



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SHABBAT SHUVAH 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

---

September 7, 2013  
Shabbat Shuvah - One

**Read My Lips:  
The Power of Words**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5774 Enter the Heart”*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Shabbat Shuvah - One > **Read My Lips: The Power of Words**  
September 7, 2013

SHABBAT SHUVAH

Read My Lips: The Power of Words

## ABSTRACT

People often wonder, especially during this special season: what can I practically do to really make a difference?

Very often our most valuable resource is right under our nose, and we don't even notice. We may go searching far and wide for the big answer, when it can be found on the tip of your tongue, right between your lips, literally.

Three unforgettable words in this week's Shabbat Shuva Haftarah - bring this message to life, as demonstrated by three unforgettable stories. Each of these illustrates one of our most powerful tools - which can change lives forever, literally.

## READ MY LIPS: THE POWER OF WORDS

### 1. A Divine Sermon (Humor)

Today is the day after Rosh Hashana. The third day of the New Year. The universe still has that new-car smell. Do you sense it?

Following the first day of Rosh Hashana service, a senior member of our community approached me and said that my sermon truly and sincerely reminded him of God.

Not to toot my own horn – though on Rosh Hashana horn-tooting is a mitzvah – I was so touched. In all my years of rabbinic sermonizing no one had ever invoked God when describing my oratory abilities. Curious – and searching subtly for an elaboration on such a divine compliment – I humbly asked for details: “What specifically inspired you to compare my sermon to God?”

“Well,” replied this respected congregant. “Like God, your sermon completely transcended my understanding. And, like God, your sermon truly went on forever!”

You may laugh, but I need not tell you that words have power. My words made this anonymous congregant think of God – for better or worse! And his words made me feel embarrassed for not connecting with his understanding and for dragging on for all eternity.”

But speaking about words...

### 2. Most Valuable Resource

Very often our most valuable resource is right under our nose, and we don't even notice. We may go searching far and wide for the big answer, when it can be found on the tip of our tongue, right between our lips, literally.

Three unforgettable words in this week's Shabbat Shuva Haftarah – as demonstrated by three unforgettable stories, which I am about to tell you – capture one of our most powerful tools. What is that tool? The power of words – the power to change lives forever, literally.

This Shabbat, called Shabbat Shuva, is so named after the opening of this week's special Haftarah:

*Shuva Yisroel ad Hashem Elokecho, "Return O Israel to your God."*<sup>1</sup>

Simple enough. On the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – the Shabbat of the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* – we read these words to inspire our return to God (in repentance), which means also returning to our own soul and our own mission in life.

But then, in the second verse of the Haftarah, we read:<sup>2</sup>

*Take with you words, and return to God. Say to Him: All iniquity, forgive; take the good; and we will render [for] bulls [the offering] of our lips.*

What do these cryptic words mean: "Take with you words" ... "render for bulls" ... "our lips"? What kind of iniquity? What kind of offering?

Very strange.

Before I begin to answer these questions, I would like to share with you a few moving stories I recently heard about the power of words, which will help us understand this verse in the Haftarah.

### 3. Wiggle Your Toes (Inspirational Story 1)

*(A woman related this story about her High School classmate, David Mulligan.)*

At our 10-year High School reunion, I watched David Mulligan enter the room. In high school I'd harbored a not-so-subtle crush on him, even volunteering to keep score for the swim team so I could watch him compete.

---

<sup>1</sup>Hosea 14:2.

<sup>2</sup>Hosea 14:3.

Even ten years older, he looked like a Greek-god – he was handsome, his blond curly hair setting off his striking blue eyes. He'd become a carpenter, so his athletic frame was filled out with strong muscles. I'm afraid I blushed a little when he said 'Hello.' He seemed to have everything going for him.

Five years later, all that changed. He took his first recreational parachute jump. The jump was going fine until he was 100 feet from the ground. The person guiding him from the ground gave him conflicting signals. Go right, no go left. At about 50 feet, Dave saw he was going to run into either a row of cars, a trailer or a barbed wire fence. There was open space beneath him. It was his only chance. He needed to land quickly.

