

Sermon Parashat Haazinu 5767
September 30, 2006
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Over the past two weeks I have given six different sermons and a handful of smaller messages. Admittedly, some were better than others, but I have now written and delivered well over 100 pages of my own thoughts. Some of you were attentive and some of you utilized the time to catch up on what I can only assume was much needed rest. You listened and I talked - and talked - and talked. In fact, there are those who suggest I negotiate my next contract based on getting paid by the word. However, I have to tell you, I am nothing compared to my father. In fact, after Rosh Hashanah we spoke and compared how things went. He told me he spoke for well over an hour and my first thought was "Oh, his poor congregation." In fact, when we talk too much I think people lose interest in what we say and place little value in our messages. The two styles, my father's and mine, are noted in the reading this morning, when Moses explains

יְעֹרֶף בְּמִטָּר לְקַחֵי תִזְלַל כְּטַל אֲמַרְתִּי

"May my discourse come down as the rain, my speech as the dew." My father pours it on, while, let's just say I am a little more disciplined, and I side with the gemara (Pesachim 3b) when it says...

הוּנָא אָמַר רַב מִשּׁוֹם רַבִּי מֵאִיר: לְעוֹלָם יִשְׁנָה אָדָם לְתַלְמִידוֹ דְרַךְ קְצָרָה. אָמַר רַב

"One should always teach with brevity."

The other conversation I have with my father around the High Holidays is what I call the "This year I'm going to get them." discussion. Every year we talk about the subject we will address. We talk about anecdotes we will use to illustrate our points, we invariably speak of the phrases we will turn and the ideas we will share. Then the conversation always turns to the same issue. He always says the same thing. He says, "This year I'm going to get them. I'm going to say the right thing this year and they're all going to see exactly what I see in our beloved religion and they're going to change their ways and return to our traditions. This is the year." He has been saying it for the past thirty years and he believes it. I then respond, "Come on, you don't really believe it." He then says, "Absolutely. You'll see Jay, this year come Sukkoth, the holiday that falls right on the heels of Yom Kippur, they will all be back in the synagogue. Our seats will be filled and the congregation will be there to experience the elation of this holiday, this holiday that celebrates the fact we are alive and we are able to enjoy the beauty of nature." So guess what, Sukkoth comes and his seats, like ours, are empty compared to the week before, in which every seat was taken on Yom Kippur. I feel the pain and I feel his pain, but we continue to talk with the hope that we will change people's lives and convince them to alter the rhythm of their lives. And we talk - and we talk - and we talk - because we have no alternative.

Since August 13th we have been engaged in the final book of the Torah, “Deuteronomy” and, in Hebrew, “Devarim,” which literally means, “words.” This book is essentially Moses rehashing the history of the Jewish people until that point. Moses retells the major moments as he perceived them and illustrates the valuable and eternal lessons which can be drawn from them. He reminds the Jewish people of their insolence and recalls the moments of victory over adversaries and comments on the reasons. For thirty-two chapters he talks. This is amazing given the fact that Moses originally tells God he would prefer not to lead the Jewish people because, when Moses was originally called by God from the burning bush, as the text points out, he is *aral sefatayim*, he has a speech impediment. God’s response is to say, “Fine, Aaron will be your spokesman.” God tells Moses, “You are a natural leader and you have what it takes to lead, to build coalitions, to draw on the counsel of wise advisors, so you are going to lead the people.” Now Moses just can’t stop himself from talking. It is almost incessant and in this week’s scriptural reading, Moses discourse turns to song.

Seven times during this one reading Moses refers to God as Tzur, as the Rock.

הַצּוֹר תְּמִים פְּעָלוֹ

“He is the Rock, his work is perfect;”

וַיִּנְבֵּל צוֹר יִשְׁעָתוֹ

and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation to mention just two.

When the word “rock” is used in connection to Moses and God, we are immediately transported to the story of Moses and the Rock. This story actually has two chapters. The first is found in the book of Exodus when God instructs Moses to hit the rock and water will come out. The second time, in the same situation, in the book of Numbers, God asks Moses to speak to the Rock. Moses reverts back to the original instruction of hitting the rock, almost ignoring the new set of directions. Moses is then punished with denied entrance into the holy land because of this mistake, a punishment that seems more severe than the infraction. Now Moses just can’t stop himself from talking, as if to make the point to God and the Jewish people that he gets it now – speech is more important than violent outbursts. So, now with his last breath, he subliminally asks the Jewish people to remember the events that took place when they were thirsty and how he brought them water. He is begging the people to come to his support.

