

Action More Than Words Parashat Va'era

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I'd like to quote from one of our most famous, talented and widely loved actors. In one of his greatest films... Actually, in all of his greatest films, Charlie Chaplin said:

"<silence>."

It's a great quote, isn't it? But seriously, we must consider the fact that Chaplin was considered the most talented actor of his time even though his voice was almost never heard in his films. What does this say about talent? About skill? Was Chaplin a dynamic speaker? Did he have a mesmerizing voice? It didn't matter. He used his acting ability to tell a story. He used his comic genius to make people laugh without using his voice. Think of a famous comedian today who makes you laugh without uttering a word?

In this morning's Torah portion, Parshat Vaera, the Lord speaks to Moses, saying, "Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land." But Moses protests. He raises doubts that the people will listen to him. He uses a *kal vachomer* - the device often used by the rabbis in the midrashic literature. Applying the outcome from a minor case to a major case, it sounds something like this: If X, then all the more so Y. Moses says to God, "The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech?" If his own people will not listen to him because of an inability to speak well, then how can God expect Pharaoh to listen to Moses' demands? He has a point.

This is not the first time that Moses appeals to God using his speech impediment as the excuse. In last week's parsha, Moses claims *Lo ish d'varim anohi* - "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant." *Ki khvad peh u'khvad lashon anohi* - "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

God negotiates with Moses finally offering his brother Aaron as Moses' agent to convey the message to the people. Yet Moses remains the central guiding figure standing at the helm of the Israelite nation. One not familiar with the rest of the Biblical Narrative might presume that Moses' inability to speak well publicly would immediately disqualify him for the role of leader of the Israelites. Thus, regardless of how we understand Moses' speech impediment or its effect on his self-confidence, what we should consider is the fact that the Jewish people's leader par excellence was not an effective speaker. And it didn't matter.

We are now in the crucial period of the campaign to nominate a Democratic contender for the presidency. Each candidate is scrutinized for how well they speak, how well they articulate their message. They are scrutinized by the media. They are scrutinized by the voting public. They are scrutinized by each other. Imagine a candidate who was *kaved peh u'khvad lashon* - "slow of speech and slow of tongue." I don't mean a politician who flubbed his words on occasion, but one with a genuine speech impediment. Would he be electable? He would be at a clear disadvantage in the debates, on the stump, and in televised interviews. Think about how much of a President's role is based on speaking publicly. So, how is it that Moses, a man slow of speech, persevered to take our ancestors to the Promised Land as their spiritual and political leader?

Moses says, "I am not a man of words." So, how is he such a successful leader? He is a man of action. Moses says, "I am slow of speech." What does he mean by this? He is a man of justice. He might have physical disabilities or limitations precluding him from eloquently conveying a message, but it doesn't deter him from demonstrating strong and charismatic leadership abilities in other ways. What Moses lacks in oratorical skill, he makes up for in his action, and in his pursuit of justice.

This past Monday, our nation commemorated the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the anniversary of his birthday. Dr. King was one of humanity's greatest orators. He could steer an audience's emotions with his booming voice, with his carefully crafted words, with his memorable sound bites. And yet, it was his acts of social justice that ultimately made him the great leader that he was. His actions rallied his followers. Yes, his words were beautiful and unforgettable, but think of the march in Selma Alabama. The photographs of Dr. King walking arm-in-arm with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel famously commented that on that day, he was "praying with his feet."

Equally as moving was the time King and Heschel, two modern masters of words, walked together in silence to Arlington's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in protest of the war in Vietnam. They laid a wreath in pledge to *lo yilmedu od milchama* - that humankind would "no longer know war." They certainly could have movingly expressed their feelings with words, but it was more powerful to resort to action. They let their actions do the speaking.

While Martin Luther King's birthday is a national holiday, we have the imperative to honor another leader in the Civil Rights Movement each year. Rosa Parks is just that example of an individual who used action to influence people and promote change. She didn't have to say anything. It was her defiance on December 1, 1955 that spoke volumes.

On this particular day, Rosa Parks was exhausted after long hours spent working. She hoped to get a seat on the bus home, and she did. Fortunately, when she climbed onto the crowded bus, she found one empty seat in the front of the "colored" section. But, as the bus picked up more riders, the front of the bus, which was reserved for only whites, quickly filled up until there were no seats left. When the driver noticed a white man standing in the aisle, he ordered four black people, including Rosa Parks, to give up their seats. At first no one moved. But then the bus driver threatened them and three of the riders vacated their seats. Rosa Parks quietly refused. She was arrested and charged with disobeying the segregation laws.

The arrest of Rosa Parks touched off the thirteen-month bus boycott in Alabama that brought the young Dr. King to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. Without her civil disobedience, her brave action, history would be much different. It wasn't what she said, it was what she did.

This past Sunday, I volunteered at a [Habitat for Humanity](#) building site in the center of Harlem. This was one of Habitat's "building blitzes" in honor of Dr. King's dream. The best way to honor Dr. King's dream of housing for all was to have hundreds of people take time out of their busy schedules and come together to build on his dream. I spent the better part of the day installing metal studs on the walls of a five-story apartment building that will soon house many families who are currently homeless.

On this day spent volunteering, I found that we were so busy working that we rarely had the chance to talk to each other. But this was fine. We were speaking with our hands. It was such an interesting experience for me in the sense that I enjoy speaking, and I think I often convey my intended message successfully. But on this day, without saying much at all, I am confident that my message was heard loud and clear.

We should be curious as to why God does not perform a miracle and correct Moses' speech impediment. After all, this is a God who only moments later causes frogs to rain from the heavens. The answer must be that actions speak louder than words. Moses leads by example. He leads by doing. This has long been the message of Reform Judaism in America. The Reform movement's strength is in its social action initiatives. The chief goal of the movement's Commission on Social Action is to help congregations apply Jewish ethics to contemporary issues. This commission also oversees the Reform Movement's highly successful Religious Action Center in Washington, which pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the entire American Jewish community.

In the Conservative Movement, we place a strong emphasis on social action in our youth programs. But we must do more. We must make the pursuit of justice a higher priority among our adult members too. If

we are to take seriously the notion that the Jewish people are a light unto the nations, then we must make social action a higher priority. It is our ethical responsibility. Rabbi Shammai teaches in Pirkei Avot, "Say Little Do Much." Not everyone is a great speaker. But that shouldn't be a hindrance. Be a doer. You can change the world.

Shabbat Shalom.