



SHEMOT

Vayakhel-Pekudei / 27 Adar

Lessons from a Stroke: When Every Word Counts

March 25, 2017

LESSONS FROM A STROKE
WHEN EVERY WORD COUNTS...

ABSTRACT

If you only had one thousand words to utter during your entire lifetime, what would they be?

A very long time ago one man pioneered and taught us the importance of every single word. And he called himself “a man of no words.” Yet, he taught us the critical need for accountability for every word, for every penny, for every detail.

We read about this man and his momentous contribution – which would go on to change history – in this week’s Torah portion, as we conclude the Book of Exodus.

This vital lesson of accountability is relevant today more than ever. With corruption, greed and lies undermining our trust in our leaders and infrastructures, financial accountability has never been a more precious commodity.

And the same is true for other forms of accountability as well. Especially when it comes to words. In our information age – where we have a steady and incessant stream of data, with trillions upon trillions of letters beaming, texting, emailing, uploading and downloading instantaneously from one end of the globe to the other, with knowledge accessible anytime, anywhere by anyone – we can easily lose sight and forget the value of a single word, of a mere utterance.

And for Chabad Chassidim, this message carries special weight this week, on the 27th of Adar, when we sadly remember how on this fateful day 25 years ago, the Rebbe suffered a stroke which left him speechless (at least to our callous ears) ... But we also are reminded of the Rebbe’s immortal words just a few weeks before the stroke, when he spoke on this very topic and made us keenly aware of the eternal power of the words Moses, “the man of no words.”

How a stroke, of all things, can teach us the power of measuring every word! Today, we all carry the responsibility to be the mouthpiece of the Rebbe, of Torah, wherever we go and to whomever we meet.

1. A Word of Honor

“Gee, Mr. Schmertz, we’d really like to give you that loan,” said the bank officer to the rather seedy character, “but your credit rating isn’t exactly ... uh ... superlative. What assurance can you offer that it’ll be paid back on schedule?”

“Won’t a gentleman’s word of honor be sufficient?” the man asked, in an injured tone.

“Certainly,” the bank officer answered brightly. “When will you be bringing him in?”

How important is our word of honor? How accountable should we be for the words we speak?

Of course, we all understand the need to be responsible and accountable for our actions. But how many of us are actually accountable for our actions and for our words?

2. A Thousand Words

What would you answer to the following question: “If I had only one thousand words to utter during my entire lifetime what would they be?”

Consider the plot of a new hit comedy called *A Thousand Words*:

Jack McCall is a fast-talking literary agent who can close any deal, any time, any way. He has set his sights on a spiritual guru, Dr. Sinja, for his own selfish purposes. But Dr. Sinja is on to him, and Jack’s life comes unglued after a mysterious Bodhi tree appears in his backyard. With every word Jack speaks, a leaf falls from the tree and he realizes that when the last leaf falls, both he and the tree are toast. Words have never failed Jack McCall, but now he’s got to stop talking and conjure up some important ways to communicate, or he’s a goner.¹

But long, long before this movie (actually some 3,300 years ago), one man pioneered and taught us the importance of every word. And he called himself “a man of no words.” Yet, he taught us the critical need for accountability for every word, for every penny, and for every detail.

We read about this man and his momentous contribution – which would go on to change history – in this week’s Torah portion, as we conclude the Book of Exodus.

This vital lesson of accountability is relevant today more than ever. With corruption, greed and lies undermining our trust in our leaders and infrastructures, financial accountability has never been a more precious commodity.

¹ <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/a-thousand-words/>

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3. Moses' Audit

This week we read the final two portions of the Book of Exodus – Vayakhel and Pekudei. In the opening of the latter, Moses giving a detailed accounting of all the gold silver, copper and other valuable materials, which he had gathered from the Jewish people, and with which the Tabernacle was built:

These are the accounts of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of Testimony, which were calculated according to Moses' order by the Levites under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron, the priest.²

The obvious question is why did Moses have to give a detailed accounting of the Tabernacle to the Israelites? Wasn't he the most trustworthy man on earth – trusted by G-d Himself?!

