

**Powerful Biblical Statements:
Lessons in Communication for Today's Leadership**

Hershey H. Friedman, Ph.D.

Finance and Business Management Department
School of Business
Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, USA
E-mail: x.friedman@att.net

Linda W. Friedman, Ph.D.

Department of Statistics and Computer Information Systems
Baruch College Zicklin School of Business
The City University of New York, USA
E-mail: linda.friedman@baruch.cuny.edu

Abstract

One of the most important prerequisites for effective leadership is powerful communication. This has been observed throughout all of human history, and examples of powerful communication may be found even in one of the oldest documents of record, the Hebrew Bible. This paper examined a small selection of powerful statements from the Hebrew Bible. The ancient messages resonate today as much as they did thousands of years ago. The authors conclude that, for a passage to be memorable and powerful, it could be categorized on one or more of three dimensions: simplicity, language and the content of the message itself. It is hoped that individuals in leadership positions will make use of these exemplars as guidelines for effective communication as well as a touchstone in understanding what truly is important.

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One of the most important prerequisites for effective leadership is powerful communication. This has been observed throughout all of human history, and examples of powerful communication may be found even in one of the oldest documents of record, the Hebrew Bible. What makes a powerful statement? Is it the message or the medium? Is a powerful communicator simply a talented wordsmith, or is the content of the communication paramount?

This paper will examine some of the most powerful statements in the Hebrew Bible. That these statements still resonate today can provide guidance to all of us, especially those in leadership positions. The Biblical statements chosen for study in this paper are both powerful and poignant. Although these passages were admittedly selected according to the subjective opinions of the authors, many are highly cited, by both religious leaders and secular. For example, the verse in Leviticus (25: 10), "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," is inscribed on the Liberty Bell and is a powerful message for humankind. Frederick Douglass (1852) used Psalm 137 to denounce slavery. The verse in question "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" is mournful and gut-wrenching, whether it stands on its own or in context:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.

The "Let my people go!" proclamation from Exodus (5:1) became a famous African-American spiritual and a mantra of the civil rights movement. As the battle cry of Soviet Jewish dissidents and refuseniks, it helped destroy Communism. Jews all over the world, and many non-Jews, rallied to that passionate appeal. Muravchik (2010) asserts that the:

...dramatization of the Soviet refusal to let people leave, a denial of freedom matched by few if any non-Communist dictatorships, served as a powerful reminder of the nature of our foe and, even, of the forgotten virtues of Western democratic civilization.

As noted above, many of the passages included herein are highly cited. They may have been quoted in the speeches of effective, powerful and/or charismatic leaders. Many project passion and, almost by the very fact of their inclusion in this sort of collection, they are memorable. In examining the passages culled for this project, the authors looked for some sort of commonality or paradigm or classification scheme that could be useful in drawing lessons from these powerful, historic statements. It was determined that, for a passage to be memorable and powerful, it could be categorized on one or more of three dimensions: content, language and simplicity. Clearly, these categories are not mutually exclusive and some passages could easily have been selected to represent one dimension as well as another.

SIMPLICITY

Some of the most powerful and memorable passages in all of Scriptures are short and pithy, rendered in a very few words. The first three examined here are also among the most effective and successful messages in all of Scriptures.

A proclamation made by one ancient prophet, Jonah, was so potent that an entire empire changed its ways. Jonah's reluctant prophecy was quite brief, using only five Hebrew words (Jonah 3:4): "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Jonah made the people believe that if they did not change their ways they were doomed and was, thus, instrumental in getting the people of Nineveh to repent.

For brevity and passion, there is not much that can compete with Moses' prayer to God on behalf of his sister Miriam (Numbers 12:13): "And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech Thee." This simple prayer may be even more simply translated, thus: "O God, please. Heal her please." This statement is powerful in its brevity – more so, even, in Hebrew, a five-word cry to God. One would have expected Moses to be upset with Miriam, who, after badmouthing Moses for marrying a Cushite woman was punished by God with *tzaraat* (an awful skin disease usually mistranslated as leprosy). Instead, his prayer on behalf of her is probably the most moving prayer in the entire Hebrew Bible. It is also the briefest prayer. In Hebrew, it consists of only five simple words, using all of 11 letters.

"Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?" This bold and sassy statement by Abraham to God (Genesis 18:25) makes it clear that justice is one of the pillars on which the entire world rests. Abraham was upset that God was planning to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Even God has to be able to justify his actions. This verse makes it clear that a country that is not concerned with justice may forfeit its right to exist.

"Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue..." This passage in Deuteronomy (16:20) continues "...so that you will live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you ..." and still manages to say a lot with few words. This is something that is even obvious in our times. Capitalism cannot succeed in countries that do not have laws that protect the people. Capitalism is

built on trust and a legal system that does not allow one's assets to be taken away illegally. Countries in which it is easy for government to seize the assets of people find that the wealth of its citizens flows to other countries. Micah (6:8) reduced the obligations of humankind to three major principles: "What does the Lord require of you: only to do justice, to love acts of kindness, and to walk discreetly before your God."

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son!" David's cry of torment at the death of his son is rendered in Hebrew using only 13 words, and only seven of them are distinct (II Samuel 19:1). He repeats the Hebrew word for "my son" eight times. This succinct cry of a parent carries within it a powerful and overwhelming passion. Absalom had rebelled against his father, King David, and tried to kill him. Despite all this, a parent's love does not ever go away. David may also have been crying to some extent because of his own feelings of guilt. David had been "angry" when Absalom's sister Tamar was raped by Amnon, David's son from another wife, but David did not punish Amnon (see II Samuel 13) and he realized that his injustice towards Tamar may have caused Absalom's rebellion. There are really no words that do justice to a parents' anguish but, if there were, it would be these.

Several powerful Biblical statements characterized by their brevity are simple – but not simplistic – adages or proverbs. From Psalms (146:3): "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help." This verse, of course, emphasizes that we can only rely on God. Similarly, also in Psalms (31:1), we have: "In you, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in your righteousness." Another proverb (Proverbs 12:1) states: "Whoever loves correction loves knowledge, but he that hates criticism is a fool." The term used for fool (*baor*) actually means a boor or brute. A person who hates criticism and is unwilling to improve remains foolish and is compared to a brutish beast. Also from Proverbs (17:1): "Better a dry crust of bread with peace and quiet than a house full of contentious feasting." We often believe that those that have great wealth are much happier than the rest of us. A poor family that lives in peace and tranquility is often better off than the wealthiest households where everyone is fighting and miserable.

When Solomon was offered the Heavenly gift of anything his heart desired, he responded (I Kings 3:9): "Give therefore your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and bad ..." This is what Solomon asked of God. The most important value for a leader is to have an understanding heart, i.e., the wisdom to do the right thing. Leadership is not about acquiring wealth and power; it is about helping followers achieve their potential.

LANGUAGE

When the language is what makes a verse resonate, it may be due to powerful imagery, to poetry, to a passionate turn of phrase. Sometimes the power of the message depends upon the poetry with which individual words are laced together to form the whole. Unfortunately, that doesn't always

come through the process of translation from one language to another. The Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko once remarked, in his restating of a French proverb, that “Translations are like women. When they are faithful they are not beautiful, and when they are beautiful they are not faithful.” With that caveat, the following are some passages that resonate – certainly in Hebrew but, often, even in translation – because of the way the language is used in the service of the message contained within.

The most eloquent passage of all Scriptures may be the one spoken by Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17):

Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.

There is nothing more eloquent in all of literature than this statement showing Ruth’s love for Naomi. At this point in the story Ruth’s husband, Naomi’s son, has died and both women are very poor. Ruth leaves her country Moab, her family and the pagan life to join the people of Israel.

