

## **The Words We Carry with Us**

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A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human being because, even though it was a very large mammal, a whale's throat was very small. The little girl pointed out that Jonah had been swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human being. It was physically impossible. The little girl said, "when I get to heaven I will ask Jonah." the teacher retorted, "What if Jonah went to purgatory?" the little girl replied, "then you ask him."

What makes us who we are? Surely, part of it is the words we carry around in our heads. Perhaps, it was something our parents said or special words we read in a book or heard in a song. Words stay with us forever and shape the rest of our lives – for better and for worse.

Marlo Thomas describes a hard time in her life, struggling to make it as an actress but always being compared to her famous father, Danny Thomas. One day, her father sent her a note: "Marlo, run your own race."

A colleague of mine tells the true story of visiting a congregant who was struggling to walk again after a tragic accident. One day she was examined by a doctor who said, almost nonchalantly, "by the way, you know you'll never walk again." the woman felt devastated. The next day, she shared the doctor's words with her physical therapist. The therapist laughed and offered words of her own, "do you think I'd be wasting my time on you if I thought there was no hope? Now, get up and let's start walking."

There is a story circulating on the internet about Kyle, a teenager who was getting so depressed about all the taunting and teasing he was getting from his peers that he decided to commit suicide. On the day before he was going to carry out his plans, teens abused Kyle yet again. They tripped him up. Kyle and his books went flying. But another teenager jogged over, helped Kyle get up and said, "those guys are jerks. They really should get lives." Kyle and this other teenager became best friends. And Kyle never

thought of taking his own life ever again.

When I was in the fourth grade at Clinton School in Maplewood, I remember standing at the blackboard unable to figure out a math problem. My teacher came over to me and told me I was stupid. Those words stayed with me throughout my childhood.

Yes, words can make all the difference. What words reverberate within you? What are the words deep inside that inspired you to become all you are and everything you've accomplished?

Can you recall what your teacher said that helped you through school?

Can you recall what your best friend said that helped you through a difficult time?

Can you recall what your mother or father said that made you feel loved and appreciated?

Can you recall the most treasured words your spouse ever said to you?

The torah underscores the incredible power of the words that echo within us to heal or to hurt.

As soon as the Hebrews entered the land of Israel, representatives from each of the twelve Hebrew tribes were to ascend Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal -- two peaks in the same mountain range in the northern part of Israel -- and there to enact a dramatic ritual to symbolize the renewal of their covenant with God.

Six tribes were to ascend Mt. Gerizim and listen to the Levites proclaim words of blessing for those who were loyal to the covenant. The other six tribes were to stand on Mt. Ebal to hear the Levites proclaim curses for those who disobeyed the covenant [see Deuteronomy 27: 9-13].

These two mountains, north and south of the city of Shechem, are part of Israel's physical landscape. Symbolically, they also represent a part of our inner psychological landscape. There Exists Within Us, Both A Mt. Gerizim, a voice of blessing, and a Mt. Ebal, a voice of cursing.

Just as the Israelites heard the antiphonal sounds of blessing and curse on the mountain tops, so do we hear the voices of blessing and curse in the deep inner valleys of our own souls.

The Voice Of Mt. Gerizim is the warm, loving voice, often an internalized voice from our childhood, by which we bring blessing upon ourselves:

It is the soothing voice that teaches us we do not have to be perfect in order to be loved;

It is the compassionate voice that encourages us to forgive and to be reconciled with others;

It is the wise voice that reminds us to savor the small pleasures of everyday life.

For many of us, we hear all too often only the inner voice of Mt. Ebal. This is the old, familiar voice, often another internalized voice from our childhood, by which we curse ourselves:

It is the demanding voice that convinces us we must be perfect at all costs;

It is the self-hating voice that deprives us of any joy or satisfaction in life;

It is the angry voice that pushes our loved ones away and refuses to bury old grudges.

What can we do about the painful voices, the hurtful words, we carry with us? Rabbi raphael sampson hirsch once observed that both Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal rise on the same soil and are watered by the same rainfall.

How could it be that Mt. Ebal is barren and bleak, while Mt. Gerizim is lush and green?

His answer: it is up to each of us to decide

Whether we will promote blessing or curse within our own life. It is a matter of choice. We have the choice to listen to the self-punishing inner voice of Mt. Ebal or to heed the self-loving inner voice of Mt. Gerizim.

Indeed, happiness requires hard work. As I overheard someone once say from the seat in front of me on the midtown direct train, "you know, it doesn't matter what the weather is like outside. I bring my own weather with me wherever I go." each of us can choose to curse the darkness or to bless the light – whatever light is available. While it is never easy, may we always be among those who choose to bless the light.

And let us remember to be more careful with our words, knowing that loved ones, friends, strangers, and students will carry our words with them forever.

In his book The Conversion Of Chaplain Cohen, Author Herbert Tarr wrote this incredibly poignant moment when David says goodbye to his aunt and uncle, the couple who had raised him as an orphan.

David says: "How can I ever begin to repay you two for what you've done for me?" Uncle Asher replies: "David, there's a saying. The love of parents goes to their children, but the love of the children goes to their children. "That's not so!" David protests. "I will always love you..." Aunt Devorah interrupts: "David, what your Uncle Asher means is that a parent's love isn't to be paid back. It can only be passed on."

What are the special words you carry within you?

What are the special words you wish to pass along?