



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Vaera 5774

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December 28, 2013

Parashat Vaera continues the conversation between God and Moses following Moses's first encounter with Pharaoh. God persists in his alternately tender and impatient wooing of the reluctant emissary, while Moses insists that he is unfit for the task. As before, Moses's feelings of inadequacy center on his difficulty with speech, now captured, ironically, by his poetic lament: "I am uncircumcised of lips."¹

The Torah does not identify the nature or origins of Moses's difficulty. Rashi postulates that Moses had an actual speech impediment—perhaps a stutter or a severe lisp.² A *midrash* explains that Moses's impeded speech dated from infancy when the angel Gabriel had guided him to place a hot coal in his mouth.³ Perhaps Moses was deeply shy, a shepherd who preferred the company of animals over people with their insatiable demand for words.

Lending further obscurity, Moses's impediment is wholly self-described. We learn of it only through his own protests at having been chosen as Israel's liberator. Whereas the omniscient biblical narrator provides the descriptions of its other central characters,⁴ it is silent on Moses's "heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued"⁵ condition. The absence of this narrative corroboration implies that Moses's impediment loomed larger in his own mind than as a handicap perceptible to others.

Whatever the impediment's nature, it is clear that each utterance exacted a painful toll on Moses. God therefore sends Aaron to be his brother's mouthpiece, and Aaron remains at Moses's side as the two heap threats and plagues upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Indeed, it is Aaron who initiates the first three plagues, stretching his rod over the waters to bring forth blood and frogs and hitting the earth to summon lice.

While the brothers seem to have settled well into their complementary roles, a nagging difficulty remains. In last week's *parshah*, God dismissed Moses's protestations by saying: "Who gives man speech? ... Is it not I, the Lord?"⁶ Why then, instead of forcing Moses to suffer through humiliation and anxiety, doesn't God eliminate the impediment? Why offer Aaron as a crutch rather than solve the problem?

¹ Exodus 6:12. More commonly this passage is translated as "a man of impeded speech." I find Robert Alter's translation—"uncircumcised of lips"—to be more faithful to the Hebrew "*aral*" and resonant with the surrounding text. Compare *JPS Hebrew-English TaNaKh*, p. 123. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999, with Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, p. 341 & n. 12, New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 2004.

² Rashi, Exodus 4:10.

³ *Shemot Rabbah* 1:26. Gabriel was not being sadistic, but was rather helping the unwitting baby with the challenges of childhood in Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh's advisers believed that Moses's grabbing Pharaoh's crown signaled the baby's lust (or destiny) for power. They thus devised a test: When presented with a precious stone and a hot coal, for which would the baby reach? Moses initially went for the precious stone, but Gabriel steered him to the coals.

⁴ For example, the Torah's narrator tells us that Esau was "a man of the outdoors" (Genesis 25:27), Leah "had weak eyes" (Genesis 29:17) and Joseph "was well-built and handsome" (Genesis 39:6).

⁵ Exodus 4:10.

⁶ Exodus 4:11.

God's solution of Aaron as translator contains the answer: Aaron's role as mediator was critical to the success of Moses's leadership. Aaron's translation not only smoothed away his brother's stutterings, but also bridged a vast existential difference that stood between Moses and the slaves whom he was charged with liberating.

Moses, raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, grew up in privilege. He had not been beaten for stumbling over his own exhaustion. His mind had not been numbed by the monotonous horror of slavery. Moses could certainly feel righteous rage for the bitterness of the Hebrews' servitude, but their burdens had never been his. Their pain was not his desperation. He had simply never been a slave. Aaron, by contrast, was not raised in Pharaoh's palace: He was raised as a slave, among a family and community of slaves.

Moses's reliance upon Aaron's translation served as a constant reminder that to advocate effectively for his nation, Moses needed to reach beyond his own personal experience. Aaron could speak directly from the experience of oppression, and his role as translator helped Moses traverse the large divide between himself and the former slaves. Each time Moses sought use of his brother's lips, the great leader was compelled to confront the fact that while he could speak to God without barrier, advocating for Israel was a more complicated matter.

As American Jews we have been raised, like Moses, among privilege. While this gives us great power to advocate for those in need around the world, it also means that we have not personally shared their experiences. The partnership between Moses and Aaron helps us understand that in a situation of such disparity we cannot work alone, but must work together with the communities whom we seek to help.

We revere Moses as *rabeinu*, our greatest teacher: Among his enduring lessons are the insights of his obdurate tongue. Just as Moses needed Aaron's constant mediation to lead and liberate a nation whose hardships he had never shared, we must be aware, when we commit ourselves to global justice work, that the communities we serve have faced challenges and privations that we have not borne.

Such awareness is, of course, not meant to impose artificial barriers. Rather, it is meant to cultivate respect and humility as we approach our work, to require from us the open-mindedness to listen for local wisdom and the discipline to concede that we do not hold a monopoly on solutions. For AJWS this means that grassroots organizations are best positioned to tackle the injustices and challenges of their own communities. They are, in effect, our "translators" — adapting for their communities' particular contours our common aspirations for a just world.



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This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2009.

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