However, that is the punishment, and we are left to wonder why. The answer lies in the difference of instruction between the two events in the exact same scenario. The circumstances were essentially the same, so why does God tell Moses to act differently? The reason is simple. Moses, between Exodus and Numbers, is supposed to grow up. God expects Moses, like the people as a whole, to mature. He imagines, but more than that, he requires, the growth of Moses. That growth and that maturity should be manifest in his mastery of language.

Moses is introduced to us as a baby, unable to speak. The first adult action we see of Moses is in the slaying of the Egyptian for torturing a Hebrew slave. This action proves Moses is worthy of wearing the mantle of leadership. The whole story about Moses, when placed in this discussion, is about a struggle with speech. First, his infancy and his inability to talk leads to his rescue, then his act of courage of protecting a fellow human being leads to his being singled out for leadership. When he hits the rock in the first case, it leads to providing sustenance for the people of Israel. Now God says, "The work with your hands is over, now it is time to use your tongue. Now is the time to make your mark through speech." However, he misunderstands and God immediately recognizes Moses cannot bring the people to the next stage in their emotional and historical development. Moses just doesn't get it and the punishment of not being able to enter the land of Israel is not so much a punishment as it is an understanding that the Jewish people need a new type of leader, one who can lead less through force and more through verbal communication.

We live in a precarious age, in dangerous times. The balance of people in the world rests in the subtle nature of diplomacy. The hopes of a nation rests in the ability of our leaders to forge a vision for the future that is based on trust and can be conveyed to the other powers of the world. The impulse is to use this power as we did in The Gulf war, by surgically removing those who are evil, those who seek to perpetuate malevolence on the world. Now is the time for the power of language to be used instead of using physical power.

This week, as the people of Iraq ratify their own constitution, America calls for it and we wait for it. So the holy text of the Bible reminds us, "remember the rock." Remember the incident at the rock and remember what that event means. Moses hits the rock and the reader recognizes the missed opportunity for the word to triumph over the clenched hand. Therefore, Moses cannot lead Israel into the next stage of its development as a nation. Once the people of Israel inherit the land, they must understand that the word must triumph over the sword. Once we become the decider of our destiny, it must be a future of words and not violence.

The symbols of water and rocks, both featured significantly in this morning's narrative, are seemingly opposite. The rock, at first glance, appears unchanging, steady and stable while water seems infinitely moldable, always changing, never the same. The rock seems to represent ultimate lifelessness while water is the very essence of life. The reality is opposite with both symbols. If the rock is God, then the Rock is the ultimate source of life, while water is the impetus for change, as seen through the example of the Grand Canyon that has been carved out, formed and reshaped by the Colorado River. The text begs the reader to examine the symbols and arrive at the same conclusion, we all embody the capacity for change. We are devastated by the fact that Moses never does. Moses regresses each time he is confronted with whatever challenges him. When he descends the mountain after receiving the Two tablets from God and sees the Jewish people have built a Golden Calf, he smashes them on the ground, again a show of force rather than the capacity for true expression through an utterance.

We must heed the lesson of Moses' life. We must understand we can create, develop and sustain a future for our own personal lives and for the world at large through what we choose to say and not say, rather than through any weapon we create and threaten to use.

God created the world in six days and He did it through speech. Genesis relates that God spoke and the world came into being. We, created in the image of God, can do the same. When we talk all is possible. We can strengthen relationships and shape new alliances. We can express our concern and our disappointment and we can do so without destroying. The subtlety of what we say can and should have a lasting impression and we should value that.

So I sit at the table and listen to my kids talk as I sat in the pews as my father spoke the messages of love and the existence of God and I speak from this pulpit about the same and I say, "talk on." And to you I say, "talk and talk and talk." We who have survived need to talk about the world and how it has changed and to you, "I say keep talking, I am listening."

Shabbat Shalom.