

## “LEARN TO EDIT”

Samuel Johnson gave some severe advice to writers: “Read over your compositions, and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.” Johnson knew that the hardest but most crucial discipline of writing was editing.

To erase one’s own work is painful, even when necessary. The end of the Torah (Deut. 34:12) refers to “all the mighty deeds” that Moses performed. One midrash comments that “mighty deeds” refers to smashing the tablets of the ten commandments. Why was that considered a mighty deed? Ateret Mordechai explains that an author cherishes his work. For Moses to smash the tablets was an act of self-effacing heroism.

The need for editing does not only apply to what we write, but to what we say. Clever, wounding words, thoughtless remarks, small cruelties are often born of the inability to edit. Falling in love with our own remarks, we do not edit the gossip, the bon mot, the argument. The momentary satisfaction fades, but the feelings we leave behind, the pain we thoughtlessly scatter, endure.

Several passages in Jewish literature define a hero. One Yiddish comment is most apt: Who is a hero? One who suppresses a wisecrack. Sometimes the wisdom is in words not spoken.