



Sermon Tidbits

DECEMBER 20, 2010

Parashat Shemot

Learning to Speak

And I will instruct you that which you shall speak (Exodus 4:12)

והוריתיך אשר תדבר (שמות ד:יב)

Moses resisted God's commandment to confront Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Jewish people, stating: "I am not a man of words." While a simple reading of the text indicates that Moses struggled to express himself, the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 1:26) famously comments that Moses actually suffered from a speech impediment and did not feel confident acting as a representative of the Jewish people. Yet God insisted that Moses accept the mission nonetheless: "I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you should speak." S'forno explains that God promised to both heal Moses' speech impediment and to aid him through the "the language of education." What does this mean? S'forno clarifies that God did not tell Moses *what* to say, but rather *how* to say it. Thus, with this training, Moses was finally able to represent the Israelites and confront Pharaoh's oppression.

Like Moses, too many of us today consider ourselves incapable of advocating on important topics. Yet also like Moses, through education we can become effective advocates for the interests of the Jewish people.

By increasing our understanding of the issues affecting the U.S-Israel relationship, every one of us can help shape policy and opinion. Many opportunities exist to increase our political and historical knowledge, allowing us to build meaningful relationships with members of Congress. In order to do so we must increase our understanding of the issues critical to Israel's survival. We must be constantly aware of the challenges facing the Jewish state, whether [Hizballah](#) on her northern border, [Hamas](#) on her southern border, or [Iran's](#) pursuit of nuclear weapons. We must also be able to lobby our members of Congress to ensure that Israel maintains her qualitative military edge, and express how a strong Israel benefits the United States. A good way to keep abreast of current events in Israel is by frequently reading Israeli newspapers online and checking the "Today's Briefing" section of AIPAC's website. For more on how you can get involved in pro-Israel advocacy, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

While the phrase "knowledge is power" may feel like a cliché, it is true. Just as "the language of education" gave Moses the confidence he needed to speak on behalf of the Jewish people, by choosing to stay informed on the issues that Israel faces we take on the power to continue Israel's story—the story of her past, present and the future that our efforts will help ensure. ■

Listening for Change

Who is the Lord in whose voice I should listen (Exodus 5:2)

מי ה' אשר אשמע בקלו (שמות ה:ב)

Pharaoh responded immediately to Moses' request to allow the Israelites three days in the desert to worship God. "Who is the Lord in whose voice I should listen?" Pharaoh asked. Netziv, in his commentary Ha'amek Davar (on 5:2) notes that Pharaoh used the word *b'kolo* rather than *l'kolo*. *L'kolo*—listening **to** one's voice—implies care and attention, while *b'kolo* implies the physiological process of hearing words without absorbing their content and meaning. Thus, while Pharaoh may have heard Moses speaking, he did not internalize his message. Netziv further explains that "In reality, it would have been appropriate for Pharaoh to investigate the intentions of the word of God." But, as his choice of words indicates, Pharaoh never intended to seriously negotiate with Moses, opting instead to act without taking Moses into account.

Recently, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has acted in a similar fashion towards the Jewish state—seeking to operate without taking Israel into account. Much like Pharaoh, the PA’s behavior is also effectively circumventing the negotiation process. The PA’s attempts to gather international recognition for a unilaterally declared Palestinian state takes Israeli concerns—such as security and a mutual partnership—out of the equation. Moreover, as the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict demonstrates, in order to achieve a genuine and lasting peace each side must sit down with the other and work to bridge the gaps that divide them. Conversely, a unilaterally declared Palestinian state would ignore the challenges of security, settlements, borders, refugees, recognition of the other nation’s rights and more.

Fortunately, the United States has taken a tough stand against this attempt to cut Israel out of the peace process. In fact, [Agence France Presse](#) reports that the State Department has opposed moves by several Latin American countries to recognize a Palestinian state, calling them “counter productive.” Additionally, the House of Representatives recently passed a [resolution](#) that opposes any efforts by the PA to unilaterally declare statehood or seek recognition for a state outside of talks with Israel. The resolution, which calls for a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, urges the Obama administration to “lead a diplomatic effort to persuade other nations to oppose a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state” and to affirm that the U.S. would not recognize such a state.

Pharaoh chose to hear Moses’ voice rather than listen to his words; refusing to negotiate in good faith and opting instead to take unilateral action against the Israelites. While the PA is replicating this approach, it is a simple fact that peace can only be achieved when each party recognizes the rights of the other. If the Palestinian Authority refuses to even sit down with the Israelis, how can we ever achieve peace? ■

Happy Anniversary?

I know not the Lord (Exodus 5:2)

לא ידעתי את ה' (שמות ה:ב)

In describing how Moses angered Pharaoh, the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 5:18) illustrates how the Egyptian king used his celebration to denigrate the Israelites. “That day was the day that he [Pharaoh] celebrated the anniversary of his reign, and all the nations came to adorn him with crowns. [When Moses and Aaron arrived] he said to them, ‘Who are you?’ They replied, ‘We represent the Holy One.’ ‘What do you want?’ he asked. They said, ‘So says God, send forth my nation...’ At that moment [Pharaoh] became incensed and said, ‘If your god did not know enough to send me a crown, but sends you only with words then ‘I know not the Lord nor will I let Israel go!’”

In celebrating the anniversary of his reign, Pharaoh used his power to refute the rights of the Jewish people. Similarly, during the recent celebrations in honor of the 23rd anniversary of Hamas’ establishment, leaders of the terrorist organization used their day of commemoration to denigrate the Jewish state, once again denying Israel’s right to exist.

On December 14th, tens of thousands of Hamas supporters streamed into the streets of Gaza City to mark the anniversary of the group’s founding, the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) reports. “At the mass rally, Hamas leaders lauded the group’s history of fighting Israel and dismissed claims, including by some pollsters, that it has been losing ground since seizing Gaza by force more than three years ago. ‘Hamas has not failed, Hamas has not collapsed,’ Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh told the crowd. In a message distributed to media, Hamas said it remains committed to destroying Israel, bringing back Palestinian refugees and seizing control of Jerusalem’s holy sites.” In addition, prior to the celebration, Hamas [informed the press](#) that, “as a part of Hamas’ celebration of the 23rd anniversary of Hamas Foundation, senior Hamas Leader Dr. Mahmoud Al-Zahar will burn the Israeli [sic] flag.”

In ancient Egypt, Pharaoh’s celebration was marked with words intended to show his power through denying the rights of the Israelites: “I know not the Lord nor will I let Israel go!” The striking comparison between Pharaoh’s words and Ismail Haniyeh’s [statement](#), “We said it five years ago and we say it now...we will never, we will never, we will never recognize Israel,” is astonishing. These acts, separated by thousands of years, taught us then and teach us now that disparaging words are the tool of a tyrant. ■

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