The following passage from I Samuel (2:6-8) is part of Hannah’s song. Hannah had been barren and then, when she gave birth to Samuel, she composed this prayer as gratitude to God.

The Lord brings death and gives life; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he humbles and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dirt; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and endow them with a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, and on them he has set the world.

This song is a message to all of us never to give up and at the same time hints that successful individuals should also be aware how easy it is to lose everything.

Some of the most powerful statements in Scriptures use memorable imagery and allegories to make important points. For example, the following passage from Isaiah (1:21-22):

How the faithful city has become a harlot! Once it was full of justice and righteousness lodged in it, but now — murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels and associates of thieves; each of them loves a bribe and chases after rewards.

No prophet was more eloquent than Isaiah. This verse should be mandatory reading for all CEOs and politicians. The Great Recession of 2008 demonstrated how easy it was for the financial

industry to destroy the economy and their own credibility with the public in order to enrich themselves. Politicians who have sold their souls to the lobbyists should have no difficulty understanding the verse: “Your rulers are ... associates of thieves.”

The imagery in the following famous passage is universally known (Isaiah 11: 6-9):

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf, the lion cub, and the fatling [will feed] together, and a small child will lead them. A cow and bear will graze together and their young will lie down together. The lion will eat straw like the cattle. An infant will play over a viper’s hole, and a newly weaned child will stretch forth his hand over an adder’s den. They will do no harm or damage anywhere in all of My holy mountain; for the earth will be filled with knowledge of God, as water covers the sea.

This resounding message of world peace is still of great value today. It is a goal for humankind to strive towards. And here is another message of hope from Isaiah:

He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might, He increases strength. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in God will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

This is Isaiah’s (40:29-31) message of hope to those who have faith. This is reminiscent of the verse in Zechariah (4:6): “This is the word of God to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit,’ says the Lord of Hosts.”

“Let justice roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.” This powerful verse from the prophet Amos (5:24) was used by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in his classic “I Have a Dream Speech” which Lucas and Medhurst (2012) consider this to be “the most significant American political speech of the 20th century.” Reverend King said:

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until ‘justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.’

In Lamentations (1:1), Jeremiah compares Jerusalem to a widow, alone and abandoned:

Alas, how does the city sit in solitude! The city that was great with people has become as a widow! She that was the greatest among nations, and princess among provinces, how is she become a tributary!

The prophet Jeremiah wonders how a great city such as Jerusalem has become so desolate and miserable. Of course, he knows the answer. This was divine retribution for their sins. Numerous prophets warned ancient Israel that this fate would befall them if they continued with their transgressions. This is a message to all countries that believe they can ignore the needs of the helpless and will remain powerful. In a similar vein (Lamentations 1:16), "For these things I weep; my eye, my eye runs down with water, because a comforter to relieve my soul is far from me: my children are forlorn, because the enemy has prevailed." The comforter (God) was far but he was definitely there watching. Indeed, 70 years later, the Jewish people returned to rebuild the Second Temple.

From Proverbs 6:6: "Go to the ant, you sluggard; observe her ways and be wise." According to Scripture, hard work and industriousness are very desirable qualities. The importance of productivity can be learned by observing the lowly ant. Both government and business play an important role in making sure that there is work for people. The verse in Proverbs (22:29) states: "Do you see a man diligent in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before insignificant men." There is more about industriousness in the section which examines the content of these messages.

In the Book of Esther (4:14), Mordechai explains to Esther that leadership is about taking a chance in order to help the people: "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" Esther does risk her life and ends up saving all her people. She tells the King (8:6): "For how can I bear to see the calamity that will befall my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" A leader has to ensure that nothing bad happens to the people. The same can be said of CEOs; they have to make sure that they do not take risks that can endanger the jobs of employees solely to increase their bonuses. In the Book of Esther, even more than the language relaying the message, the very structure of the storyline does so. Individuals who were on top as the story opens are by the time the story ends, brought low by their own actions; and, vice versa. The message throughout is we reap what we sow, and just because we are on top (or on the bottom) now, it doesn't mean can't fall (or rise) in the future.

