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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #15:**

**Moses’ Ready Hand and Heavy Mouth**

The first two signs that God gives Moses revolve around his hand, transforming his confidence in its power. With God’s help, Moses’ hand has performed wondrous feats: pitching a staff to the ground, where it turns into a snake, and then restoring it with his grasp; and placing and then removing his hand from his bosom, where it turns leprous and is then cured. Appearing eight times in six verses (4:2-7), the word *yad* (hand) weaves throughout these signs.[[1]](#footnote-1) God deliberately strengthens Moses’ hand, directing the nascent leader to trust his power and use it to represent God.

Yet, even before God fortifies his hands with the signs, Moses is predisposed to rely on force in getting things done. When he first emerged from the palace, Moses summarily struck down a cruel Egyptian, thereby rescuing a Hebrew slave (2:12). An abiding reliance on the power of his hand holds sway for the duration of the Exodus story (e.g., 9:22; 10:12; 14:21), facilitating Moses’ success as leader.

Confidence wanes when it comes to Moses’ use of his mouth. He was not successful in his bid to use his words to prevent the Hebrews from squabbling (2:13-14), and at the burning bush, he frankly proclaims his deficiencies in this area:

And Moses said to God, “Please, my Master, I am not a man of words – neither yesterday nor the day before nor since You spoke to Your servant. For I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue.” (*Shemot* 4:11)

In this fourth attempt to deflect his mission, Moses focuses on his speech. The word *peh*, meaning mouth, appears a key seven times in this passage (4:10-17). The noun *davar* (speech), together with its verbal correlate, *daber* (speak), appears together eight times in this unit, paralleling the eightfold appearance of the word *yad* (hand) in the sign narrative.

Moses does not clarify the precise nature of his speech issue. Many interpreters assume that Moses has a speech impediment, perhaps a stutter[[2]](#footnote-2) or difficulties with pronunciation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Possibly, Moses simply does not feel that he is suited for the task of persuading Pharaoh, considering himself ineloquent and his oratorial skills lacking.[[4]](#footnote-4) We should also recall that Moses has been absent from Egypt for many years. This, compounded by his complex upbringing in two cultural worlds, may diminish his confidence in the Hebrew or Egyptian language, or perhaps in both.[[5]](#footnote-5) A language barrier would impede Moses’ ability to communicate with his intended audience, and could certainly account for the hesitation he expresses in this fourth objection.

God readily addresses Moses’ concerns, acknowledging their validity. He assures Moses that He “will be with” his mouth and will instruct him on what to say (4:12). Even after Moses persists (again!) in resisting his mission (4:13), God informs Moses that He will continue to assist him in his oratorial tasks (4:15). God promises, moreover, to append Aaron to the taskforce, appointing him as Moses’ mouthpiece. The section ends by focusing Moses back on the staff in his hand, bolstering his confidence and assuring him that his hand\staff will be put to good use. He need not worry too much about his heavy mouth for the upcoming mission.[[6]](#footnote-6)

One wonders why God chooses a messenger whose speech is flawed. Is this impediment an obstruction or an asset? Perhaps Moses is chosen because his character is best suited for the task. As for his speech difficulties, God will offer him direct assistance to overcome this obstacle. Alternatively, perhaps we could suggest that Moses is chosen – among other reasons, certainly – not despite, but *because* of his verbal difficulties.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moses’ speech difficulties will make it eminently clear – to both Egyptians and Hebrews – that his success comes from God.[[8]](#footnote-8) Malbim suggests that Moses’ defect will enable him to be a faithful mouthpiece of God in his most important assignment: imparting God’s Torah to the nation. If Moses is not proficient in his speech, then those who hear him will know that every word he speaks comes from God, without additions or changes.

