

Moses' Transition from Stuttering to Speech

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Moses, the man who was “slow of speech and slow of tongue”ⁱ certainly does not have that problem in the fifth and final book of the Torah. He shares many דְּבָרִים, words which are mostly harsh rebuke, ⁱⁱ with Israel throughout this book. How did Moses transition from a stutterer, one who needed his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf, to an excellent orator?

One answer is practice makes perfect. Moses certainly had ample opportunities to practice his speech in the Torah so that by Deuteronomy he was a skilled speaker. However, I do not buy that being the sole reason. For example, I am not the most coordinated individual to say it mildly. I can work on my hand-eye coordination for hours a day through playing tennis, and while my game would improve, I will never be competing in Wimbledon or the US Open, or even a semipro tournament. It appears to me that something additional is occurring here.

The Sefat Emet, or Gerer Rebbe, whose writings I study every week, sheds light on this question. He quotes the proverb “a healing tongue is a tree of life...”ⁱⁱⁱ which the Midrash interprets as “the languages of the Torah liberates the tongue...regarding Moses, until he merited Torah, it is said of him, ‘I am not a man of words.’ When he merited Torah, his tongue was healed and he began to speak.”^{iv} Had the Midrash been the end of Sefat Emet’s comment, I would not have bought into it either. However, he interprets the Midrash as follows: “Moses our teacher represented the collective wisdom of all of Israel. Therefore, so long as the Israelites were not ready (to receive God’s words), Moses was not “a man of words” because his speech included the speech of all of Israel.”^v What the Sefat Emet is saying, is that Moses’ initial impediment was not due to his own inability to speak but rather to his inability to be heard...it was the fact that he was already leading them, already bound up with them, that made him see how ineffective he would be without Israel’s full buy-in. Israel’s unreadiness to listen made him unwilling to speak. Moses’ journey towards words, then, was not a move from silence to speech, but from isolation to solidarity, from a ruptured relationship to a repaired one.”^{vi}

Today is Tisha B’Av, the anniversary of the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, the exile of Spanish Jewry, and numerous other calamities in our people’s history. While the fast and observance of the day is pushed off until tonight because we do not want to rush towards sad occasions, nor do we want to experience them on Shabbat, we recognize where we are on the Jewish calendar. The rabbis say that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred between Jews.^{vii} While actions speak louder than words, it is not true that ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.’ We know, as is the title of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin’s book, that there are “words that hurt” and “words that heal.” Moses was reluctant to lead because he saw the stubbornness, the “stiff-necked” nature of Israel, so he was not able to speak. Similarly, as Rabbi Dr. Erin Lieb Smokler writes, “Tisha B’Av lies not

only in the breakdown of communication between God and human beings, but importantly, in the rupture of communication between people.”^{viii}

At the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, we ended each day of retreat in complete silence and continued silence for the first half of the next day, observing without speaking, taking everything in without verbally reacting. Tonight, at the end of our outdoor Maariv services, we will leave without saying anything to each other, not even the word Shalom. There is a time and place for speech, and Moses recognized that speaking at the outset would lead to resistance. As a matter of fact, the first time he spoke before Pharaoh, Israel had to gather their own straw, causing the Israelite leaders to erupt against Moses and Moses to cry out *למה הרעותה לעם הזה למה זה שלחתיני* “Why have you brought evil onto this people? Why have you sent me?”^{ix} Tisha B’Av reminds us, in the words of Kohelet, that there is “a time for speaking and a time for silence,”^x and Tisha B’Av is the time for silence: to take it all in, to feel with our emotions but not respond with words. May we have a meaningful Tisha B’Av where we observe without reaction, where we recognize there are no words for the calamities that befell our people, and where in doing so we draw closer to the Holy One—for we can only start to rebuild towards the New Year when we recognize the broken aspects of our lives.

ⁱ Exodus 4:10

ⁱⁱ See Rashi on Deuteronomy 1:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Proverbs 15:4

^{iv} Devarim Rabbah 1:1

^v Sefat Emet, Devarim, 1877

^{vi} Rabbi Dr. Erin Lieb Smokler, Torah Study to Sustain the Soul, Devarim, Institute for Jewish Spirituality, 2022, Page 4.

^{vii} Yoma 9b.

^{viii} Smokler, Page 5.

^{ix} Exodus 5:22

^x Ecclesiastes 3:8