

Words As Weapons & World Builders

Parashat Chukat

July 4, 2025

Rabbi Evan Traylor

Shabbat Shalom! There is the old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But we know that they very much can. Just as words have the power to create and build tremendous things, even entire worlds as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heshel would remind us, they also have the power to cause pain, destruction, and keep us from the truth. And the same was true for our ancestors.

Now, for the second half of Exodus and all of Leviticus, we do not hear directly from the Israelites, only from God, Moses, and other leaders. But in Numbers, the people begin to speak again, and they’re not too pleased. As we have read over the past several weeks, there are complaints about the food they’re eating, about the direction of their wandering, about the leadership of Moses and Aaron. These words are then used to create false memories of the past, initiate rebuke, and lead to rebellion amongst the Israelites that often lead to death and destruction.

In addition to Torah, words also hold power right here, in this country. 249 years ago today, the founders of this country gathered to sign the Declaration of Independence. In addition to naming a long list of grievances against the King and declaring war against Great Britain, the founders used words to express a profound idea: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹ This sentence is rooted deeply in our Torah, the idea we read about in Genesis that each and every human being is created in the image of God. And yet, even with this inspiring statement of humanity, we can see the ways in which these words subvert the truth. Because while writing these famous words, Thomas Jefferson, and other signers of the Declaration of Independence, were enslaving Africans that had been captured and forced into labor in this country. Because while writing these famous words, the founders were part of a generations long genocide against Indigenous people here. Because while writing these famous words, so many people - women, Black folks, indigenous folks, poor folks - were left out of their definition of human and therefore left out of the God-given rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Words, even these most famous ones, can be used as weapons of subversion that seek to hide the truth.

¹ National Archives, “Declaration of Independence”.
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

We see another example of this in the piece of legislation that passed Congress this week and that the administration will sign into law. The so-called “Big, Beautiful Bill” is anything but that. The bill attacks Medicaid and food stamps, builds even more migrant detention centers, increases ICE’s ability to deport our neighbors, slows our progress on renewable energy, increases healthcare costs, and cuts funding to family planning clinics, among many more detrimental policies.² With this bill, the rich will get richer and more powerful; the poor will get poorer and suffer. The administration uses words, “big and beautiful” to distract us from the harm that it will bring upon the most vulnerable in this country. Again, words, plain and simple words, subvert our ability to know the truth, and for all of us to hold close those unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.”

² PBS, “Here’s what’s in the big bill that passed the senate.”
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But if words have the power to subvert the truth, to break apart relationships and societies, they also have the power to build them up. On July 4, 1852, Frederick Douglass asked the question, “What to a slave is the Fourth of July?” And part of this answer used words to articulate a better future: “I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. “The arm of the Lord is not shortened,” and the doom of slavery is certain.”³ In response to the bill’s passage yesterday, Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia, himself a pastor, shared the stirring words of the prophet Amos: “For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate...I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”⁴ In both of these examples, we see the ways in which words can cut through the noise and begin to build something different, something better in the future. In these ways, words, even in dire circumstances, can build new worlds.

³ Frederick Douglass, “What to a slave is the Fourth of July?”
<https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1852FrederickDouglass.pdf>.

⁴ Amos 5:12, 23-24

Whether it is the Declaration of Independence that only declared freedom and liberty for some, or the Big Beautiful Bill Act that will hurt so many, it is clear that words can be weapons of subversion, keeping us from the truth. But it is also clear, from the words of Frederick Douglass and Reverend Warnock, and so many others fighting for freedom, justice, and peace for all across the centuries, it is also clear that words can lead to healing, to connection, to joy, and to love. It's the choice that matters. Our choice, in how we use our words, each and every day. Because words matter, and they can, in fact, build worlds. Shabbat Shalom!

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And then there is this episode in our Torah portion this week. We read:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

וְדַבַּרְתָּם אֶל-הַסֶּלֶעַ לְעֵינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִמֶּי.

But, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses strikes the rock, twice, and is punished severely by God. Even across centuries of commentary, it’s unclear Moses’ motivation for striking the rock.

Was it frustration at the people, grief from the death of his sister Miriam, or something else?

Either way, the words given to Moses from God go unspoken, unused, undermining God’s command. As Dr. Adriane Leveen, Bible scholar and one of my professors in rabbinical school notes, speech in the Book of Numbers features “words as weapons of subversion.” Whether it is subverting the leadership of Moses, or in this instance, Moses subverting the commands of God, we can see the ways in which words, both spoken and unspoken, can subvert and undermine.

In addition to Torah, words also hold power right here, in this country. 249 years ago today, the founders of this country gathered to sign the Declaration of Independence. In addition to naming a long list of grievances against the King and declaring war against Great Britain, the founders used words to express a profound idea: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”⁵ This sentence is rooted deeply in our Torah, the idea we read about in Genesis that each and every

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