However we understand Moses’ verbal shortcoming, his qualms in this area continue to manifest themselves, emerging as a key theme in Moses’ life. Moses is most comfortable with a staff in his hand, confident in his use of power. He wields his hand\staff to launch several plagues: the plague of blood,[[9]](#footnote-9) the plague of boils, the plague of hail,[[10]](#footnote-10) and the plagues of locusts and darkness. Moses’ hand and staff are instrumental in splitting the sea (14:16, 21) and in providing water to a thirsty nation (17:5-6). During the battle against Amalek, Moses’ hands are instrumental in determining the outcome (17:11). Strikingly, Moses’ hands are not employed in striking the Amalekite enemy, but instead are raised heavenward, propped up by Aaron and Hur when he tires.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Moses’ easy reliance upon his hand runs parallel to his discomfort with regard to his mouth. Perhaps this is true of many leaders. Leadership by force (using one’s hands) generates greater obedience and faster results than leadership by persuasion (using one’s mouth). Nevertheless, this difficulty is particularly evident with regard to Moses, who claims to have a particular speech issue – one that may be evident during a later biblical episode involving his siblings.

**Moses and his Siblings**

In *Bamidbar* 12, Moses’ siblings – Miriam and Aaron – speak against his leadership, expressing doubts that Moses’ communication with God is exceptional. This prompts a scathing rebuke from God, who assures them that Moses’ level of communication with God far surpasses their own. God’s wrathful reaction to the skepticism of Moses’ siblings (*Bamidbar* 12:9) recalls his anger at Moses’ self-doubt in our chapter (4:14). Both incidents revolve around an expressed concern with Moses’ speech, his functioning as God’s prophet or spokesman, concluding with the notion that only God determines the quality of a person’s speech or one’s prophetic abilities.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Linguistic similarities forge a concrete link between these two episodes. The word *daber* functions as a key word in both stories, with the verbal use of the word (namely, to speak) appearing six times in each.[[13]](#footnote-13) Both episodes likewise feature the word *peh*, meaning mouth. In *Bamidbar* 12:8, God informs Moses’ siblings that He maintains unique communication with Moses: “Mouth to mouth I speak with him.” This double usage of the word *peh* recalls the frequent appearance of the word mouth in *Shemot* 4:12, 15, where God promises to bolster Moses’ speech. God’s unwavering assertion brooks no explanation; only He decides whose speech will succeed. The central (fourth) appearance of the root *daber* (which appears seven times in *Bamidbar* 12), refers not to human speech but to God’s words; God brandishes divine authority to explain Moses’ prophetic edge to his misguided siblings (*Bamidbar* 12:6): “Listen, please, to My words!”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In another striking parallel to our chapter, following her conversation with God, Miriam is struck with leprosy, “like snow.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Similar to Moses, Miriam’s leprosy appears both punitive and educative; she should know better than to question Moses’ uniqueness or God’s ability to choose His own prophets.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The question of trust in Moses’ authority lies at the heart of the signs that God gives Moses in *Shemot* 4 (the word *aman* – meaning trust or belief – appears five times in verses 1-9). God gives Moses these signs in order to bolster the nation’s trust in Moses’ leadership and his role as God’s trusted emissary. The skepticism expressed by Miriam and Aharon reflects their lack of trust in God’s appointed messenger. It seems they have failed to comprehend the message of the signs that Moses brought to the people.[[17]](#footnote-17) This failure provokes the ire of God, who admonishes them (*Bamidbar* 12:7): “In all of My house, he [Moses] is trusted (*ne’eman*)!”

**The Transition from Hand to Mouth**

During the course of his career, Moses must transition from leadership by hand – employed during the Exodus story – to leadership by mouth, meant to be implemented when the nation arrives at Sinai. Moses’ leadership in Egypt necessitates the use of force, symbolized by his hand and staff. Moses’ primary role there is to bring **ten** **plagues** against the reigning, hostile power. When the nation exits Egypt, Moses exits this role, becoming the leader of a nation poised to receive the word of God. For this task, Moses must employ a gentler sort of leadership, using persuasion and words to guide his constituents. In this role, Moses’ primary contribution is to bring **ten** **commandments** (*aseret* ***ha-devarim***, literally translated as, “The Ten Words”), to his people at Sinai. Moses’ claim that he is *not* a man of words (*lo ish* ***devarim***) hints to the difficulty he will face in transitioning to this new role. His mouth was – in his words – “heavy (*kaved*),” and therefore ineffectual.