CONTENT

Sometimes it really is simply all about the message, rather than the medium or the delivery. Some of the more resonant and powerful – and highly cited – statements in the Bible have timeless

messages such as industriousness, justice, integrity, compassion for the disenfranchised and for the less powerful members of society, redemption, and hope for a better tomorrow.

“When you shall eat of the toil of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” This verse in Psalms (128:2) is just one of many that stress the importance of industriousness. Modern happiness research indicates that losing one’s job has a huge impact on one’s happiness; conversely, a good job contributes a great deal to one’s happiness.

The “Woman of Valor” hymn in Proverbs (31:10-31) describes the attributes of the perfect wife.

She seeks out wool and flax, and works with her hands willingly...
She arises while it is yet night, and gives food to her household and a portion to her maidservants. She considers a field and buys it; from the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard... She knows that her merchandise is good... She stretches out her hands onto the distaff, and her palms support the spindle. She spreads out her palm to the poor; and extends her hand to the needy... She makes a cloak and sells it, and supplies aprons to the merchant... She opens her mouth with wisdom; the lesson of kindness is on her tongue... She does not eat the bread of idleness.

What is fascinating about it is that it describes an entrepreneurial woman. The following are the traits of this ideal woman: she is industrious, entrepreneurial, honest, wise, and charitable. She cares for her entire household but also for the needy.

Exodus 20: 14: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” This is the last of the 10 commandments but in one way it is the most powerful of them. Individuals who are envious of others will never be satisfied. Moreover, they will often commit crimes such as robbery or murder to satisfy their needs. Research on happiness supports the view that the key to happiness is being satisfied with what you have and not focusing on what you do not have. Once a person gets on the “hedonic treadmill” and continues to demand more and more, not only will s/he never be satisfied but will also be tempted to do immoral and illegal acts.

“Who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain? One who walks in total integrity, works righteously, and speaks truth in his heart.” Here the Psalmist (Psalms 15:1-2) is providing us with what religion is truly about: helping others and being an upright, honest individual. Zechariah was also concerned with truth and honesty in business and declared (8:16-17): “Speak the truth every man with his fellow; with truth, justice and peace, judge in your gates. And let none of you contrive evil in your hearts against one another ...”

Malachi (2:10) stated: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother...?” Indeed, the Bible tells us that all men are created equal. This is a powerful statement of the importance of every individual. Similarly, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together in unity.” This verse from Psalms (133:1) is a simple plea for tolerance and diversity. We are all brothers, since all of us are descended from Adam and Eve. There is nothing more joyful than peace among all of humankind.

A pervasive message in Scriptures is that people should model themselves after God (i.e., *imitatiodei*) in the traits he values, such as justice and compassion. From Leviticus (19:2): “You shall be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” The idea of being holy and not doing anything which is an abomination to the Lord (e.g., false weights and measures) is repeated often in the Bible. It basically asks humankind to reject a selfish, atavistic life style and, instead, be a spiritual, caring person. From Leviticus 19:18: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. I am the Lord.” The Golden Rule is a foundation of every religion. Both Hillel and Confucius reworded this slightly so we also have the negative version of it: “What is hateful to you, do not do unto others.”

The Bible tells us no fewer than 36 times to treat the stranger well. For example (Leviticus 19:34): “You shall treat the stranger who dwells with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Societies that care about the rights of strangers thrive. America became great because it allowed immigrants from all over the world to come to this country. Try to imagine an America with only immigrants from England or from France or from Spain. Countries that have two classes of citizens often find themselves at war; civil wars are usually the most destructive of wars. The idea of “one law” for the citizen and stranger is repeated numerous times in the Bible. The idea that there should be one law for both the stranger and native is mentioned several times in the Bible. Thus, the Bible (Numbers 15: 16) states: “There is to be one law and one ordinance for you and the stranger that sojourns with you.” Leviticus (25: 23) also states: “The land is mine, for you are strangers and settlers with me.” This verse succinctly states what people always have to remember. The time we spend on Planet Earth is quite limited and everything we possess has to be left behind. All that we actually truly possess is our deeds. The good and bad that we do on this planet lives on after us.

