

Parshat Emor
May 12, 2012
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“I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

No, this was not uttered by Mitt Romney, or Barak Obama or Joe Biden – it was written on a sign I once saw posted in a lawyer’s office – but, you are correct it does sound like something anyone of our current crop of politicians might have said.

The President or Vice-President trying to explain their precise position on gay marriage? “I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

Mitt Romney trying to explain his position on the bailout for the car industry, “I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

Sometimes my comments are based on a chapter or an episode of the *Tanach* - sometimes even on a single verse. This morning my comments are based on a single word - it is in the opening verse of today’s Torah portion, it is the word which gives the name to this mornings *parasha* - it is repeated no less three times in that opening verse. It is a verb - one of the most frequently used verbs in the Bible -literally thousands of times - the word is *emor* - speak!

Vayomer adonai el moshe, emor el hakohanim b’nai aharon v’amarta aleyhem...

“And God said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them...”

God speaks to Moses, Moses speaks to the priests, the priests speak to the people - there is a whole lot of speaking going on... and I believe in that one word - *emor* - speak lies an important message for us today.

“I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

One of my teachers suggested that the entire Torah could easily be understood as the education of Moses. After all, the five books of the Torah bear his name, they are called: *Torat Moshe*. It can be argued that everything in the torah before his arrival is preamble – setting the stage – getting us ready for the hero. And when we do meet him – we are told very few details about the kind of person he is, but we are told this – *lo ish dvarim anochi* - when God challenges him to be His man, his designated leader to confront Pharaoh – to lead the Jewish people from slavery – Moses, protesting what he believes is his own inadequacy for the job – tells us one thing --- *lo ish dvarim anochi* -- “I am not a man of words...”

Talk about irony! After all, what is the legacy of this man? Words! *Torat Moshe* – and to make sure we don’t miss the point – what is the name of the 5th of the five books of Moshe? *Devarim!* This man who describes himself as incapable of words – leaves us a book called, *Devarim* – so it behooves us – his descendants to ponder his words and their implication for us today.

We have come a long way from the wilderness of Sinai to the suburbs of Long Island and some of the greatest advances, in these many thousands of years, have been in the area of communications - fiber optics, the internet, cell phones - we are so well connected that it is hard to go anywhere - even here - without being tweeted, paged, texted, e-mailed or called. Yet, for all of our improved *methods* of communication, Moses with his speech impediment could speak more effectively than most of us today. Why? What was his secret? What is the secret of this morning's Torah portion - that for all of its, primitiveness, was able to communicate a message that has lasted for 4000 years, while we today, with all of our sophistication can't seem to remember what was said to us yesterday?

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

A number of years ago, scientists launched a space probe toward the farthest reaches of our galaxy. The idea was to see whether there was life out there and to communicate with it if possible. Some of you may remember - the capsule contained pictures of a man and a woman, the mathematical symbols, and a diagram of the position of earth in relation to our own solar system and our galaxy. Presumably, if there are forms of life out there, they will find the capsule, open it, and they will figure out the diagrams and they will be moved to send back greetings. The hope is to open up communications for the first time with other forms of intelligent life.

Now, I am all for space exploration, but, I do believe that this is another example of putting the cart before the horse. Maybe, *before* we try and contact other forms of life, maybe we should consider *what* we are going to say if, in fact, we do contact them!!

This experiment sums up the great dilemma of modernity. We have spent so much time and effort and money on technology, we have developed our ability to communicate to a fine science, we are connected in ways that our parents could not have imagined - I can talk to anyone, anytime - faster, clearer and cheaper - than ever before - the only problem is - we have nothing to say.

But I have a bit of good news. That experiment - the space capsule hurling to the farthest reaches of our galaxy, well, scientists estimate that it will take at least 75,000 years for that space probe to reach the ends of the galaxy and for intelligent life, if it exists, to send back a response. 75,000 years - well at least that gives us a little lead-time to get our act together down here. Since that probe was launched more than 10 years ago, we only have 74,990 or so years left - so we better get cracking.

Yes, my concern is more pressing than how to contact intelligent life beyond Mars - I am concerned with the problem of communicating with intelligent life right here on earth - how to make contact with the person sitting next to you in shul!

I find it interesting and more than a bit depressing - on this Shabbat when the torah portion cries out to us: *Emor* - Speak! That there are Jewish leaders who are telling their followers, "Don't Speak!"