To facilitate Moses’ transition from Egypt-leader to Sinai-leader, God renders Moses’ hands “heavy (*keveidim*)” during the battle with Amalek (17:12). This suggests to Moses that his hands are no longer meant to function as his primary means of leadership. Moreover, Aaron – who previously functioned as Moses’ support for his mouth (which Moshe described as *kaved*) – here supports Moses’ *hands* against Amalek (17:12). Moses’ hands fail him at this point in his career, compelling him to transition from his role as liberator in the Exodus story (where Moses used his hands as his primary instrument of leadership) to the role of educator in the story of receiving the Torah (where Moses must use his mouth as his primary instrument).

In *Shemot* 18, Moses disseminates God’s laws and instructions to Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai (18:5, 13-16). The keyword of this episode (featuring the partnership between Yitro and Moses, who set up a judicial infrastructure for conveying God’s laws) is *davar* (meaning word), which appears a key ten times in 18:14-26.[[18]](#footnote-18) Here, Moses acquires a new type of leadership. Not only does Moses focus upon words and his judicial role, but he also learns to move aside and make room for others to assume responsibility alongside him. Yitro informs Moses that he must not run the judicial system single-handedly, explaining that this “*davar*” (here, “thing” rather than “word”) is too “heavy (*kaved*)” for him to bear on his own (18:18). Leadership that utilizes speech rather than force naturally causes Moses to shift from an autocratic style of leadership to a more democratic or participatory one.

A *midrash* notes that when Moses receives the Torah, his speech is indeed transformed, a metamorphosis that finds its most dramatic expression in Moses’ role in the book of *Devarim*:

Before Moses merited the Torah, it is written about him, “I am not a man of words (*devarim*)” (*Shemot* 4:10). After he merited the Torah, his tongue was cured, and he began to speak words (*devarim*). From where do we know? From what we read in this matter [*Devarim* 1:1]: “These are the words (*devarim*) that Moses spoke.” (*Devarim* *Rabba* 1:1)

The same man who once said that he is not a man of words (*lo* *ish* *devarim*) now appears at the helm of a book known colloquially by its second word, *devarim*. That book consists mostly of lengthy first-person speeches by Moses, who apparently no longer finds speech daunting.

**The Failure of Speech**

Moses does succeed in internalizing God’s promise and completing his divine tasks – both of the hand and of the mouth – with distinction. Yet, his mouth remains his vulnerability, and at moments of stress, Moses instinctively prefers his hand. Moses’ inclination to wield his staff instead of his mouth comes to an unfortunate end in an incident that seals his fate as leader, ending his career and disqualifying him from entering the land of Israel.

In that fateful episode, God instructs Moses to speak to a rock so that it will bring forth water. Moses instead resorts to his secure medium, raising his hand and striking the rock twice with his staff. Apparently, it remains difficult even decades later for Moses to use verbal persuasion, especially when force seems so much more effective. It should not be surprising, then, that God determines Moses cannot be allowed to continue to lead the nation into the next period. Forging a healthy and autonomous society depends upon a leadership that uses words – to encourage, advise, and partner with others – rather than autocratic or forceful means.