As he'd been instructed to do in order to land quickly, he pulled his chute's strings hard. Too hard. His chute collapsed. He fell 40 feet straight down. It was the equivalent of falling from a four-story building

Several vertebrae were crushed around his spinal cord. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

In the hospital after surgery, his doctors told him he'd never walk again. Although he had no feeling in the lower part of his body, he was determined to walk out of the hospital. When he kept insisting he was going to walk, the doctors told him to see a psychiatrist to help him through his denial.

He was joined in his determination by his physical therapist, Helga. Every day she said, "Dave, wiggle your toes." Every day he tried and tried, yet couldn't. After each daily treatment, focusing on her words, he continued to try to wiggle his toes, determined to walk again. Helga didn't give up either, even though she knew what the doctors had said.

"You can do it. Keep trying," she insisted. Everyday she encouraged and caringly hounded him with her words. He would struggle to wiggle his toes every waking hour. "This is now my full time job," he told himself, "toe wiggling. And I'm going to be the best toe wiggler there ever was."

After three weeks of trying for countless hours, his left big toe miraculously wiggled. This meant there was a neural connection from his brain to his toe. Soon his other toes were wiggling. There was hope for him.

Bolstered by his success, he worked even harder to make his legs work. After only three months, he was amazingly able to walk with the aid of crutches. He was able to go from a paraplegic to ambulatory in an incredibly short amount of time. He now walks without crutches, and is not only happily married, but the father of a little girl.

Dave's determination, buoyed by Helga's persistence and words of encouragement, helped him change the outcome of his life. If he'd listened to his doctors words and had not been motivated continually by the simple power of Helga's words, he'd be in a wheelchair, and have a much different life.

When he shared this story, he told me:

"It seems very difficult to motivate our mind and especially our bodies to do things that are nearly impossible. The power of thought – for example, seeing someone running and wanting to do the same – was the most effective healing power for me, but also the hardest to stay focused on. However the simple, constant chant of 'wiggle your toes David' worked wonders to help me continue that thought process and keep me focused."

It was the odd word 'wiggle' that turned a paralyzing reality into hope.

Another story:

#### **4. On the Brink of Suicide (Inspirational Story 2)**

*(Edward's teacher related this story.)*

It was in the 1970's that I met a young man with brown wavy hair, sad green eyes, and a mouth that never seemed to smile. His name was Edward and he stood a little over 6 feet tall. He presented a mood of quiet, shy and almost pitiful demure.

Edward had enrolled in a music theory class that I was teaching at a Community College located in the small, sleepy town of Moorpark, California. I was proud to be on staff, offering a variety of music classes after working very hard to attain a teaching degree.

The first day of class, when students mill around as they decide which seat to take, is always interesting to me. Some are confident and more aggressive than others, claiming the front row for themselves. Other, less confident fill up the middle section and the back row is usually reserved for the shy students, and even for those who do not want to be there in the first place. This is my own observation and there is always the exception.

It was hard not to notice Edward, the only boy who was six-feet tall, as he walked into the classroom a few minutes late and positioned himself in the back row. He slumped into his chair and lowered his head with his arms folded across his chest in a defying manner. This would be his general entrance into class for the remainder of the semester.

As weeks progressed and tests were given, Edward did not do well. He managed to turn in homework, which was marked way below his ability level with my notes. He never participated in class discussions or offered to answer any questions.

To my knowledge, he had no friends at school. Sometimes, during lunch, I would see him sitting on the grass, under a tree, munching on a sandwich and staring into space. On occasion, I would allow myself to join him on the grass and see if I could start up a conversation. But it was always awkward.

Edward missed too many classes and when he did come, he carried himself like an old man, as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

The semester was winding down, finals were about to begin and I worried about Edward's reaction to his final grade. He was the last one to finish his final exam and as I waited, I said a silent prayer for him. I so much wanted to be able to give him a good grade.

In those days, I had a reputation of being a strict, but fair grading instructor. I also had the largest enrollment in the music department. It was important that I live up to my reputation.

Finally, Edward finished his exam and he looked completely worn out and defeated. I wished him good luck and told him I would be giving out the final grades on Tuesday morning at 9 a.m.

