

A MOUTHFUL TO SWALLOW

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Though this is the second parsha in the book of BaMidbar, it is not too late to introduce a prevalent theme that weaves throughout the entire book, in advance of Shavuos.

The word "midbar," as pointed out previously, means "desert," but with a slight vowel change can spell the word "medabehr," which means "speaking." Thus, when the Talmud teaches that one, in order to receive Torah should make himself into a "midbar," it alludes also to the concept of "medabehr." But what does speech have to do with receiving Torah?

Let's start with the holiday that celebrates our freedom from Egyptian slavery, Pesach. The word "Pesach" can be divided into two words, "peh" and "sach"-which means the "mouth that spoke." From this, it can be concluded, our redemption from Egyptian bondage had to do with our level of spirituality, as measured through our speech, which is refined every year through the Pesach Seder, and the telling of the Haggadah.

Perhaps this is even why the book that deals with Jewish preparation to live in the land of Israel, Sefer BaMidbar, is focused on incidents that involve speech. For example, Parashas BaMidbar itself involved the counting of the Jewish people, a concept that is associated with speech. Parshas Naso (this week's parsha), among other matters, deals with the suspected adulteress, the Nazir, and the Priestly Blessing.

Shlomo HaMelech, when describing the adulteress remarked,

*Thus it is the way of the adulteress to eat and wipe her **mouth** and **say**, "I have done nothing wrong." (Mishlei 30:20)*

The cleverness of the above metaphor becomes clear through Sefer BaMidbar. As we will see, the difference between one who succeeds in achieving G-dliness and one who does not, depends on how he uses his mouth. A medabehr-a "speaker" in the ultimate sense-is one who strives for G-dliness, and this is reflected by what comes out of his mouth:

From a man's mouth you can tell what he is. (Zohar, BaMidbar 193)

The sota, the suspected adulteress, we learn, is ensnared through her mouth:

The son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man went out among the Israelites and the Israelite woman's son had a quarrel with an Israelite in the camp. The Israelite woman's son then blasphemed God's name ... His mother's name was Shelomit, the daughter of Divri, from the tribe of Dan. (VaYikrah 24:10)

The son of an ... Egyptian man ... It was the Egyptian whom Moshe had killed [in Egypt] ... His mother's name was Shelomit, the daughter of Divri, from the tribe of Dan ... The verse publicly mentions her name to tell you how properly Israel acted, telling us implicitly that of all the Jewish women, she alone was a harlot; Shelomit ... She was called this because she was always babbling: 'Peace (shalom) be upon you. Peace be upon you.' She used to continually babble with many words. (Rashi)

Perhaps this is why the sota is made to **swallow** the bitter waters to determine her innocence or guilt. For having improperly used her mouth and for lowering herself to the level of an animal, (which is why her sin-offering is only barley, the food of a donkey,) she is treated as such.

The nazir, the gemora in Talmud Sota points out, is the response to the sota. By **verbally** proclaiming to be a nazir, the nazir avoids that which caused the sota to stumble. And as wine (which is consumed) also caused her lewdness, the nazir abstains from wine.

The priestly blessing is one of the best examples of the ultimate use of the power of speech. Through it the priests invoked the name of God, something which can only be done in an ultimate state of purity, to bless the nation. This is mankind exhibiting the highest form of speech, for through the priests G-d showered his blessing down upon the people.

After Parshas Naso comes Parshas BeHa'alosecha. BeHa'alosecha, says the Ramban, contains an allusion to the future rededication of the menorah in the time of the Chanukah victory. In this parsha, **complaints** by the people led to Divine punishment. And at the end of the parsha, Miriam is punished for **speaking** loshon hara about Moshe.

Parshas Sh'lach recounts how the spies spoke loshon hora about the Land of Israel, which led to the additional 38 years of wandering in the desert.

Parshas Korach details the rebellion Korach led against Moshe. Korach himself was incited with loshon hara about Moshe, and he incited others through subtle coaxing. Korach was punished "measure-for-measure" for improper use of speech: The **mouth** of the earth swallowed him and his followers.

Chukas contains the episode that cost Moshe the chance to enter Israel. Instead of bringing forth water by **speaking** to the rock, he did so by hitting the rock. Living in Eretz Yisroel successfully is measured by how well the Jewish people maintain their level of G-dliness, which is measured by how dependent they are on nature to survive.

In a land that is also above nature, a descendant of Avraham should strive to live above nature. Israel is a place where the rains fall because God decrees it, regardless of seasons and cloud formations. A Jew's mouth is where the "key" lies to unlock the door to spiritual survival, and only then, physical survival, for,

... It is not by bread alone that man lives, but by all that comes of God's **mouth**. (Devarim 8:3)

This point was clearly made when Moshe was denied access to Israel for physically bringing forth the water, as opposed to doing it spiritually, through speech.

Parshas Balak clearly illustrates the importance of speech. Bilaam, the non-Jewish prophet whose "strength was in his mouth" and who kept claiming that he could only say that which God placed in his mouth, insisted on using his mouth for unholy purposes. The result was self-destruction, but only after a humiliating episode. While on his way to meet with Balak, the king of Moav, Bilaam's donkey **spoke**, leaving Bilaam quite speechless. The message: use your mouth improperly, and you are no better than a donkey, perhaps even worse.

Toward the end of Parshas Balak, the Jewish people, through the advice of Bilaam, were drawn into sin. Divine retribution was swift and harsh. Someone named Pinchas acted zealously on behalf of God, killing the conspirators. Among the many rewards Pinchas received, there was an additional letter added to his name: a yud. This addition transformed his name, which now meant, "my mouth urged me to do it" (Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch).

Pinchas, through his act of zealousness, became the very embodiment of all the Jewish nation stands for, "saying little, doing a lot," and using the mouth as a vehicle to understand and interpret the will of God. For behaving in this fashion, he returned himself back to the state of mankind prior to the consumption of the forbidden fruit: He became immortal (he became Eliyahu HaNavi, who ascended to Heaven in a fiery chariot and never died).

A fitting end to Sefer BaMidbar is the list of laws of oaths and conditional statements, both of which are used to gain control over physical desire. These are the final laws before beginning Sefer Devarim, which also means "words." Having completed the book of "speaking," the Jewish people were ready to enter Eretz Yisroel.

And lest we forget, the covenant that symbolizes our holy status and close relationship to God is, of course, Bris Milah-the covenant of the word!.

The goal of the bris is to represent our commitment to use our creative powers to reveal the light of creation that is hidden within Torah; we do this primarily through speech, but not just any speech,

but, as

*... God said, 'My spirit that is upon you and My words that I have placed in your mouth ...'
(Yishiyahu 59:20)*

This is called the level of "d'var Hashem"-the word of God-which comes from Above but **through** the mouth of man. It was this level that Pinchas reached (indicated by the yud added to his name), which made him a vehicle through which God was able to act, a mouth through which God was able to speak. It is this level to which Sefer BaMidbar and Shavuot tries to raise us, at which point we become the ideal vessels to receive the holy light of G-d and His Torah.

We should all merit such a gift.

Have a great Shabbos,

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org