From Zechariah (8:16): “These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth, justice, and peace in your gates.” Without justice there can be no peace. And from Psalms (82:3-5): “Give justice for the poor and orphan; uphold the rights of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the poor and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” The world cannot exist without justice and equity for all.

“Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, plenty of bread, and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.” This verse (Ezekiel 16:49) teaches us that a country (or company) that does not care about the poor and needy does not deserve to survive. This is similar to Micah(3: 9-12):

Listen to my message, you leaders of the House of Jacob, you chiefs of the House of Israel, who abhor justice and who twist all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Her leaders judge for bribes and her priests give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay... Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed over as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of rubble and the Temple Mount will become like a stone heap in the forest.

Also from Micah (6:8): “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” We see here that justice and compassion must often go hand-in-hand.

The prophet Amos (8: 5-6) was concerned with various ways the poor were exploited by business such as hoarding food in order to resell it at exorbitant prices, tampering with weights and measures, and raising prices unjustly:

Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying when will the month pass, so that we can sell grain; the Sabbatical year, so that we can open the stores of grain; using an ephah that is too small and a shekel that is too large, and distorting dishonest scales. To purchase the poor with silver and the destitute for shoes, and selling the refuse of grain as grain.

Hosea 2: 21-22: “I will betroth you to Me forever; and I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness, and in compassion. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord.” This is clearly a message of hope. Eventually all of humankind will recognize God and he will never again abandon his people. This is a beautiful and passionate analogy of the relationship between God and humankind. We are not simply serving a willful and/or vengeful God, but we are tied to God by characteristics and behavior expected. Once again, we return to the message of *imitatiodei*.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.” This verse from Deuteronomy (31:6) is reminiscent of Psalms 23: “...I will fear no evil, for you are with me...” More of the verse from Psalms is referenced later in this paper in the next section. This verse could be the credo of all whistleblowers.

Hope and redemption are important messages as well. From Deuteronomy (30:4): “Even if your dispersed will be at the farthest parts of heaven, from there the Lord, your God, will gather you and from there He will bring you back.” Once the people repent of their wicked ways, God will redeem them and bring them back from exile. The complete passage (verses 1-10) shows what will happen

if the people repent. Another message of hope and redemption is found in Ezekiel (18:31-32): “Cast off from upon you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, O House of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, declares the Lord God. Therefore, repent and live!” This is another exhortation to repent and thus start afresh as though with a new heart and new spirit.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined a small selection of powerful statements from the Hebrew Bible. The ancient messages resonate today as much as they did thousands of years ago. The wolf will not lie down with the lamb until righteousness rolls down on humankind as a mighty stream. One Biblical message that has been used by many groups is “No justice, no peace” or “No peace without justice.” This has been used to justify riots as well as peaceful demonstrations. Pope John Paul II (2002) spoke about this topic on the World Day of Peace. He quoted Isaiah (32: 17), and observed that “true peace is the work of justice.” The complete quote is: “And the work of *tzedaka* (translated as either righteousness or justice) will be peace; and the effect of *tzedaka*, quietness and security forever.” World peace cannot be possible without justice and equity for all.

Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), a Sephardic Jew, was an early advocate for an independent Jewish country in Palestine. She was also concerned about the plight of disenfranchised immigrants. She died at the young age of 38, but one line from her most famous poem, *The New Colossus*, is strikingly Bible-like and will never be forgotten (Lyden, 2006): “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”

These messages are meant for any people who seek meaning in their life. It is also hoped that individuals in leadership positions will use them as a guide for effective communication as well as a touchstone in understanding what truly is important.

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