My thoughts continued to lead me to Edward and the final exam that he struggled with. I had trouble sleeping that weekend. Somehow, I knew that the grade that I would give him would be a turning point in this young man's life.

Tuesday morning finally came. I made breakfast, fed the children and helped prepare them for school. There was a mountain of laundry, dishes to do and beds to be changed before I headed out for my classes. None of that seem to matter. I was a teacher and had a responsibility to hand out final grades today. And Edward was no exception. He would be given the grade he deserved. Maybe he needed to learn the biggest lesson of all – to be responsible for his own actions. I felt good about my decision.

I sat in my office looking at the long line of students waiting to come in and receive their final grade. I allowed one person at a time to come in, take a seat, close the door and prepare to be “judged.” After each student left my office, I would take a peek at the line to see where Edward was. After an hour or so, the line became shorter and still there was no Edward. I began to worry. Did something happen at home to delay him? Was there an accident on the way to school? Maybe a policeman stopped him? Perhaps he was sick?

The last student in line met with me, received his grade and left.

Where was Edward? Should I wait a little longer? I decided to lock up my office and go home. I had done all I could. But something deep within continued to gnaw at me. I felt sick to my stomach. My eyes filled with tears.

What is wrong with me? I took some deep breaths, sat back and closed my eyes. In front of me lay the papers, the final exam for Edward. I had not decided what kind of grade to give him. Well, it didn't matter, for he didn't show up anyhow. I looked down at the exam with his name printed on it and saw an imaginary D as his final grade.



I got up from my chair, gathered my things and closed the office door behind me. As I reached for my keys to lock up my office, I heard footsteps approaching me. I held my breath as I turned to see Edward standing behind me. He apologized for being late and asked if I would please give him his final exam and grade. I hesitated for a few seconds, then cautiously opened the door and asked him to have a seat.

He looked just terrible. His eyes were sunken with dark black circles under them and the hollows of his cheeks were drawn. His swollen lips were cracked with dried blood in the creases. His skin was pale and his hair matted. He was wearing the same clothes he had worn for the last few weeks.

“Would you like some water?” I asked him. He replied “No thank you,” as he sat trembling. Then he spoke to me for the first time.

“I know that I am getting a low grade on my final. I realize that I have not been participating in class and that I am an embarrassment to others. I am lazy, selfish, stupid and an ugly no-good-for-anything person. I have no place on this earth and what’s more, no one can ever love a person like me. I am a hopeless case with absolutely no future.”

I could not believe my ears. I wanted to interrupt him, to convince him that he was none of these things. Instead – I let him talk. I listened with my heart and not my head. I fought back my own tears to manifest my strength and professionalism.

When he had finished, I faced him, looked directly into his very sad eyes and said, “Edward, your final grade is an A.” His reaction was one of total and complete surprise. “You are giving me an A? Me? Why would you give me an A when I did such a poor job in class, on my assignments and on my final exam? Why would you do that?”

My answer to Edward was this. “You may appear to be a D student, but you are an A person. I believe in you now and I will always believe in you. I am here for you now and I will always be here for you. Never, ever forget that. Now, go and create the life you dream of. Believe in yourself. I will be watching.”

In all my years of teaching, I have never graded a student this way.

Later that evening, as I prepared to go to sleep, I began to question what I had done." Did I make a terrible mistake? Had Edward filled the room with lies just to win me over and get a high grade? Had I been had? Was my level of compassion playing tricks on me?" Finally, my exhausted mind and body gave way to a deep sleep.

At 3 a.m. the phone rang. In a fog, I tried to sound alert as I answered it. The voice on the phone asked me if I were Edward's Music Theory Teacher at Moorpark College? I told him yes and waited. "I am a priest from Edward's church and I have something to tell you. I want to thank you on behalf of Edward's family and myself for saving his life today."

The priest went on to explain to me the events leading up to this phone call. Edward has an older brother who has always been angry because he was short in height, although scholastically a high achiever. This brother has always been extremely jealous of Edward and has belittled and verbally abused Edward most of his life.

