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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #24: Moses’ Uncircumcised Lips**

God’s lofty promise to free Israel from slavery and establish a covenant fails to inspire the people. Weary in spirit and disillusioned by recent events, the Hebrew slaves lack both the faith and the resolve to take part in their own liberation. For now, they remain passive, sidelined from the unfolding drama. Israel will reemerge only on the eve of the Exodus, ready to step into its role. In the meantime, to drive the process forward, God sends Moses to Pharaoh once more to demand Israel’s release:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Come, speak to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, so that he will send the children of Israel from his land.” (*Shemot* 6:10-11)

God’s instructions to Moses are introduced by a formula that will become a hallmark of their frequent interactions: “And the Lord spoke (*va-yedaber*) to Moses, saying (*laymor*).” *Daber* is often associated with more formal or authoritative speech than its cognate *amar* (*to say*);[[1]](#footnote-1) specifically, it may be speech intended to persuade and guide.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here, God’s command that Moses confront Pharaoh – *Bo daber* (“*Go, speak*”) – suggests a transference of divine authority, as Moses is charged with delivering God’s message in His stead.[[3]](#footnote-3)

God tells Moses to direct his speech to “Pharaoh, king of Egypt,” a formal appellation which appears here for the first time.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet, instead of immediately using his persuasive speech to speak to Pharaoh as instructed, Moses uses the word *daber* to deflect God’s mission, presenting two objections:

And Moses spoke (*va-yedaber*) before God, saying: “Behold, the children of Israel did not listen to me, and how will Pharaoh listen to me? And I am uncircumcised of lips.” (*Shemot* 6:12)

Despite Moses’ reluctance, he speaks *“*before God*”* (*lifnei Hashem*), in a deferential manner.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet, much like we saw at the burning bush, he resists God’s command to confront Pharaoh. While his first objection cites his recent failure to sway Israel, his second revisits his longstanding speech impediment. This time, however, he uses a new phrase, describing himself as *“*uncircumcised of lips*”* rather than *“*heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue*”* (4:10).

Is there a distinction between these descriptions? Midrashic interpretations often conflate them, treating them as synonymous.[[6]](#footnote-6) As support for this approach, Ibn Ezra suggests that *arel* (uncircumcised) implies heaviness, an encumbrance – an extra layer that weighs the lips down, hindering speech. [[7]](#footnote-7)

In this reading, Moses reiterates the same concern about his speech that he previously raised. But if that is the case, *why* does he return to it? God has already assured him that his speech impediment will not be an obstacle – that He, as the Creator and master of human speech, will assist him. Moreover, to further allay Moses’ concerns, Aaron has been appointed as his spokesman to address Pharaoh on his behalf.

Why, then, does Moses raise the issue again? His initial failures with both Pharaoh and Israel may have reinforced his fears, reviving his self-doubt and convincing him that his inadequacy remains a genuine hindrance.

Alternatively, perhaps Moses’ use of the word *“*uncircumcised*”* to describe his mouth suggests a different kind of concern – one that points to spiritual inadequacy rather than physical limitation. How can a mere mortal presume to serve as the conduit for God’s words? Viewed this way, Moses’ hesitation reflects deep humility, an awareness of his unworthiness for such a role. A *midrash* reinforces this idea, praising Moses precisely for this recognition. According to the *midrash*, it is his acknowledgment of his own unworthiness that makes him worthy: “Because Moses said, ‘I am uncircumcised of lips,’ he merited to be the messenger between God and Israel.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Moses’ concern with his spiritual worthiness is particularly fitting in this section. As noted earlier, at the burning bush, God sent Moses to free Israel from Egypt on moral grounds. At that stage, Moses’ primary concern was pragmatic – whether he possessed the necessary skills and persona for the task. By this point, however, God’s mission has taken on a distinctly religious dimension: to fulfill His promises to the forefathers and establish a covenant with Israel. Given this shift, it follows that Moses’ concerns would also change, focusing not on his practical abilities but on his spiritual fitness to serve as God’s spokesman.

**Circumcised Lips**

The peculiar phrase *aral sefatayim* (“uncircumcised of lips”) echoes God’s command to Abraham regarding circumcision, where an uncircumcised person is called an *arel* (*Bereishit* 17:14), and the uncircumcised organ is referred to as *orlat basar* (*Bereishit* 17:11, 14). While not a perfect parallel, the connection suggests that Moses’ lips are burdened – cumbersome and obstructed, preventing smooth speech. In both cases, the responsibility seems to fall on the individual (or parent) to “circumcise” the impediment and correct the imperfection. Of course, the situations are not identical; no one expects Moses to physically excise part of his lips. Yet the phrase implies that the task of refining his speech ultimately rests with him.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Circumcision signifies that the human body is not inherently perfect; God creates people with imperfections that require them to take action for self-improvement.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the Bible, four body parts are described as uncircumcised (*orla*): the genitals (*Bereishit* 17:14), the heart (*Devarim* 10:16), the ear (*Yirmiyahu* 6:10), and, in our case, the lips.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Each of these organs, prone to leading a person astray, can obstruct one’s devotion to God. They demand an extra degree of discipline and vigilance; left unchecked, they become sources of excess, burdensome and unmanageable, and are liable to hinder spiritual and moral growth.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**God’s Response**

In lieu of a direct response to Moses’ objections, God turns to the task of formally enlisting Moses and Aaron together to begin the mission. The following verse seems to officially launch the Exodus narrative, naming each of its major figures:

