

BY DESIGN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And Moshe said to Hashem, "Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words, even from yesterday nor the day before—even from the very first time You spoke to Your servant—I am heavy of mouth and of tongue." And Hashem said to him, "Who gives man his mouth, and who makes him dumb, or deaf, or sighted or blind—is it not I, Hashem?" [4:10-11]

Rashi seems to understand Hashem's response thus: "You, Moshe, are worried about your speech impediment. If you consider Who's sending you, you should realize yourself that it's silly to be concerned. Didn't I 'give you a mouth' help you to say the right words when you had to plead your case before Pharaoh after slaying the Egyptian taskmaster? Didn't I make Pharaoh 'dumb' in failing to follow through with your execution, his servants 'deaf' to not take their command seriously, and the executioners 'blind' when you escaped their grasp and strolled away from your own execution? If I'm sending you on this mission to Pharaoh and Israel, you can trust that I'll be there for you when the time comes to speak your words."

The Ran (Derashos Ha-Ran 3) tries to understand how it's possible that Moshe, whose prophecy reached levels that the Torah attests have never and will never again be attained by mortals, could have been lacking in any way, all the more so in his speech. Speech is the basis of all prophecy; Navi, Hebrew for prophet, also implies niv sefasa'im/speech of the lips. Sure, Hashem can promise that when the time comes, He will put the right words in his mouth, and his speech will emerge unflawed. But then again, Hashem could have gifted Moshe with eloquence.

Reish Lakish in the Gemara (Sotah 12b) notes that the Torah calls Moshe both an infant and a youth (2:6): "And [Pharaoh's daughter] opened it, and she saw the infant, and a youth was crying." This teaches us, he says, that Moshe looked like an infant, but had the voice of a youth. Said Rabbi Nechemia, "If so, you are making Moshe a ba'al mum/blemished!"

R' Nechemia apparently found it inconceivable that Moshe, who conversed with Hashem "face to face," could be blemished in any way. How does he deal with Moshe's speech issues?

The Gemara (Menachos 85a) says that when Moshe came to Egypt and began performing his wonders, Yochna and Mamre, Egypt's greatest 'magicians,' scoffed at him. "Moshe, would you bring straw to Afarayim [a town where there was straw in abundance]?" Egypt was a land of magic like none in the world, and these two wisecrackers thought little of Moshe's intentions to wow them with his wonders.

Moshe's answer? "People say, 'To a city of vegetables, bring vegetables.'"

Well, who's right? Should we save our tricks for the naïve and uninitiated, or should we sell our coals in Newcastle?

It really depends. If your veggies are tired and second-rate at best, you'd better peddle them from your corner store where someone in a fix might just go for them; just don't try selling them in the St. Lawrence Market where the goods are fresher and cheaper. But if what you've got is really good. If it's better than good, even better than the best—if it's something 'out of this world'—then there's no better place to hawk it than in the central market, surrounded by your inferior competitors; in their face, so to speak.

In their flawed understanding of what was about to happen, Yochna and Mamrei thought Moshe was a mediocre magician trying to show off his prowess in a land where they eat, drank, and slept magic. They scoffed. Moshe's response: "Who dares to bring his vegetables to the great market? Only one who knows he's got something no one else does!"

One of the tenets of our faith, explains the Ran, is that Hashem is the Doer of all deeds, Master of the Universe, before Whom the laws of nature crumble and bow away. We were not simply told that it is so. Hashem demonstrated it to us with the wonders of the ten plagues and the Exodus from Egypt, which culminated in the splitting of the Red Sea.

Egypt was the soil from which the seedling shoots of our faith would sprout. This was no accident. Hashem chose to work His wonders in the cauldron of magic. The Egyptians, one might say, knew every trick in the book. When the great sorcerers of Egypt proclaimed (8:15), "This is the finger of Hashem!" it carried the weight of authority. Anywhere else in the world, and people might have said, "Take your tricks to Egypt."

If challenged to distill Jewish faith into two tenets, I would suggest the following. (1) Hashem's Greatness: That Hashem, our G-d, is all powerful, all knowing, controls all, has always existed and will always exist. (2) Truth of the Torah: That the Torah is the immutable word of Hashem, unchangeable, significant down to the crowns on the letters and the space between them, to be studied and practiced with unfailing dedication forever.

If Egypt was the garden in which the seeds of principle #1 took root, then Moshe Rabbeinu was the vessel through which #2 was transmitted. If Egypt's role was to proclaim beyond any doubt that "this is the hand of Hashem," then Moshe's task was likewise to leave no doubt that his prophecy was the pure, unmitigated word of Hashem without any personal input.

Had Moshe been a skilled and elegant orator, it might have left room to say that his exceptionally sharp tongue and eloquent speech were what so inspired the Jews. His poor speech left no doubts; this was none other than Hashem's word.

In this light, Moshe's lack of oratorical skill was not only not an 'impediment,' it was a necessity.

Moshe was no ba'al mum—his stuttered speech was by design.

This, explains the Ran, was what Hashem answered Moshe when Moshe complained he felt daunted by the task in light of his difficulties: Who gives man his mouth, and who makes him dumb, or deaf, or sighted or blind— is it not I, Hashem?—Do you imagine that had I so desired, I could not have given you the most beautiful speech? Is it not I who decides who shall speak, and who shall be dumb, who sighted and who not? Do you think that anything I do is coincidental? You should have realized that if I made you this way, there must be a reason.

Hashem's providence, of course, extends not only to the great Moshe, but even to us lowly beings too. Even the things about ourselves we most dislike are there by design. Having the wisdom and determination to understand the whys and hows, well, that's so much about what finding our way though life's mazes and labyrinths is about.

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