

Sermon Parashat Bo 5766
February 4, 2006
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My first high holiday sermon emphasized a sound. I spoke of the sound of little feet toddling across a hard wood floor. I spoke of the image of feet that were still rounded on the bottom because time had not yet flattened them. The sound I suggested was the sound of learning. The sound of little feet on hard wood floors is the sound of exploration and the sound of confidence growing, the sound of little feet brings joy if they are coming close and brings trepidation if they are running away. But no matter what, the sound of little feet on a hard wood floor is powerful. It speaks volumes both intellectually and viscerally as little feet on a hard wood floor is representative of so much.

Over the past few years many people have come to me and suggested other sounds that are equally potent. Some have suggested the sound of laughter, the sound of water trickling in a stream or the sound of rain. But the most common sound people have said is potent is when their child says “mommy” or “daddy” for the first time. Yes, we all joke about when they will stop talking once they begin, but we all wait for the first utterance. We stare at them, reciting our own name over and over hoping the word will emerge. We lean in and we listen carefully for anything that in any way resembles “mommy” or “daddy.” I remember like it was yesterday each time one of our children chose to grace us with their first words. One was at the kitchen table trying to get heard over their siblings. One was from their crib as they were trying to get our attention. One was at night while we were watching TV, one was over the phone and one was in the car. Each time we immediately stopped what we were doing and rushed to attention, getting closer and begging for a repeat performance. Some were startled with our exuberance and began to cry, some joyfully complied and made the sound again, laughing gleefully and one refused to do the trick again, exerting her independence.

As time passed the sounds became real words and the real words were strung together into phrases and then sentences. Sometimes it would take forever to get the idea out and sometimes they flowed easily. As the complexity grew sometimes the amount of time it took to get the idea across grew, but not always. Either way, we have worked hard at listening to our children

because they have so many important things to say. As parents, early on we subscribed to a parenting technique offer by one of the many parenting books we read called *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* (Paperback) by Adele Faber

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/search-handle-url/index=books&field-author-exact=Adele%20Faber&rank=-relevance%2C%2Bavailability%2C-daterank/102-5391238-5604134>>, Elaine Mazlish <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/search-handle-url/index=books&field-author-exact=Elaine%20Mazlish&rank=-relevance%2C%2Bavailability%2C-daterank/102-5391238-5604134>>.

The power of language is incredible. We can build and we can destroy with just one word. We are endowed with a piece of God in our language. *Barukh sheamar v'haya haolam*. God spoke and the world came into being. So too we speak and worlds are born. Equally so we can speak and decimate entire lives. That is why Moses was selected as leader, because of his speech pattern. I know you have always felt Moses was selected despite his speech impediment, but I don't think he had one at all. The text says he was *k'vad peh-uchivad lashon*. He was slow to speak and it is that English translation that I like. He was slow to speech. Would that we could hold our tongues for just a bit before we spoke? If we could be a little slower to speak how many worlds we could save?

I can't tell you how many times I have said to myself, God I wish I had not said anything. If I could just stop myself before I open my mouth, how many arguments could I have been spared. How many feelings would not be hurt? How many bridges I could have left in tact? If I were just little slower to speak.

In the story mentioned a few weeks ago, Pharaoh, with one edict, puts so many to death. It is that decree that gives birth to the extraordinary fable of Moses' journey to safety. Pharaoh's attempt at complete male infanticide compelled by his paranoia and rage is the precursor to the final solution offered by Hitler, *yimach shemo*. This morning's reading proposes the remedy. Pharaoh says to kill all the male children. Judaism says call them holy and save them, protect them, sanctify them. *Kadesh li Kol Bichor*. (Exodus 13:3) "Consecrate to Me every first born."

A rite that has been preserved called *pidyon haben*, in which a parent buys back their child from the local kohen.