This treatment has caused him to have severe low self-esteem and a miserable existence. Edward thought of his brother as his hero and wanted desperately to please him. I am not sure what role the parents played but I got the impression they were wrapped up in their business and had little if any time for the boys.

The day that Edward came to me regarding his final grade, he had left a note on his pillow. It read: " I am sorry that I could not be the kind of son and brother you wanted me to be. All I ever wanted was to be loved. I am sorry for being unlovable. I will go now ... you will find me in the closet. I am sorry for any inconvenience I have caused you. Please have my body cremated. My small savings is in the top right-hand drawer of the dresser."

Edward wrote that note prior to meeting with me. His plan was to see me one last time before taking his own life. When I gave him an A, told him that I believed in him, that I loved him and would be here for him, something changed within himself.

He had never heard those words before and it gave him something that we call hope. He left my office feeling positive and uplifted for the first time in his life. He felt so good, he decided to take a long walk in the surrounding hills and relive the confirmation he had just heard. He was loved ... yes, someone in his useless life loved him and believed in him. He forgot all about his plan to do away with himself.

Meanwhile, his family found the note, went to the closet in Edwards room where they found a rope hanging from the rafters.

His closet was carefully prepared as the last thing he would see before dying. A large photograph of his brother was mounted on the wall, in view, from where the rope was hanging.

Today, Edward has a beautiful wife and 4 sweet children. He is a successful dentist in Southern California and donates his spare time to abused children, helping them to find love, acceptance and hope.

And finally:

### 5. Words Can Make You Leap (Inspirational Story 3)

A group of frogs was traveling through the woods, and two of them fell into a deep pit. All the other frogs gathered around the pit. When they saw how deep the pit was, they told the two frogs that they were as good as dead.

The two frogs ignored the comments of the others and tried to jump up out of the pit with all of their might. The other frogs kept telling them to stop, that they were as good as dead. Finally, one of the two frogs took heed to what the other frogs were saying and gave up. He fell down and died.

The other frog continued to jump as hard as he could. Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and just die. But he just jumped harder and finally made it out.

It was only after the frog jumped out that the other frogs realized that the frog was deaf.

Seeing only their motions, and not hearing their words, he thought they were encouraging him all the time. And it inspired him to jump out of his predicament!

This story teaches two lessons:

- There is power of life and death on the tongue. An encouraging word to those who are down can lift them up and help them make it through the day.
- A destructive word to those who are down can be what it takes to kill them. So be careful of what you say.

## 6. The Power of a Word

These stories, and many similar ones, can help us appreciate the powerful meaning of this week's Haftorah:

*Take with you words, and return to God. Say to Him: All iniquity, forgive; take the good; and we will render [for] bulls [the offering] of our lips.*

*Take these words, says the prophet Hosea, and return to God!*

How does one return to mobility from a paralyzing state? How does one overcome years of abuse to build a beautiful family and have children of one's own? How does one – who is at the brink of the abyss, who has hung a rope in one's closet, who has given up all hope – return to life?

How does man return to God?

Says the prophet – “Take these words...” For with words, with a kind comment, with an encouraging remark, you can return to God and change the world!

With your lips you can move the universe!

## 7. Your Lips

Today is *Shabbat Shuva*, the “Shabbat of Return.” As we stand between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we realize that one word has the potential, the ability, the power, to move heaven and earth!

*Take with you words, and return to God.*

The incredible lesson this teaches us is to appreciate the awesome power of our own words.

Very often our most valuable resources are right under our nose, and we don't even notice. Indeed, right under our actual nose reside our lips. And they can bring someone to life.

We may go searching far and wide for the big answer, when – all the while – it can be found on the tip of our tongue, right on our lips, literally.

Many of us ask, especially during this special holiday season: “What can a small person like myself really accomplish?” “What can I practically do to really make a difference?”

Says the prophet: “Your lips are an offering; just a few simple words can transform existence.”

*Take with you words.*

The next time you speak to someone, remember to “take with you words” – say something nice and heartwarming.

When you meet a stranger, don't ignore him. Speak kindly to him.

When you speak to your children, when you put them to bed, remember what your lips and words can accomplish.

Never take your words for granted. Always remember their power.

One word can change a life. Amen.