

Redemption to the World through Words Parashat Behar

By Rabbi Jason Miller

This past week, I learned that a twenty-seven-year-old gave a 152-year-old a black eye. Seriously. You might have even heard about this already. The twenty-seven-year-old is a reporter named Jayson Blair, and through his acts of deceit and plagiarism, the New York Times, perhaps the most respected newspaper in the world received “a huge black eye.” Now, I should mention that I put the words “a huge black eye” in quotes because that was what the publisher of the Times said. I make this point because I am no Jayson Blair. Those aren’t my words, but I think they are helpful in explaining the result of Blair’s dishonesty on the New York Times as an institution.

This reporter misled New York Times readers like me by claiming to be reporting the news firsthand from locations in which he never visited. He completely made up quotes, leading us to believe he had interviewed people whom he never had. But I would like to focus on what I consider to be his most egregious crime. His theft. Yes, I believe it is fair to call him a thief or a robber. What did he steal? He stole words. Plagiarism. He took someone’s words or ideas and presented them as if they were his own.

In explaining his view of teshuva (repentance), the great Rabbi, Sa'adya Gaon, writes in his *Emunot V'Deot*, that “all sins are atoned for by repentance.” However, he names a few that are not. Among his list is “keeping misappropriated articles.” To Sa'adya, even the one who is in possession of plagiarized works is at fault. He clearly understands it as akin to owning something that has been stolen which of course is illegal. In this case, the one in possession of the misappropriated articles is in possession of stolen words.

Rabbi Michael Graetz, a Conservative rabbi living in Israel, periodically sends out his divrei Torah by e-mail, adding a request at the end that his colleagues feel free to use his material in sermons so long as they cite him as the source. So, in keeping with his request not to plagiarize his words, I inform you that it is he who brought the following to my attention. In this morning’s parsha, Parashat Behar, our text is seemingly redundant. In one verse, we read *And if you sell something to your neighbor, or buy something from your neighbor’s hand, you shall not defraud one another* (25:14); and only three verses later, we have *You shall not therefore defraud one another* (25:17). As in most cases in which the Torah seems superfluous, the rabbis come to explicate our text for us. In the Sifra, the midrash on the book of Leviticus, we learn that our first verse stating that “we shall not defraud one another” speaks about defrauding someone in monetary matters, while our second verse refers to deceit with words, “*ona’at devarim*.” And the rabbis teach us that *ona’at devarim* is the more serious transgression. What Jayson Blair of the New York Times did was *ona’at devarim*. He was morally obligated to credit the person from whom he learned something, and by not doing so, he made himself a thief.

In *The Book of Jewish Values*, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes that if you plagiarize, you are considered a thief in Jewish ethics because you steal the credit due to the person who first enunciated the idea, and then you engage in *g’neivat da’at* (“stealing the mind”): you deceive your listeners (or in the case of Jayson Blair, your readership) into thinking that you are smarter or more knowledgeable and insightful than you really are.” In his column on the day following the Times going public with the revelation about Jayson Blair, Bill Safire wrote that attributing credit to your sources is the cardinal rule in journalism. Well, that is true, and attributing credit to your sources is similarly a very vital rule for all humanity. To plagiarize is to violate the mitzvah of *lo tignov* “Do Not Steal,” which is not only one of the Ten Commandments, but also number two on the list of the seven Noachide Laws, the seven mitzvot for non-Jews to observe. These laws are the pillars of civilization, named for Noach, since we believe that all humans are descended from him.

Maimonides teaches that whoever faithfully observes the seven Noachide Laws earns a place in heaven. But in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah, we learn that the reward for citing your sources is even greater than heaven. In a series of quotes of Rabbi Eleazar in the name of Rabbi Hanina, we learn that

“Whoever reports a saying in the name of its originator brings deliverance to the world” *kol ha’omer davar b’shem omro, mevi geula l’olam*. The prooftext for this comes from Megillat Esther, where it says, “And Esther told the king in the name of Mordechai.” Knowing well the story of Purim, we know this to be true. Queen Esther undoubtedly did bring redemption to the Jewish world through her heroism.

