

THE WAR OF THE WORDS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah invests a great deal of worth into the power of speech. Though we read in Pirkei Avot that "words spoken are not as important as deeds performed," the Torah nevertheless constantly emphasizes the importance of the spoken word. Improper speech, slander and obscenity are terrible abuses of the gift of speech. The Torah rates speech as the one quality that truly separates humans from the animal kingdom. Speech can console, comfort, advise, persuade and inform. It is the primary method for educating and communicating with others. Speech can be holy and it can lead to reconciliation, compromise and understanding between humans, even amongst former enemies. On the other hand, force, even when justified and necessary, rarely settles matters or increases understanding and wisdom. Force is to be employed only if speech fails. The Torah tells us that even in war, the Jewish army entering the Land of Israel was "to call out for peace with its enemies" before embarking on military action. Of course, speech is not a surefire winner all of the time and without some use of force or threat of force, security and progress cannot occur in a complex and dangerous world such as ours. But Churchill's line about the UN - "It is better to jaw, jaw, jaw than to war, war, war" - certainly retains its place in the truisms of history.

Moshe admits at the beginning of his mission of leading the people of Israel that temperamentally and physically he is not a person of words and speech. Yet his greatest successes and achievements occur when he follows the Lord's command and speaks to the people of Israel and to Pharaoh. Moshe is not only the giver of the written Torah to Israel but he is the master teacher of the Oral Law - he spends the last forty years of his life speaking, teaching, explaining, and guiding. For this reason, it is clearer to us why he was punished for striking the rock in anger to bring forth its waters rather than adhering to God's instructions to speak to the rock. By striking the rock and not attempting first to speak to it, Moshe unwittingly enshrines force over speech, power over persuasion in the minds of his followers. Striking the rock is the antithesis of everything that Moshe taught and did until now. Certainly striking the rock achieves an immediate success - water flows from it. But the Lord tells Moshe that striking the rock does not sanctify the people of Israel or its God. It may appear to be a quick fix to the problem but it certainly is not a long lasting lesson of morality and holy behavior. Striking the rock and not speaking to it is what brings Moshe's hopes of leading Israel to the Promised Land crashing down in failure. The ability to speak wisely at the proper moment is still one of the great talents of human beings. All of us should attempt to cultivate and use it regularly in our personal, family and communal lives.

Shabat shalom

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