The Midrash³ explains Moses' responsibility as treasurer to the Israelite people:

One who entered the treasury of the Sanctuary to take out money should not enter wearing clothing with pockets or with shoes, for if he should become rich, they will say, "He has become rich from the public treasury." A man needs to be free from suspicion among his fellows, just as he is morally clean before G-d, as it says,⁴ "You shall be clean before G-d and before Israel."

According to the Midrash, it appears that not even Moses was above suspicion!

But this is bizarre! How could anyone in their right mind accuse Moses of enriching himself through the building for a House for G-d?! Moses was the man chosen and trusted by G-d to lead the Jews out of Egypt, to receive His Torah at Sinai, to build His Sanctuary. Every Jew was aware of his impeccable credentials. Everyone knew how Moses was the trustworthy and faithful shepherd – ro'eh ne'eman, ra'ya m'hemnah. How could anyone question his honesty?

But as we shall see, the fact that Moses was sensitive to the possibility of such outrageous suspicions – and immediately sought to put any doubts to rest – only emphasizes how great and humble this giant truly was. And it teaches us the extent of our own need for accountability.

² Exodus 38:21.

³ Exodus Rabbah 51:2.

⁴ Numbers 32:22.

4. Accountability for Every Word

Moses' accountability was so profound and all-encompassing that his every word was measured and accounted for, as we read in the story of the Burning Bush.⁵

From the fire G-d spoke to Moses, telling him that He had chosen him to lead the Israelites out of slavery to the Promised Land. And how did Moses respond? In every possible way Moses tried to convince G-d that he was not worthy of this mission, that G-d should choose someone else more appropriate. When G-d would not accept any of Moses' arguments, Moses brought up his speech impediment, pleading: "I beg You, Lord, I am a man of no words ... I find it difficult to speak and find the right language."⁶

Can you imagine?!

G-d had explicitly chosen Moses to lead the Jews out of Egypt, and Moses declined the honor! Most everyone would have jumped at the opportunity. Yet, Moses shied away and tried in every possible way to avoid the appointment.

And why did G-d choose a "man of no words" to serve as His spokesman to Pharaoh? Should not such a person have been someone who could eloquently present the case for freeing the Jewish people.

5. A Leader of Choice

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 G-d chose as His leader – a man who is called "the most humble man on the face of the earth."⁷

Why is humility so important?

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 G-d. A true leader must be utterly selfless – serving as a transparent channel between G-d and the people.

⁵ Exodus 3:1.

⁶ Exodus 4:10.

⁷ Number 12:3.

6. A Leader Who Cannot Speak

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

G-d Himself answers the question. When Moses argues, "I am a man of no words," G-d replies:

"Who gives a man a mouth to speak? ... Is it not I, G-d? Now go – I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say."⁸

In other words, G-d wanted a spokesperson who did not speak his own words, but the words of G-d. He wanted someone who was completely selfless and devoid of ego, so that he served as a mouthpiece of G-d'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 *Devorim*, meaning "Words," and it begins: "These are the words that Moses spoke..."⁹

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 are words coming from a man of "no words!"

7. Bookkeeping

Understanding that every word was precious to Moses, we can now appreciate how every single thing was precious to Moses – and this explains the depth of Moses' meticulous accounting for every "penny" used in the Tabernacle:

Moses took nothing for granted. Not a word, and not a piece of copper. As a humble agent of the Divine, every cell in Moses was saturated with serving as a channel for G-dliness in this world.

Even when he overheard people gossiping about him with baseless accusations, he didn't dismiss their words, which he could have easily and justifiably done. Indeed, their suspicions just demonstrated how they were

⁸ Exodus 4:11.

⁹ Deuteronomy 1:1.

projecting their own lack of integrity unto Moses; they were essentially arguing that if they were in his position, they would enrich themselves. Moses could have simply ignored their ludicrous speculations. Instead, Moses took it to heart and humbly and sensitively recognized the critical need – in a corrupt world – to demonstrate the highest level of integrity by providing a thorough accounting for every item spent and used in the Tabernacle!