And **God** spoke to **Moses** and to **Aaron**. And He commanded them regarding the **children** **of** **Israel** and regarding **Pharaoh** the king of Egypt, so as to bring out the children of Israel from the land of Egypt. (6:13)

In His response, God appears to disregard Moses’ concerns. Yet by including Aaron alongside Moses as the recipient of His command, God subtly provides a clear solution.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moses will not have to rely on his own speech; instead, Aaron will serve as his partner and support.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This is, of course, the same solution God offered Moses at the burning bush. There, however, Aaron was chosen for his rhetorical skill, as God affirms: “I know that he can surely speak(*ki daber yedaber hu*)” (4:14). Here, Aaron's role extends beyond mere articulation; he is selected for his spiritual capacity as well. This is signified by the use of the word *navi* (prophet) to describe his function alongside Moses: “And Aaron your brother will be your prophet” (7:1).[[15]](#footnote-15)

The parallels between God’s commissioning of Moses in this passage and the earlier episode at the burning bush underscore a key distinction. At the burning bush, Moses' mission was framed primarily in moral terms – freeing the Israelites from oppression. Here, however, the objective extends beyond liberation itself, to freeing Israel for a higher purpose. We begin to see clearly, through God’s words, Moses’ own reservations, and the rationale for Aaron’s selection, that this mission is rooted in fulfilling God’s promises to the forefathers. Moses is not merely tasked with delivering Israel from slavery but with laying the foundation for a covenantal nation, one destined to forge a lasting relationship with God.

1. Our unit (6:2-7:7) clearly favors the word *daber* over the more common *amar* (which appears a mere eight times in the narrative section, compared to thirty-three times when Moshe encounters God in *Shemot* 3:1-4:17). Four of the instances of *amar* that do appear are subsidiaries of the main verb, *daber*: e.g., “And the Lord spoke – *daber* – to Moses, saying – *amar*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Benno Jacob, *Shemot*, p. 143, seems to regard *daber* as a word that indicates a more formal speech, while *amar* is more suitable for dialogue. The verbal *daber* and nominal *davar* may relate to a cognate Semitic word meaning to lead or cause to follow. Variations of this word appear in Arabic, Aramaic, Syriac, and perhaps in biblical Hebrew as well (e.g., *Tehillim* 18:48; 47:4). See BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 180. In this vein, the act of speech implied by the word *daber* is speech that leads others, due to its persuasiveness. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (*Bereishit* 1:22; 15:1) notes that *daber* connotes decisive, apodictic speech used to make absolute statements without concern for the audience, while *amar* is speech that is directed to an addressee. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The fourteen occurrences of the word *daber* in this passage (6:2-7:7) are nearly evenly divided between human speech – spoken by God’s messengers, Moses and Aaron (eight times) – and divine speech directed at them (six times). This interplay between human and divine speech highlights the ongoing process of enlisting Moses and Aaron as spokesmen to articulate God’s plan for Israel’s liberation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While this phrase will appear several more times in this chapter (verses 13, 27, 29), notably, Pharaoh is never addressed with this full title throughout the plague narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The phrase “and Moses spoke before\to God, saying” only appears here and (with a small variation) in *Bamidbar* 27:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Tanchuma* *Devarim* 2, for example, cites *Shemot* 6:30, where Moses again calls himself “uncircumcised of lips,” followed by God’s rebuke of Moses’ saying that he is not “a man of words” (from 4:10!). See also *Midrash* *Aggada* (Buber) *Shemot* 4:10. *Lekach* *Tov* *Vaera* 6:30 also seems to regard these descriptions as essentially the same thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibn Ezra 6:12; 34:14. Like Ibn Ezra, Nachmanides explains that Moses here rehashes his previous objection regarding his speech difficulties. Rashi (6:12) explains that the word *orla* refers to something sealed or obstructed. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Otzar Midrashim*, Eizenstein, Akiba. Other Rabbinic sources, however, criticize Moses for this refusal, citing it as a reason that Moses dies before he enters the land of Israel (*Otzar Midrashim*, Eizenstein, Moses). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Klitsner, *Wrestling*, p. 159, proposes that the goal of the circumcision story at the lodging house (*Shemot* 4:24-26) is to suggest to Moses that he should remove the foreskin from his lips that caused him to refuse God’s mission. If this is the goal, it most certainly does not succeed, since Moses calls himself uncircumcised of lips *following* that incident! [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the well-known dialogue between R. Akiva and the Roman procurator, Turnus Rufus, on this topic (*Tanchuma Tazria* 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The word *orla* is also used to refer to the prohibition of eating the fruits of a tree for the first three years after it is planted (*Vayikra* 19:23). See *Tanhuma* *Lekh* *Lekha* 16, which delineates these five usages of the word *orla*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Hirsch (*Bereishit* 17:10) posits that the word *orla* refers to something over which a person has lost control. Circumcision enables one to subjugate and govern that part of the body which has eclipsed the person’s moral and religious character. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rashi (6:13) makes this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This reading is borne out by the continuation of this section and especially its conclusion, which focuses on Aaron’s role as Moses’ spokesman (7:1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. While some exegetes, such as Bekhor Shor (*Shemot* 7:1), derive *navi* from *niv* (dialect) and interpret it simply as a skilled speaker, the broader biblical usage of *navi* suggests a far more significant role as one who channels divine speech to the people. As Ibn Ezra clarifies, rejecting any etymological link between *navi* and *niv*: “Its explanation is that he is My prophet, to whom I reveal My secrets.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)