This is further stated in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Sages. During this time of year, between Pesach and Rosh Hashanah, when Shabbat doesn’t go out until late on Saturday evening, the rabbis recommend that we study Pirkei Avot to avoid the monotony, lest we come to engage in an activity prohibited on Shabbat. This sixth and final chapter is better known at Kinyan Torah, or the Braita of Rabbi Meir. After stating that Torah is greater than Priesthood or Royalty, Rabbi Meir proves this by naming forty-eight virtues needed to acquire Torah. His final two virtues, or *ma’alot*, are that Torah is acquired “by being precise in transmitting what one has learned” and “by quoting one’s source.” Rabbi Meir too, explains that “a person who quotes his source bring deliverance to the world.”

How many of you recognize the name Baruch ben Nuriyah? You heard his name only minutes ago. In this morning’s haftarah, the focus is on the prophet Jeremiah, but we are also introduced to Baruch ben Nuriyah. My teacher and friend, Rabbi Burt Visotzky, opened my eyes to the fact that while 2600 years later we are all familiar with Jeremiah who has a book named after him as part of our Tanakh, Baruch ben Nuriyah is virtually a footnote. Baruch ben Nuriyah was Jeremiah’s scribe and we are taught that *Baruch ben Nuriyah did everything just as Jeremiah the prophet had commanded him, to read the words of Adonai from the book, in the Temple of the Lord*.

We don’t hear much about this man, but he was the next in the chain of our tradition following the death of Jeremiah. Not only did he help ensure that generations of Jews through our own time could still be studying the words of God through Jeremiah, but scholars even theorize that Baruch ben Nuriyah was partly responsible for assembling the text we now know as Deuteronomy. A pretty lofty contribution to our faith.

Baruch earned Jeremiah’s trust as a faithful scribe. It was his job not only to dictate Jeremiah’s prophecies, but also to read those words publicly to the people. He could have easily led the people to believe that these narratives were of his own creative work, but he was always certain to preface his addresses by stating that these words are the words of Jeremiah, prophet of God. When we read the history of the Jewish people to this day, we know the words as the words of Jeremiah, but we are ever grateful to Baruch ben Nuriyah whose determination allowed these words to be preserved with attribution to their proper source.

Baruch explains that Jeremiah *pronounced all these words unto me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in the book*. It seems like an easy qualifier to make, but all too many people neglect to do what Baruch did and give credit where credit is so clearly due. Coincidentally, the first biography on Baruch ben Nuriyah was published this month. In it, author J. Edgar Wright, explains that Baruch ben Nuriyah’s legacy grew from that of a scribe to a divine sage who was granted a tour of heaven itself. Indeed, that ability to taste heaven is due to his doing the right thing and recording Jeremiah’s words as just that, Jeremiah’s words.

Our tradition has much to teach about plagiarism. One quick peek into our rabbinic tradition and you will see how seriously the rabbis take the attribution of a quote. “Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y” not only serves to document the chain of tradition and add credence to an opinion, it is also a sign of respect. That short phrase informs us that the next generation takes seriously what was learned from the previous generation. That those teachings are very much valid and need to be preserved with proper attribution. It is through this process of citation that we are in possession of *Torat Chayyim*, the living tradition of Torah.

Whether writing a paper for school, a newspaper article, a business report, or delivering a speech, we must remember the importance of words. Words can and do have proper owners. By using someone

else's words, we can communicate our opinions more effectively, but we must treat those words with respect. When we pass those words around and do not accurately state from where they came, we are misleading others into thinking they originated with us. When we provide an honest recording of our sources, we allow our readers to judge each source on its own merit. And we further state without question that we have done our proper research and have verified our sources truthfully.

Let us be less like the reporter Jayson Blair and more like the scribe Baruch ben Nuriah. We are a people of the book, a people who values words and we should use them wisely. Imagine the possibilities if we all follow the dictum that Rabbi Meir teaches in Pirkei Avot, found in the Talmud as the words of Rabbi Eleazar who teaches in the name of Rabbi Hanina: "Whoever reports a saying in the name of its originator brings deliverance to the world." So may it be. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.