

SHABBOS SERMON
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Noah, Steve Jobs and the Tower of Babel

Today, from start to finish, I want to talk to you about Steve Jobs ... from the start of today's Torah portion until its conclusion, for both contain an important lesson regarding Steve Jobs' life and death and an important lesson for all of us to take to heart.

Our Torah portion this morning told the story of Noah and the flood. But before the story is told, our rabbis first discuss: how did Noah get his name, and what does it mean? The Torah tells us: "*Zeh yinachameinu mimaseinu u'mei-itzvon yadainu ... this one will bring us rest from our work and the toil of our hands.*" Noach means, "rest" and "comfort." Why did he get this name? Because, according to our tradition, Noah was the creator of the first advancement in agricultural technology. It was Noah who invented the plow ... the first great farming tool that made it easier for early mankind to abandon a nomadic existence and to till the soil, easing man's physical workload. It provided mankind opportunities for rest and leisure and the comforts of life.

Steve Jobs followed in the footsteps of Noah. His technological creations changed the way in which we live. It is said that three apples changed the course of history: Adam's apple, Newton's apple ... and Steve Jobs' Apple! I use his computer and his phone, and well understand from personal experience how remarkable this man's creations are. Genius is certainly a word appropriate for him. His technological advancements open the book of knowledge to billions around the world. That's something we Jews should applaud. At the beginning of Genesis where God tells us, "Be fruitful and multiply ... fill the earth and subdue it," my teacher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, says

that means that it is a religious requirement to harness the forces of nature for the betterment of all mankind.

We Jews long ago accepted that mandate. The Jews have always been at the forefront of technology and communication. We were one of the first to use an alphabet. In fact, the very word “alphabet” according to some, comes from the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet – the aleph and the bet. There can be no doubt that Jewish society was the first in which every individual was able to reach their potential through direct access to knowledge. In the 15th century one of the greatest of all technologies was introduced, that of the printing press. Berel Wein, the Orthodox historian, writes: “Wherever the general printing press appeared the Jewish printing press was not far behind ... tens of thousands of Jewish books were printed and disseminated ... the hunger for knowledge, especially for Torah knowledge – the hallmark of the Jewish people – was appeased by printed books ... No other invention would ever prove to be as useful to Jewish survival and Torah development as the printing press.”

You know which society did not accept the innovation of Guttenberg? Muslim society! In 1485, a decree by the Ottoman sultan banned this new invention on the grounds that it would be sacrilegious to use the Arabic language in mechanical equipment. For centuries printing in Arabic was illegal. The Muslim world to this day has not fully recovered by passing up the new technology.

So, yes, we as Jews recognize and applaud the contributions of Steve Jobs. He walks in the footsteps of Noah with his contribution to the world of technology. But that is not enough! Unfortunately for him – and for all of us – his story – our story – has more to it than the beginning of our Torah portion. There is also its conclusion, which Steve Jobs never took to heart.

The conclusion of our Torah portion told of the generation that tried to build the Tower of Babel. On the surface, what they attempted to do seems innocent enough. They tried to unite mankind and build a tower reaching up to God. It is said that 600,000 men were involved in this project which lasted more than 40 years. On paper it sounds all good! They were using the technology they had learned to build higher and higher ... but the Medrash describes what used to happen during this building project and the dangers of their mindset. As the tower rose, if one of the builders fell off the tower, no one paid attention. But if one of the bricks fell down, people cried. Building and technology took precedence over human concern and spiritual growth.

I'm sorry to have to say it, but the same seems to have been true of Steve Jobs. This man had so much to offer the world, and he did! But he limited it all to the world of technology. He was so obsessed with producing the best and the newest technological achievement that he lost sight of his fellow human beings along the way. People who are willing to talk say – and his biography now confirms – that he acted like a tyrant at work ... he belittled people, pressured them, swore at them, publicly humiliated them. He didn't care about people; he only cared that the product should “shine.”

And it goes deeper than this. Bill Gates is also known as a genius in the world of technology. But he is known for other things as well ... he has dedicated a fortune to charitable work, to making human life more livable here on earth. Bill Gates pledged \$60 billion to charity ... and Steve Jobs? Steve Jobs has no public record of giving to any charity. In fact, when he returned to Apple in 1997, he closed Apple's philanthropic programs and never reopened them. It seems as if it was iPod, iPad, iPhone, ISteve ... and nothing else!

And it goes even deeper than this! Steve Jobs had been given up for adoption. While he searched for his biological mother and sister, and had a relationship with them, he knew who his father was but never sought to connect with him. This, despite the fact that Steve Jobs

himself had a daughter out of wedlock who he spent two years denying that he was her father. So here was the man who helped connect the world, but was disconnected within his own family. He helped build the tower but didn't pay much attention when people fell by the wayside. Sad, but true!

There is a lesson here for all of us to learn. The contribution that Steve Jobs made to this world should not be belittled; so much changed because of him. It was in 1985 that my family bought a MAC computer. While my kids were using it, I had no idea of what it was! I couldn't understand why it wasn't showing the Sunday football games! And I am still not sure I understand it. But at the time, someone gave me a book to read entitled, The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit. It was written by Sherry Turkle who is now a renowned professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The book remains one of the most thought provoking I have read. The author points out that, at first, man viewed himself from the perspective of physical strength – survival of the fittest ... *might makes right!* That all changed with the Industrial Revolution when man discovered that strength is not what distinguishes him from the animal. What distinguishes him from the animal is his intellect, his ability to think. The Industrial Revolution brought with it the discovery that, for man to harness the energy of 50 horsepower did not require the use of 50 horses! The Industrial Revolution brought with it the discovery that brains can achieve a lot more than brawn. But with the arrival of the computer, all that changed! We used to think that a person was brilliant if he had a photographic memory; if he could remember things he had learned years ago. The computer can do that better! We used to think that a person was brilliant if he could sit down with a slide rule and work out an intricate math problem. The computer can do that better! We used to think a person was brilliant if he achieved a high level of expertise as a chess player – a game demanding intellect and logic. The computer can beat the best of them! So, where is our uniqueness? The question is no longer what makes us different from the animal ... the question today is what makes us different from the machine! Answer? A computer can't feel, but a human being can. Originally man thought his uniqueness was based on his strength; then

man thought his uniqueness was based on his intellect. But the computer has come to teach us that man's uniqueness is based on the fact that man – and not machines and computers – only man has feelings and emotions. And that is what makes us truly human ... to be able to feel for our fellow human beings. And that is something no App can do!

I purchased the new iPhone 4S ... the last piece of Steve Jobs' legacy. Its most remarkable technological achievement is called "Siri" ... you can ask it any question and in a soft, female voice, it provides an answer. At first, I thought to myself: great ... just what I needed ... another woman telling me what to do! But it is a remarkable piece of technology! It knows so much ... it knows where I am, where I should be eating, what I should be doing. But it has no idea of how I *feel*. It has a mind ... but it has no heart.

So let's salute Steve Jobs for his mind; following in the footsteps of Noah. But let's also remember his mistakes and the mistake of the builders of the Tower of Babel ... In the immortal words from the song from *Damn Yankees*: "You've gotta have heart." Or, in the words of our tradition: "*Rachmana liba boyi* – God looks to the heart."

Today is Rosh Chodesh, ushering in a new month. The Sabbath before we usher in every new month we recite a prayer which concludes with the words asking God for a "*chayim sh'yimalu mishalos libeinu l'tovah*" – Let us all be blessed with "a life in which all the desires of our heart will be fulfilled for good." Amen.

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