

**Sermon/Drasha Parshas Ki Sisa , 5774/2014 "Harnessing the Power of Words"
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If you know what the phrase 'The Day the Music Died' refers to, you're either showing your age or are a very well-informed student of the early history of Rock n' Roll. 'The Day the Music Died' is a line in the Don McLean song "American Pie". It is a reference to the deaths of three famous rock and roll musicians: Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson. These three stars died in a plane crash in Iowa in February of 1959.

Twelve years later, in 1971, Don McLean released his single, 'American Pie', to commemorate Buddy Holly's death. A little-known fact is that 'American Pie' was the name of the airplane in this tragedy.

Buddy Holly had just terminated his partnership with this backup group, The Crickets. Ironically, Holly and his band had just scored a No. 1 hit with "That'll Be the Day (that I die)". But Holly assembled a new band, including future country music great Waylon Jennings. Holly and his entourage were on a tour of 24 Midwestern cities in three weeks in which the performers traveled on a tour bus.

There were a number of fascinating subplots surrounding the tragic plane crash; subplots that determined who would live and who would die.

The distance between venues and the difficult conditions on their poorly equipped tour bus made for painful traveling. One band member was hospitalized due to frostbite -- the bus didn't have heat, and they say it gets cold in the Midwest in the winter. So in Iowa, before their next stop in Minnesota, Holly decided to charter a plane. The Big Bopper, who had the flu, swapped places with Waylon Jennings, taking the latter's place on the plane. Ritchie Valens 'won' the last seat on the plane on a coin toss.

When Buddy Holly learned that Waylon Jennings was not going to fly, he said in jest, "Well, I hope your ol' bus freezes up." Jennings responded, "Well, I hope your ol' plane crashes."

Waylon Jennings and Buddy Holly were best friends. Jennings was clearly joking. But Jennings' humorous but ill-fated response ("I hope your ol' plane crashes") were words that Jennings said haunted him for the rest of his life.

Who among us hasn't said words we'd like to have back?

Every Jewish ethical work emphasizes the great caution one should exert when speaking. Indeed, the Onkeles translation of the Torah verse, "Man became a living soul" (2:7) is "Man became a speaking spirit". Man's very identity lies in his capacity to verbalize, and corruption of speech is equivalent to corruption of one's identity as a human being.

The words we use are incredibly powerful. Although we're often not aware of it, our words have the potential to create or to destroy worlds.

Did you ever hear the story of the infamous bank robber, Pepe Rodriguez? Pepe Rodriguez was one of the most notorious bank robbers in the early settling of the west of America. Pepe lived just across the border in Mexico. He regularly snuck into Texas towns to rob banks, returning to Mexico before the Texas Rangers could catch him. The frustrated lawmen were so embarrassed by this that they illegally crossed the border into Mexico. Eventually, they cornered Pepe in his favorite Mexican bar. Unfortunately, Pepe couldn't speak any English, so the lawmen asked the bartender to translate for them.

The bartender explained to Pepe who the men were, and Pepe became very nervous. The Texas Rangers, with their guns drawn, told the bartender to ask Pepe where he had hidden all the money he had stolen from the Texas banks.

Tell him that if he doesn't tell us where the money is right now, we're going to shoot him dead on the spot!

The bartender translated all of this for Pepe. Immediately, Pepe explained in Spanish that the money was hidden in the town well. They could find the money by counting down 17 stones from the handle of the well bucket and behind the 17th stone was all the money he'd stolen. The Rangers had their eyes pinned on the bartender waiting for the translation.

The bartender said in English;

Pepe is a very brave man. He says you are a bunch of stinky gringos, and he's not afraid to die!

Things sometimes get lost in the translation! We have to choose our words precisely and carefully - as we learn in a lesson from this week's parsha.

Last week's Torah portion (Tetzaveh) is unique in that it is the only one, after the introduction of Moshe (Moses) in the beginning of Exodus, where Moshe's name isn't mentioned even once. How could it be that given Moshe's central role in the story of the Jewish people in the desert that his name could be omitted for an entire parsha?

This omission, our rabbis teach, is a consequence of something Moshe said in this week's parsha, Ki Sisa. When Moshe was pleading for Divine forgiveness for the Jewish people following the sin of the Golden Calf, he said that if they were not to be forgiven;

Wipe me out from Your book" (32:32)

Although G-d did forgive Bnai Yisrael, the punishment which Moshe invoked upon himself was partially fulfilled by the omission of his name from one portion of the Torah. This teaches us an incredible lesson about the power of words: Even a conditional curse, like the one said by Moshe, expressed while pleading to save the Jewish people, may take effect even when the condition of the curse isn't met.

In the famous novel *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne said,

I read in a book once that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but I've never been able to believe it. I don't believe a rose WOULD be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage.

As a rabbi, the tool of my trade, in a sense, is words. I am a speaker and a writer and a lover of words. Addicted to them, you might even say. I believe in the power of words, and am amazed how, when used properly, words can positively transform lives. Here are three ways in which we can harness the positive power of words.

1) Encouragement

In June of 1993 the police in South Windsor, Connecticut, pulled over motorists in larger numbers than usual, but not because outlaws had overrun the city.

One person stopped by a patrolman was Lori Carlson, according to a news report. As the policeman approached Lori's car, she wondered what she had done wrong. To her amazement the officer handed her a ticket that said, "Your driving was GREAT! – and we appreciate it."