On the heels of the horror that was the slavery of Egypt, God says affirm life and its value. In the face of destruction, embrace life. Wrap your arms around it and never let go. At the end of the terrible destruction brought upon Egypt by its own leadership, God implores, “stop the madness and consecrate life.” This point is driven home when the Torah mentions *pidyon haben*, the redemption of the first born right after the death of Aaron’s two boys, Nadav and Avihu. In the face of death, the Torah instructs us to hold tight to life. (Numbers 3:13). Our insightful tradition and our sacred sagacity tells us while the rest of the world has lost sight of the value of those people around us, take heed. In the biblical world in which child sacrifice to the god of Molekh was common practice, our tradition emphatically rejects that in life. While others are careless about the holiness of our loved one’s existence, we say *shomer goy kadosh*, protect that holiness. Protect the holiness.

Pidyon Haben is a ceremony whereby we essentially buy back our child from service in the priesthood. In ancient days the first born male child was supposed to serve in the temple. To alleviate the family from that obligation, they could buy their child out of service. As Isaac Klein points “The first born son was vested with special responsibilities. From the day of his birth he was consecrated to the vocation of assisting the priest in the conduct of worship.” (Guide to Jewish Religious Practice p. 430) Today, there is no temple and the priesthood’s remnant is only found in receiving a certain honor during the Torah service, (and in some congregations reciting the priestly blessing,) so we have preserved the ceremony. In fact, it is so important that rabbis instruct us, if a parent doesn’t do it then when the child arrives at an age of maturity, they are supposed to buy themselves back. But the child must be made to feel special, holy. *Pidyon haben* does not say they are no longer holy for they have not served in the Temple. *Pidyon Haben* says protect their holiness.

This is done through making a simple declaration in a brief ceremony. When your child turns 30 days old and the difficulty of the first days are behind you, the overwhelming obligations finally come into perspective. At thirty days, the fog of worrisome sleepless nights at last gives a brief

reprieve and gives way to some perspective, it is then we are told to make a declaration. In an unbelievable description of what the father is supposed to say publicly Yehuda David Eisenstein remarks *Vayikach ha'av et kesef ha'pidyon b'yadova'yaneh* “*et beni bechori ani rotzh yoter v'ha licha chamisha selayim b'pidyono*. (Otzar Dinim U'Minhagim) The father takes in his hands the money for redemption and he announces to his son, “my son, my first, I want you more than this money.” Bring a kohen into your home and more importantly tell your child that you choose him over money any day, every day. Says the pidyon haben ceremony, make sure you tell your child from the earliest age that you choose them over everything else. Stand over the crib with your first and the last alike and tell them you choose them over money, over status, over career over everything else. Start with the first and make sure you tell everyone that follows. Say it to your children and say it to your loved ones. It is not enough to believe we are letting them know in so many non verbal ways, we *must* say the words.

Every day in language we use we degrade the power of that language. We render inadequate one of the most significant apparatus in our repertoire for building relationships and forging true bonds. Heschel tells us we must recognize words are far more than short hand for expressions. Heschel says, “we use words as tools, we forget that words are the repository of the spirit.” (Prayer as Discipline in Insecurity of Freedom) We cannot, we must not, debase the manner in which we imitate God. Barukh she'amar vehaya ha'olam, God spoke and the world came into being. We too can create worlds and we have too. We must fill those around us with the knowledge of how we care about them by telling them. Ludwig Wittgenstein explained “the limits of my language is the limit of my world.” Therefore, we must expand our vocabulary and work harder to uncover and access greater depth and then we must share that. We, each of us, has the capacity for elevating our discourse and talking about that which is important and that discussion can change the nature of our families and our community.

A young woman loses her grandmother and returning from the funeral she writes the following to me. “I so appreciated our conversation. Your suggestions brought me comfort as did your beautiful letter and kind words from the bimah.” “Your kind words from the bimah” stick with me. Believe me, I had no idea the impact of my words. A young woman saddened by the loss of one of the most influential people in her life, having lost a woman who taught her about

thoughtfulness, graciousness. Having lost the person who taught her about deep appreciation for quality people, expresses her appreciation in a short note and in a few words. I had no idea. She concluded her note with the following: “My coming to terms with losing such an important person in my life has been made easier because of the compassion I received from you and the warmth of the Har Zion staff and community...” *D’varim she’yotzim min halev nichnasim lalev.* Words that come from the heart, enter the heart. I am pleased when I can say something that brings comfort and I appreciate all the words of encouragement I receive. Words can build worlds.

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