

Parashat Shemot: Exodus 4:10-17

P'SHAT

10But Moses said to the LORD, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." 11And the LORD said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say." 13But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent."

14The LORD became angry with Moses, and He said, "There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. 15You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—16and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, 17And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs."

10 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּלָּה גַם מִשְׁלֵשׁ גַּם מֵאֵן דְּבַרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פֶּה וְכִבְד לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי: 11 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לְאָדָם אוֹ מִי־יְשׁוּם אֵלִים אוֹ חֲרָשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶח אוֹ עוֹר הֲלֹא אָנֹכִי יְהוָה: 12 וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבָּר: 13 וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי שְׁלַח־נָא בְיַד־תְּשֻׁלֶּת: 14 וַיַּחַד־אַף יְהוָה

בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְיֶה אִתְּךָ הַלְלוּי יִרְעַתִּי כִּי־דַבֵּר יִדְבַר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה־הוּא יֵצֵא לְקִרְאֲתֶךָ וְרֵאךָ וְשָׁמַח בְּלִבּוֹ: 15 וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשָׁמַתְתָּ אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְעִם־פִּיהוֹ וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן: 16 וְדַבַּרְתָּהוּ לָךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִיֶה־לְךָ לִפֶּה וְאַתָּה תְּהִיֶה־לּוֹ לֵאלֹהִים: 17 וְאֶת־הַמַּטֶּה הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה־בּוֹ אֶת־הָאֵתוֹת: פ ששי

KEY KOSHI: Why does God choose a spokesman who is heavy of mouth and tongue? How might this heaviness serve as a tool for patience, slowing down anger, and even mirroring the Divine?

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתַי וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.
Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'cizvanu laasok b'divrei Torah.
Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

REMEZ on v. 10: *But Moses said to the LORD, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."*

RASHI: *Either in times past...* Moses says literally, "Also yesterday and also the day before and also now." This indicates that God made seven attempts to persuade Moses to take on the assignment...until God became angry with him (v. 14), and he accepted the mission (cf. Leviticus Rabbah 11:6). All this reluctance was because he was unwilling to assume any dignity that would make him superior to his brother Aaron who was older than he and was also a prophet.

כבד פה *Slow of speech* (lit. heavy of mouth) – I speak with heaviness or difficulty; old French *balbus* – a stutterer.

IBN EZRA: *I have never been a man of words* – I am not a smooth talker (I cannot speak with precision), as one needs to be to speak before a king. I have been this way since birth. *Slow of mouth* – hereditarily. *Slow of tongue* – in Egyptian language, because he hadn't spoken it in many years.

RASHBAM: Is it possible that a prophet who could communicate with God freely, i.e. "face to face," and who received the Torah from Him and communicated it to his people should have been afflicted with a stutter?

GERSONIDES: *Slow of speech and slow of tongue* – the first expression may refer to a speech impediment, or, like the second, it may mean that he was not very good at putting words together. His inarticulateness was the result of his extreme concentration on divine matters.

PLAUT: *Slow of speech* – Literally, "heavy of mouth," not an orator. Or he had a speech defect. God knows this shortcoming but chooses him nonetheless, even as Jacob was chosen despite his moral immaturity. The speech difficulty of the hero is one of the motifs found also in ancient Near Eastern literature...In one of the earliest Sumerian epics, a central role is played by the messenger whose "mouth was too heavy" to repeat a message verbatim, leading by necessity to the invention of (letter-)writing.

RABBENU NISSIM: It was so ordained in order that people might not say that it was his eloquence which convinced Israel.

S. R. HIRSCH: Moses was to speak the truth, unvarnished and without compromise. Being slow of speech he could do this better than had he been eloquent, for the eloquent speaker easily reacts to the opinions of an audience and tends to incorporate their *ideas* so that he be better appreciated.

DRASH by ALAN MORINIS on “Slow to Anger” (Ch. 12 in *With Heart in Mind*)

The phrase *erech apayim* literally means “long of nose.” What does that have to do with anger? It means that when someone is provoked (and that someone could be God) and before they react they take a long breath, their response in anger is delayed. The longer the nose, the longer the breath, the more time there is for another response, like compassion and understanding, to take the place of anger.

