any society. In short, it is extremely easy today to spread anarchy via the world-wide web, as Thomas Friedman put it this week in the *New York Times*.¹¹

But the reason that good leaders are lacking may partially be our own fault. We tend to respond to gossip and innuendo, charisma and sound-bites, to surface glibness instead of to people who embody vision, humility and courage. So, we may have ourselves to blame.

¹¹ “We’ve Only Got America A” by Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2010.

The Talmud says, that a leader is commensurate to his generation.¹² Every generation gets the leaders it deserves. How do we change that? How do we get to merit better?

There is a Jewish saying: “Where there is no man (*ish*), even a herring is a fish.”

The lowly herring is a common fish that does not compare so well to some of the more elegant fish in the sea – like the marlin, say. But when the marlin is absent even the common fish will have to do. When no man will take the helm, the common man must grab the rudder.

We will perhaps merit to deserve better leaders, when we develop within ourselves better leadership qualities.

10. A Grassroots Effort

Rabbi Chanina, a Talmudic sage, famously said, “I learned much from my teachers, even more from my colleagues, but most of all from my students.”¹³

Students empower their teachers. Citizens of a society can educate and inspire their leaders.

So, to the extent that we cultivate our own qualities of leadership – courage to act, humility and empathy – we empower our leaders, and we draw out those qualities from within them.

In addition, we ourselves actually possess the tools to change the world. Our ability to network today, if used for positive, spiritual purposes, can truly change the world. Whenever souls come together and create energy down here below, they have the power to erupt into a true spiritual awakening that may never come from the establishment or the bureaucracies from above.

¹² Talmud, *Erchin* 17a.

¹³ Talmud, *Taanis* 7a.

Does that mean that we can answer all our own questions? Obviously, we need mentors and teachers to guide us. But, at the same time, we cannot underestimate the power we possess and the responsibility we carry.

Each of us has the spark of Moses inside. And like Moses, we must look around and see. If there is no one, well then, we are it.

Moses looked around, and there was no one. He didn't see himself as the big savior, but he saw there was *no one else* doing anything, so he knew he had to act.

Each of us here has our own sphere of influence. God sent each of us to the particular place and time that we presently occupy. What we can accomplish here and now, no one else can accomplish! This may mean sharing a thought with someone you meet, opening our home once a month for a Torah gathering, hosting a Shabbat meal ... There are hundreds of ways. It means, above all, taking the initiative.

We – each one of us – can make a difference. That's called leadership – in our community, in our corner of the earth.

Leadership is a qualitative thing; it's not a quantitative thing. If you act in one area of your life, there's bound to be a shift in others. Pro-active behavior will change your life, because every action breeds a reaction. When you initiate action, instead of reacting to what fate serves up, you send our ripples which actually change the universe.

That is the lesson from Moses, who more than anyone else, changed the world. And so we can. Starting today. Amen.