

“Grand Statements Are Important, But Quiet Assurances Are Necessary”
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President Obama’s agenda is bold and includes all of the issues important to us; peace in the Middle East, our economy, America’s image world-wide, and the single most provocative and important issue – health care reform. Recently, President Obama gave an incredibly important speech to a joint session of Congress and, essentially, the American people. As the eighty-plus million Americans who already have health insurance (and still worry that they have more to lose than to gain); and the more than forty five million Americans age 65 plus who are on Medicare, were listening attentively to their TV sets on September 9, we watched and we critiqued. We listened for key phrases, like “healthy competition,” or “government option,” or even “bi-partisanship.” We gathered around our televisions and listened carefully because big speeches are important as they may sway public opinion or influence people. David M. Herszenhorn of the *NY Times* wrote, “They have the capacity to “close the sale.””

Grand statements and big speeches are important. I’m sure you remember the orations of Martin Luther King Jr. and the words of John F. Kennedy. We remember these words because quiet reassurances are necessary. President Obama gave an important speech to the country that Wednesday night, but it was his talk to the classrooms of children in this country that I want to focus on and *not* the speech that he gave at the joint sessions of Congress about health care, although that speech was important. What he said to the country via the Senate was important however, today I want to talk about what he said to the children in the classrooms.

So, President Obama began, “Now, I’ve given a lot of speeches about education and I’ve talked a lot about responsibility.

I’ve talked about your teachers’ responsibility for inspiring you, and pushing you to learn.

I’ve talked about your parents’ responsibility for making sure you stay on track, and get your homework done, and that you don’t spend every waking hour in front of the TV or with the Xbox.

I’ve talked a lot about your government’s responsibility for setting high standards, supporting teachers and principals, and turning around schools that aren’t working, schools where students aren’t getting the opportunities they deserve.”

President Obama was letting the children know that he has given big speeches and, in fact, while he ran for President, he gave many stump speeches and made many public appearances. “All of this is well and good, even important, but at the end of the day we can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents, and the best schools in the world, but none of it will matter unless you fulfill your responsibilities. Unless you show up to those schools; pay attention to those teachers; listen to your parents, grandparents and other adults; and put in the hard work it takes to succeed.”

While he seemed to talk to each child in America individually, he said, “I want to start with the responsibility you have to yourself... We need every single one of you to develop your talents, skills and intellect so you can help solve our most difficult problems. If you don't do that – if you quit on school – you're not just quitting on yourself, you're quitting on your country.” Obama was letting the children know that big speeches are important but the quiet reassurances are necessary. He was saying that he believed in the children and that they could accomplish anything they wanted to. They could invent innovative technologies or be whatever they wanted to be.

This is no different than what Moses said to Joshua. God affirms this to Joshua in one of our earlier readings and there were two speeches offered in our Torah reading. First, Moses gathers the Jewish people together to watch the transfer of leadership. As the people listen attentively, Moses turns to Joshua and says, *Hazak v'ematz*, “Be strong and resolute.” You are the one who will bring the people into the land. You will be the one who leads them into the land they were promised and you will be the one to help them grow so they can truly inherit that land. (Deuteronomy 31:7) *Hazak V'ematz*. “Be strong and resolute.” This is a bold, grand statement. In front of a nation of witnesses, Moses says to Joshua, “You are the one” – and the people watch and listen. They are looking for subtle nuances and there are none. They are looking for a crack, but there isn't one. They are looking for the wink and there isn't one. You see that the grand statements, the big speeches are important and Moses, who has become quite an orator, steps up and delivers. Who would have thought, Moses, the one who slays the Egyptian and hits the rock, would present such a great speech.

There is no question that the reason Moses gathered Joshua in front of the nation was to appoint him as his successor and from these words it is very clear that Joshua is his successor. Why then does the same scene, almost to the word, go repeated in the quiet of the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting? The reason is clear, because grand speeches and bold gestures are important, but quiet reassurances are necessary.

And he gave Joshua, the son of a Nun, a charge, and said, “Be strong and of a good courage; for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land which I swore to them...” (v. 23) And then God says one more incredibly important phrase, “*Anochi eheye imach*, and I will be with you.” Just as God reassures Jacob at Beit El, just as God reassures Moses at the burning bush, just as Heschel writes in his incredibly important work, *Man Is Not Alone* – “*Anochi eheye imach*, and I will be with you.”

Maybe the real lesson is that all of us cannot give grand speeches – but each of us can give the quiet reassurances. We can't all be the great orators of a generation and all of us can't get up in front of hundreds, even thousands of people, and stir the crowd, but each of us can sit in the hospital room and hold a hand. Each can visit with someone who has lost a loved one and offer sincere sympathy. Each can say the words God said to Joshua, “I know you are afraid. I know the road ahead seems long and nearly impossibly to traverse, but “*Anochi eheye imach*,” and I will be with you.”

Moses and God offer the same message. There is a people that depend on you and a nation that needs you.

At the end of President Obama's speech to the students of America, he said what God or Moses could have said to Joshua, and what I certainly offer **you** this morning, "Even when you're struggling, even when you're discouraged, and you feel like other people have given up on you – don't ever give up on yourself. Because when you give up on yourself, you give up on your country." He was saying, "You are not alone, you have a nation behind you and you have a nation that counts on you."

I imagine they are words God said to Joshua and they are the words I say to you today. "Even when you're struggling, even when you're discouraged, and you feel like other people have given up on you – don't ever give up on yourself."

If I can say those words to you then you can say them to someone else and you can even say them to yourself. Today I deliver the message to you that great statements and grand speeches are important, but quiet reassurances are necessary. We need to hear them ourselves and we need to offer them to others. There is nothing a person suffering in a hospital room wants to hear more than, "You are going to be fine." If that is not possible, every person wants to hear what God said to Joshua, "I am here with you and I am not going anywhere."

This week, our younger children finally went back to school and for the past few days we have been talking about what they expect school to be like. We spoke of their anxiety and their excitement and about the newness of it all. For my daughter Yasi, it is the first time she is in school by herself, with no siblings or family members in the building. For Mia, it is a new school altogether, for Gavi it is the first time she is the big sister – each brings its pressures and apprehension. Just as we did for Nina who went to Israel for the semester, and for our son who once again returned to college, Missy and I made the big speeches about making good decisions and acting responsibly and respectfully. However, we also offered the quiet assurances that are necessary to ease a difficult transition. We sat at their bedside and stroked their backs and listened to them breathe, we even offered to wipe a few tears. You see, the grand statements are important but the quiet assurances are necessary.