We all get angry, we all know that most of the time we shouldn't, and we all need to be reminded that we have the capacity to choose other responses that will carry us more in the direction of holiness than will anger...

As the verse says, “At a time of anger God reminds Himself of His mercy” (Habakuk 3:2). By breathing deeply and not jumping to react, we open a space in which to remind ourselves that we have the capacity to choose another response in place of our anger.

Being slow to anger does not mean that a person should accept being a victim, but neither is there great virtue in acting out one's anger even in responding to injustice. In fact, reactivity is an instinctive characteristic of animals, and what distinguishes humans from other animals is our ability to override emotions with wisdom. Rabbi Perr speaks of Mussar practice helping to open “a space between the match and the fuse,” which could be a definition of wisdom itself. Being slow to react affords us a better perspective from which to respond...

Being slow to anger requires that you be patient and tolerant. The Hebrew word for patience is *salvanut*, which comes from the same root as “suffer” (*sevel*) and “porter” (*sabal*). Being patient means bearing or carrying your own emotional suffering. In practice that means becoming aware of difficult emotions as you experience them, and then just holding them, even embracing them, so they do not take you over and dictate your behavior. You still respond, but it is you responding, not just the passion of the moment roaring through you. That's real patience, and that is what you are assigned for this period.

...Your assignment is to practice the Mussar method found in many places that advises living out in your mind's eye a potentially provocative situation before it occurs.

SOD – Marc Shell adapted from “Moses’ Tongue” in *Stutter* (2005)

My most unbearable stuttering experience in Hebrew school was the unavoidable one at the beginning of every class. I would be called upon to announce my presence during the alphabetical roll call. Mr. Teicher—a stern and always disapproving teacher—would begin to read out the roll in predictable, inexorable sequence. There was plenty of time for me to anticipate my failure. I trembled fearfully, more and more, until my name, Me-ir, came up. “Me-ir, are you present?”

...I would try, always unsuccessfully, to answer, in Hebrew, ani poh (“I [am] present”). But the schwa—a-a-a-ani—was too much for me; and my fear of stuttering helped precipitate the failure I feared. Stuttering at Hebrew school was so difficult an experience for me that I often played hooky all day in order to avoid being there at all. On such days, I would hide out from Mr. Teicher at the local French-language library. I would read the Five Books of Moses and identify with Adam, who hid among the trees when God called to him: “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:8). And I would especially read over the passage in Exodus where God calls out “Moses, Moses” from the burning bush in Midian (Ex. 3:4).

Moses had a severe speech impediment of his own. Yet somehow Moses managed to get out a magnificent answer, hineni (“I am here”), when called...My colleague and former officemate Neil Schmitz, at SUNY Buffalo, is right to insist, in his first person account “To the Speech Clinic,” that “at some point in the stutterer’s early life there must be a question—a question so powerful that it is forgotten, because all that is remembered is the circumstance. I am obliged to speak.” “It is not what is to be said that makes the stutterer hesitate,” Schmitz claims, “but that it must be said.”

At the burning bush, God tells Moses to speak for him. Why Moses? On the face of it, God’s choice of Moses to be his dummy spokesperson is odd. Moses is not a person who speaks well. Presumably, an omnipotent God could cure Moses of his speech impediment...But Moses makes no explicit request in Exodus to be cured, and he is not cured.

Moses is not the only being to hesitate at the burning bush. God does too. Is that why he seeks out a stutterer? Like a teacher reading out the roll, Moses demands that God speak out the ineffable name: “What [is] his name?” (Ex. 3:13). The stutterer James Malcolm Rymer was right to stress, in his first person account, *The Unspeakable; or, The Life and Adventures of a Stammerer* (1855), God’s relevant status as “unspeakable.” But God says in the Hebrew of Exodus 3:14, *eheyeh asher eheyeh* (“I am that I am” KJV)...and suggests indeed a divine stutter.

God as ventriloquist needed a spokesman because he was unable to speak directly to the people. We will see that the dummy Moses, whom he required to speak for him, was both too much and too little like God to do the job. We will also see, though, that the most important aspect of the job would seem to require that the Hebrews’ monotheistic legislator and alphabetical scribe be a stutterer.