There have been a series of articles in the New York Times this past week - and I would like to

point out they have been written by Times reporter Sharon Otterman, the daughter of our members Bernard & Sandra Otterman – on how the Ultra-Orthodox communities in Brooklyn under the direction of their rabbis are told not to speak out and report cases of sexual abuse of children in their communities to the authorities. In these closed communities the sin of betraying a fellow Jew and going to the non-Jewish authorities is considered worse than the sin of sexual abuse of children. And if you do speak out, you are shunned and harassed by the community. The reputation of the community is considered of greater import than the welfare of its children – so the clear and unmistakable message is: *sha shtil* – “Be quiet!” “Say nothing!” And the result is that children suffer. I find it absurd that the only outrage that these communities can muster is for those who would defy their rabbis as opposed to outrage directed at the rabbis themselves. I find it outrageous that a religious community can counsel silence in the face of injustice – when the torah demands we raise our voices.

How has this happened? How have we come to this? *Emor!* God challenges us to speak. *Lo ish devarim anochi* – “But we are not good with words” – we, like Moses, protest. You remember what God responded to Moses when he expressed his sense of inadequacy? *Mi sam l’adam peh?* “Who made man’s mouth?” God says to Moses, “You are trying to tell me you don’t know how to speak? I created your mouth – I know what it can and cannot do. “Now go,” says God, “and I will teach you what to speak!”

You know what I have learned, in these many years – my mouth works fine when I am speaking the truth – it only malfunctions when I am trying to be clever, or lie – or say something other than what I really mean.

The Vice-President spoke to our Rabbinical Convention this past week – I just returned from Atlanta – where the Rabbinical Assembly held its annual convention – and in addition to our usual studying and discussions – we were privileged to be addressed by the Vice-President – you may have seen it on the news, because he was speaking shortly after he created a bit of excitement – when he went on the Sunday morning news programs and expressed his support for legalizing gay marriage. It seems he did what a politician is not supposed to do – he told us what he really thinks.

And when he spoke to us rabbis a couple of days later Vice-President Biden remarked, “No one has ever accused me of not meaning what I say – my problem is that too often I say everything that I mean!”

No – Mr. Vice-President – that is not your problem – that is why so many people admire you. We want politicians to say what they mean.

There is a saying in the Talmud, it is one of my favorites: “*dvarim hayotzeim min haleyv, nichnasim el haleyv*. Words that come from the heart enter into the heart.” If we would only say what we feel, and feel what we say – I think we would learn as Moses did – that our mouths work just fine.

When words are treated with greater care and respect – they come out of our mouths just fine. When they are sacred words and sincere words and true words- our mouths work just fine. What Moses came to learn was that the problem wasn’t his mouth – but his heart. And as soon as he allowed his mouth to speak words from the heart – his mouth worked just fine and he became one of the greatest men of words in human history.

Today what do we say when we really want to be taken seriously? There are a series of verbal prefixes that have become commonplace in our language: “Frankly speaking; honestly though; sincerely now. Do these sound familiar? Weren’t you serious before? Weren’t we being honest before? Weren’t we being direct or truthful before?”

Each of these prefixes has an assumption - that what has been said before is ordinary conversation not worthy of serious consideration and you are alerting your listener that *now* - you want them to pay attention and take you seriously - something you obviously had not expected of them up until that point!

So often I hear people say, “words are not adequate to express my feelings...” Frequently this is said at extremely happy or extremely sad moments - a wedding or a funeral. But, I suggest to you that it is not the words that are inadequate - but rather we are the ones who are inadequate. Somehow we, for all of our sophistication have lost the art of speaking - honestly, sincerely, directly.

The Bible still speaks to us after 4000 years because it is honest and forthright. Moshe and Joshua, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ruth and Deborah - they speak to us today because when they spoke 4000 years ago they spoke from the heart – they spoke honestly, seriously, they knew how to speak to each other heart to heart, soul to soul. Their technology may have been “primitive”, but their honesty was profoundly sophisticated. We have inverted the equation. Our methods are superlative yet the words that we utter today are of cheap currency and of diminishing worth. Every waking moment finds the air filled with sound waves that contain words - words that are structured to convince, and to excite and to entertain. The mass media bombards our senses with words that seek to sell and stimulate. We talk and we talk when we have nothing to say. And when we do have something to say we find words inadequate to express our thoughts and feelings. There is such a torrent of language that flows over us. We have notes of explanations, memos of discussion, letters of understanding, announcements of intention - but somehow it doesn’t seem to help.

“I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

Maybe it is time to say what we mean. If I were one of the scientists sending that probe to the farthest reaches of the galaxy, I would have included a copy of our *Tanach* - our Bible. Alas, it may be too late for that experiment – but it is not too late for the experiment we are currently occupied in – life down here on earth.

This is *Shabbat Emor* – this Shabbat challenges us to speak, to speak words of truth and compassion, sacred words, holy words, words from the heart.

Yeyu l’ratzon imrey fi, v’hegyon libi l’fanecha, adonai tzuri v’goali -

May the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable before You, O’ Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer - Amen.