1. Although his hand is not referenced explicitly in the third sign (perhaps because he does not actually perform that sign until he gets to Egypt), Moses must use his hand there as well (4:9), to draw water out of the Nile. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rashi *Shemot* 4:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibn Ezra, for example, maintains that Moses could not pronounce certain letters. Rabbeinu Bechaye cites Rabbeinu Chananel’s opinion that identifies these letters as those that utilize the teeth (*zayin, shin, reish, samekh, tzade*) or the tongue (*daled, tet, lamed, nun, taf*). Some exegetes, however, regard this approach as offensive toward Moses (e.g., Rashbam and Shadal). See also *Sekhel Tov*, *Shemot* 4:10, which describes the physiology of Moses’ impediment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Shadal, *Shemot* 4:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rashbam maintains that Moses is concerned about his proficiency in the Egyptian language, while *Daat Zekeinim* suggests he fears he is not fluent in the seventy languages used in the regal court of Pharaoh. This general approach is supported by similar phraseology used to depict language difficulties in *Yechezkel* 3:5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shemot* *Rabba* 3:17 notes that the staff is especially important for Moses’ upcoming confrontation with Egypt. It seems to me that this is borne out by the narrative; it is only after leaving Egypt that Moses will be required to focus on using his mouth as his primary tool of leadership. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Shemot* *Rabba* (*Shinan*) 3:15, which claims that God wanted to make a miracle through Moses’ speech. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the Ran, cited by Abravanel (*Shemot* 4:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is some confusion about who actually strikes the water. First God declares that He will strike the water (7:17) with His hand. He had previously told Moses to take the staff that transformed into a snake in his hand (7:15), but then tells him to instruct Aaron to take his staff and stretch it out over Egypt’s waters (7:19). The actual person who executes the task remains somewhat ambiguous (7:20): “And Moses and Aaron did this as God had commanded them; and *he* raised his staff, and *he* struck the waters… and all of the waters that were in the Nile turned to blood.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The execution of this plague blurs between Moses’ hand (in God’s command, 9:22) and his staff (in the execution of God’s command, 9:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is similarly striking that Joshua’s hands are never referenced during the episode, although he is the one who actually uses his hands in battle. This, despite the fact that the word *yad* appears a key seven times in the story (six times to refer to Moses’ hand and once to God’s hand). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This same point is made in another story, that of Balaam on his journey to curse Israel (see Rashbam on *Bereishit* 32:29 – who, in a divergence from his usual methodological focus on the narrow text, widens his scope, noting similarities between our story and others, including the Balaam narrative). Indeed, Balaam acts as a mirror image of Moses, repeatedly endeavoring to embark on a journey with a mission that God does not desire and is designed to undermine Israel. This is in contrast to Moses, who repeatedly refuses to go on a journey that God has initiated, one which is designed to benefit Israel. Both behaviors spur God’s anger (*Shemot* 4:14; *Bamidbar* 22:22), prompting Him to send a divine representative to meet the errant prophet “on the way” (*Shemot* 4:24; *Bamidbar* 22:22). To make the point that God controls speech and that no prophet speaks independently of God’s will (similar to the message given to Moses in *Shemot* 4:11), God opens the mouth of Balaam’s donkey (*Bamidbar* 22:28). That this is the same message that Moses receives is confirmed (according to the Rashbam) by the repercussions of both narratives, in which an angelic messenger threatens the prophet, drawing attention in some way to his leg (see *Shemot* 4:25 and *Bamidbar* 22:25). The threat to the prophet’s leg hints to the fact that he has embarked on a journey in which he is not acting in harmony with God. Rashbam also draws our attention to two additional stories that retain similar elements: Jacob wrestling with the mysterious man and emerging with an injured leg (*Bereishit* 32:24-32), and Jonah, who runs from God’s prophetic mission and is swallowed by a large fish (although his life is threatened, nothing actually happens to his leg, perhaps because unlike the others, in the end Jonah does carry through his divine mission). Although Rashbam does not cite a midrashic source, *Shemot* *Rabba* 4:3 correlates between three of these episodes (Balaam, Jonah, and Moses). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The nominal use of the root *davar*, meaning word, appears twice in Moses’ conversation with God (*Shemot* 4:10, 15) and once in the story of Miriam and Aaron (*Bamidbar* 12:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Strikingly, this central appearance is the only time the root appears in its nominal form rather than its verbal one, which highlights it even more. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Compare *Shemot* 4:6 to *Bamidbar* 12:10. (The only other appearance of this phrase is in II Kings 5:27.) See Rashi on *Shemot* 4:6, who notes the connection between these two narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A *midrash* (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shemot* 172) connects and differentiates between the leprosy that Moses experiences and Miriam’s experience; for the *midrash*, Moses’ leprosy is a positive sign, a hint to Moses that God will avenge him from Miriam when she speaks against him. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As noted, Moses performs these signs again for the benefit of the nation in *Shemot* 4:30. Certainly Miriam and Aaron should have extrapolated the intended message from that event, and if not, from Moses’ considerable leadership role in the many episodes that follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 222, suggests that the tenfold appearance of the word may allude to the upcoming Decalogue, which will form the theme of the next section of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)