8. Moses Within Each of Us

Though we are not Moses, each of us can learn from him, for each of us has a dimension of Moses in our souls.¹⁰

Please close your eyes for a moment and imagine how you would act if you felt the same accountability that Moses felt. Just imagine what words would come out of your mouth, if before uttering a word you, too, felt that you were “a man of no words” and your mouth was simply a vehicle for the words of G-d!

Next time you speak with someone – a loved one, a friend, even a stranger – don’t take your speech for granted. Measure every word. Imagine that the words you speak are the only ones you will ever utter during your entire lifetime.

What words would come out of you if you saw each one of them as a gift – as the only words you will ever utter?

Most of us have been blessed with the power of lucid speech. A great gift indeed. But we must ask ourselves: Do we use this gift to communicate truth? Are our words kind and loving and ones that elicit love? Are we able to convey in words our innermost feelings and deepest spiritual desires? Or are our words deceptive? How often do we lie? How often do we use offensive language – words that hurt, divide and conceal, rather than words that heal, unite and reveal? Does our body’s speech speak the words of our soul? Or is it the other way around: Our soul’s energy is forced to speak the narcissistic words of materialistic pursuits? Physically we may speak clearly, but spiritually do we all not have some sort of speech impediment, in one way or another?

As long as there is no seamlessness between our spirits and our words, we stutter along, once in a while hopefully sharing a true word or two. We trip over our tongues, ramble, mumble, bumble, stumble in our search for love and intimacy. We stutter and mutter through our fears and insecurities, and our lips are closed when we are called upon to speak truth to our children and friends. We stammer and falter when we need to show kindness to others and when we need to welcome and respect strangers.

¹⁰ Tanya, chapter 42

The only difference is that some of us have mastered the art of concealing our speech impediments and tied tongues beneath an elegant “façade” of words and poetics. Whether it is the “gift of gab” or excellent “sales skills,” “spin,” “buzz,” “hype” or “hooks” – we know how to convincingly “sell” something even if it has no true benefit (or we know how to convince ourselves that it has benefit even if it doesn’t).

But when we create a seamless continuum between our words and our spirits, when we seek to serve truth, a rich and enriching conversation ensues.

9. Twenty Five Years After

And for Chabad Chassidim this message carries special weight this week, on the 27th of Adar, when we sadly remember how on this fateful day 25 years ago the Rebbe suffered a stroke, leaving him speechless (at least to our callous ears) ... But we also are reminded of the Rebbe’s immortal words just 6 weeks before when he spoke on this very topic and made us keenly aware of the eternal power of the words Moses, “the man of no words.”

The Rebbe had been a wellspring of information and inspiration, but the flow of his words suddenly ceased on that dark Monday evening two decades ago. However, true to his nature, the Rebbe did not leave us unprepared.

In one of his last talks, he spoke about his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, who was the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe. In 1942, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak suffered a stroke, robbing him of the ability to speak. Why? Explained the Rebbe, “Just as G-d had sent along Aaron to be Moses’s mouthpiece, so too must we, guided by my father-in-law, the [previous] Rebbe, be the mouthpiece that carries his words and teachings to all.”

And then, barely two months after telling this story, the Rebbe himself suffered a debilitating stroke...

It soon became clear to us all that the Rebbe had tragically yet lucidly prepared us for what would be and, more importantly, for what we must do.

We must be responsible for every word we utter – for now we carry the mission to serve as ambassadors and agents of the Rebbe’s teachings!

We also must be accountable for every one of our actions, and for all the things we were entrusted with, including funds and other communal obligations.

10. Conclusion

This lesson is particularly poignant in our times when we see the corruption, greed and lies that have infiltrated the powers that be. People today have lost trust in their leaders, who are not accountable for their actions nor for their words.

It would do us all well to learn from Moses – a model of integrity.

Integrity means that no detail is too small. Everything counts. Every penny, and every word.

Though we are blessed to speak many more than one-thousand words in our lifetime, every time we speak, we ought to think of our words as if they were the last ones we will utter. We cannot take them for granted. We must make them count.

For one word can change the world. Amen.