

THE HIGHEST FORM OF SPEECH

Pashas Vo'airo

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

One of the themes of today's sidrah is the continued mission the Al-mighty entrusted Moshe, to become His messenger to redeem the Israelites from Egypt, though he had a serious speech defect. How is it, it is queried, that the man designated for this awesome task should have such a major flaw in his personality? This is, furthermore, a flaw that impedes the very purpose of the mission. The man chosen to carry out this mission should have been perfect, excellent, particularly in his eloquence.

This question is not a new one. Moshe himself in his original reluctance to accept the yoke of the mission uses this argument: And Moshe said, "...I am not a man of words... for I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue" (Exodus 4:10).

In Parshas Vo'airo (second encounter), Moshe is still reluctant to take on the mission, this time more forcefully. Pharaoh's initial rejection leaves Moshe utterly frustrated, crying out "How will Pharaoh listen to me? And I have sealed lips!" This is worse than mere "slow speech", his earlier classification of himself.

Hashem's reply to this argument was that Moshe will receive special powers from Heaven to be able to deliver the message. Upon Moshe's insistence he was advised that Aaron his brother will help him do the talking (ibid 4:14), but in essence Moshe with his defective speech remained the messenger.

An understanding of this anecdote will accord a clearer view of a basic element in the panorama of the exodus.

The word "Pesach" is expounded by some commentators as "Pesoch" (a mouth that speaks). The freedoms gained on Pesach can all be expressed in one succinct phrase: "a mouth that speaks." In essence this is the all-inclusive gain. For the tribulations suffered by the Israelites in Egypt were all the result of their speechlessness. They had no right to speak up for justice. There was no platform where Jewish suffering could be brought for airing out. Their cries were stifled, their screams muted, their clamor muffled.

The very city which was built by the Israelites in Egypt through forced hard labor was named "Pithom" (ibid 1:11), which in Hebrew indicated "PiSosum", a mouth forced shut (see Rashi and Sifsei Chachomim on ibid 14:2) to symbolize the crushing suppression of speech. Thus, upon gaining freedom the Israelites renamed this very city "Pi Hachiros", literally "mouth of freedom" (Rashi ibid).

The true leader is the one who emerges from the very midst of the people and who carries in his bloodstream the very essence and character of his people. Moshe, the divinely assigned redeemer of Israel, came from the midst of his people. It is for this reason, one may suggest, that the Torah conveys his and Aaron's lineage: "And Amrom married Yocheved... and she bore him Aaron and Moshe (Shemos 6:14-20). The intention here is to demonstrate that Moshe and Aaron were born like every other child, to normal parents, not from angels, and yet they became the great prophets and teachers. Their lineage is spelled out even more specifically in Parshas Vo'airoh, after which the Torah states: "These are the same Moshe and Aaron to whom the Al-mighty said to bring out the children of Israel..." (6:26).

This background profoundly explains not only why when Moshe grew up "he went out to his brethren and observed their burdens" (Shemos 2:11), but, moreover, he actually embodied in his speech difficulty the tragic muteness of his brethren. [See Zohar on Shemos 6:12 who

connects Moshe's speech difficulty with Egyptian Galuth (exile) of speech, also Igra d'Pirka 166. Reb Tzodok in Tzidkas Hatzadik Ch. 154 shows that each time the Israelites descended from their high level of righteousness, a negative reaction reflected in the behavior of Moshe himself].

Moshe's defective speech was thus the result of his being, as the true leader, thoroughly involved and immersed with the misery of his people who were forced to suffer in silence.

When Moshe came to Pharaoh with his request to free the Israelites, Pharaoh tightened his grip over the Israelites even more. Their freedom was even further curtailed. "Let the work load upon the men be made heavier..." (ibid 5:9). Moshe, the true shepherd, was further affected in his speech ability. Now, he complains, "I have sealed lips".

Upon deliverance from Egypt, and the subsequent Sinai experience, the Israelites gained a "mouth" to speak freely, a platform to transmit their own heritage. "I am the L-rd your G-d who brought you up out of Egypt, open your mouth and I will fill it" (Tehilim 81:11). "I will fill it with words of Torah" (Targum).

Once the Israelites gained their freedom of speech, Moshe automatically lost his speech defect. He even became an articulate poet and singer. "Then Moshe sang" (ibid 15:1). As transmitter of Sinai Mesorah, says the Zohar (ibid.), Moshe was most eloquent. He thus became not only redeemer but also teacher and instructor of Klal Yisroel.

Pirkei d'R' Eliezer teaches (Perek 48) that the letter "peh" (פ) comes double, as a secret sign by which to recognize the true redeemer. Thus when Moshe uttered "Pokod Pokadete" (Shemos 3:16), both words beginning with the letter "Peh", he was recognized as the true redeemer sent by Hashem. Additionally, writes the Baal Haturim, the very word

“Pokod” contains a reference to the exodus, since numerically it equals one hundred ninety, the number of years decreased from the original decree of four hundred years of Egyptian exile (Beraishis 15:13). This is so, adds the Baal Haturim commentator Rav Yaakov Reinitz, when the word “PEKOD” is spoken, which is pronounced with the letter “VOV”, though it is written without that letter.

This mathematical count is well substantiated according to Pirkei d’R’ Eliezer, quoted above, signifying the letter “Peh” as the sign of redemption. “Peh” (mouth) is indicative of the spoken word rather than the written.

The usual Haftorah for Parshas Vo’airo (Yechezkel 28:22) concludes with the clause “and I will grant you an opening of the mouth, “Pischon Peh”, an utterance that penetrates. This year, however, Rosh Chodesh coinciding with Shabos, the chosen Haftorah is, applicably, the last chapter of Isaiah. There, too, the prophet articulates the profundity of the sacred “word”.

This is in parallel to one’s “word” on Shabos, which requires extra selectivity and sensitivity. “If you restrain, because of the Shabos... and you honor it in the manner of speaking” (Isaiah 58:13), “i.e. speaking more calmly, more gently” (Radak). The Musaf service goes a step further: “Tekanto Shabos... Ho’ohavim devoreho... Those who LOVE its ‘words’ have chosen greatness”.

With this level of sincerity the Shabos Rosh Chodesh Haftorah enunciates (Isaiah 66:5) “SHIMI... Listen to the word of Hashem, you who are ‘Chareidim Devoro’ zealous, reverent, regarding His word”. The uttered word attains real meaning when “SHIMI” it is heard, accepted.