Authorities in this Hartford suburb had recently begun a new program to give safe drivers a two-dollar reward for obeying the speed limit, wearing safety belts, having children in protective seats, and using turn signals.

"You are always nervous when you see the police lights come on," said Carl Lomax, another resident of South Windsor pulled over for good driving. "It takes a second or two to adjust to the officer saying, 'Hey, thanks a lot for obeying the law.' It's about the last thing you would expect."

The police of South Windsor had a good idea. The first thing others should expect from us is encouragement. Our friends, family and fellow workers will respond best if we not only correct them when they do wrong, but if we catch them when they're doing something right.

The tongue has the awesome power to whittle other people down to nothing, or with encouragement turn them into giants capable of great things.

People who care about others constantly encourage them. G-d told Moshe to offer words of encouragement to Joshua before the latter took over the reins of leadership of the Jewish people.

But you command Joshua, and strengthen him and give him resolve ... chazkayhuv'amtzayhu (Deut. 3:28)

Upon performing a mitzvah, Ashkenazim say to one another *yashar koach*: literally, 'straight strength.' Sefardim say to one another: *chazak u'baruch*: literally, 'be encouraged and blessed.'

You never know when a few words of encouragement can have an impact on a life.

2) Compliments

A man owned a strong-willed horse which would go only if the rider said, *Boruch Hashem* (thank you, G-d)," and would stop only if he said, *b'Vakasha* (please). It wasn't a Jewish horse (!), but that was the way it was trained.

The owner decided to sell the horse, but when he explained the horse's peculiarities to a prospective buyer, the buyer said, "That's ridiculous. I've been raising horses all my life. I'll make him go and stop without those expressions."

So he jumped on the horse and kicked him until he started to run. The horse went faster and faster. Worried, the buyer reined back and yelled, "Whoa" But the horse wouldn't stop. Suddenly, the man saw they were galloping toward the edge of a cliff. Desperately he yelled, "*b'Vakasha!*"

The horse screeched to a halt just in time. Peering down over the edge of the cliff, the man wiped the sweat from his forehead, patted the neck of the horse, and said, "*Boruch Hashem.*"

Gratitude and compliments are a dynamic force in motivating others. Psycholinguistic research indicates that a person's mind takes 48% longer to understand a negative statement than a positive one -- so compliments based upon a person's character or actions are incredibly effective in inspiring people to live up to the praise they receive. People tend to live up to the compliments they receive.

The story is told of a newspaper cartoonist who amused himself one summer day by sending a letter to twenty acquaintances selected at random. Each message contained only one word: "Congratulations."

As far as he knew, not one of them had done anything in particular to be congratulated for. However, each one took the message as a matter of fact and wrote him a letter of thanks. Everyone who received the message had done something that they regarded worthy of congratulations.

The power of praise is limited only by its lack of use. How many people do you know who could benefit from a sincere 'congratulations' or 'great job', or possibly even, 'you're the best'?

When you sincerely praise others, you fulfill the mitzvah of *V'ahavta l'rayecha k'mocha* (Love your friend as yourself). Harness the positive power of words by complimenting and praising others.

3) Rejoice

One of the most supportive things we can do for others is to rejoice in and celebrate their success. Forty thousand fans were in attendance in the Oakland stadium when Rickey Henderson tied Lou Brock's career stolen base record. According to USA Today, Lou left baseball in 1979 but faithfully followed Henderson's great career and was excited about his success. Realizing that Henderson would set a new record, Brock was quoted as saying, "I'll be there. Do you think I'm going to miss it now? Rickey did in 12 years what took me 19. He's amazing."

Imagine how Rickey Henderson felt knowing the person whose stolen base record he was about to break was excited about his achievements. Envy or jealousy might have been more natural feelings for Lou Brock, but he set self-interest aside to rejoice in the happiness of another.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that a person who has a good heart is one in whom envy, jealousy and hate can gain no access. The sixth chapter of Ethics of the Fathers identifies having a *lev tov* -- a good heart -- as indispensable to achieving spiritual completion. Having a "good heart" includes developing a soft nature and the ability to act joyfully for the benefit of others.

Rejoicing in the success of others is an exceedingly generous act of giving. When you see others basking in the glow of their blessings -- bask and celebrate with them!

In conclusion:

William J. Bennett, former U. S. Secretary of Education, was once asked a perceptive question by a seventh grader: "How can you tell a good country from a bad one?"

Sec. Bennett replied, "I apply the 'gate' test. When the gates of a country are open, watch which way the people run. Do they run into the country or out of the country?"

Bennett's answer can easily be translated to synagogues. If a synagogue is good, people want to be part of that community. They know that they and their family are valued. The doors don't open fast enough at a good synagogue.

Secretary Bennett's answer can also apply to people. People who routinely use words to make others feel good are people we want to be around. Never underestimate the importance of people in your life. And always look for opportunities to harness the positive power of words in your relationships, no matter how good they already are.

The omission of Moshe's name in Tetzaveh is of great significance. If a conditional curse, which was part of a passionate plea of forgiveness for the Jewish people can have unfavorable consequences, how much more of an impact can be made through using words in a positive fashion?

Our words create worlds. Use your words to encourage, compliment, and rejoice with others.