

Parashat Vaera

The Challenge of Communication

An Aggravating Misunderstanding

Communication is everything. I remember a traumatic day of my life on my way to one of my annual North American tours. The taxi was supposed to arrive at 8:30 to take me to the airport. I was busy with last minute tasks, making sure my iPhone was 100% charged, answering my last emails and deleting them from the inbox, so I only noticed when it was almost 9 o'clock that the taxi was late. All my phones were charged and ready to receive the call from the driver announcing that he had arrived. As I continued doing yet another dish and wiping my phones spotless, I nervously gazed out the window, but no taxi was in view. Now, as I began to get worried about missing my plane, I tried to call the taxi-company but was unable to get through. In panic, I ran up my driveway to the top of the street, dragging my suitcase, but there was still no taxi waiting there. As I ran down the street, passing two houses to my right, I finally spotted him – the taxi driver, relaxingly smoking a cigarette, while reading the newspaper. "Finally you arrive," he reprimanded me. "I have been waiting here for 40 minutes." Needless to say, this was not an easy start of a challenging speaking tour. When I asked the driver why he hadn't called, he retorted that I was supposed to call him! Many similar miscommunications happen all the time. People only hear the part of the story most beneficial to themselves, or even worse, sometimes you feel that they don't even hear you at all. One of the hardest things in life is when you open yourself to someone with whom you are close, but the person totally ignores you and what you shared with her. People don't always have the capacity to process what you are communicating or it brings up something too painful for them to deal with. Effective communication is challenging. In Western culture, we are encouraged to speak up, voice our opinion and express our feelings. However, we need to learn to think before we talk. "There is time to keep silence and a time to speak" (*Kohelet* 3:7). It may be worthwhile asking ourselves before we communicate, "Is my message sensible? Is the person ready to hear my message? What would be the most appropriate time and the best way of communicating in order to get my message across?"

Body Language and other Signs that Accompany our Communication

Communication problems are highlighted in this week's *parasha*, which opens by Moshe telling the people that G-d will redeem them. Yet, they cannot hear it:

ספר שמות פרק ו (ט) וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵל מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה:
 "Moshe spoke thus to the children of Israel but they did not listen to Moshe because of their shortness of spirit (or breath) caused by hard work (*Shemot* 6:9).

Pharaoh can't hear Moshe, either. The Torah tells us numerous times, **וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֲלֵיהֶם** / *velo shama aleihem* – "He [Pharaoh] did not listen to them [Moshe and Aharon]." G-d brings a new method of communication to these hard-of-hearing folk, one based not on the subtleties of words but on the clearer medium of the **וַיֹּאמֶר** / *ot* – the "sign," a physical visual event that defies the ordinary laws of nature. To such signs both the people of Israel and Pharaoh must eventually listen. This teaches us that we too may need to use signs for effective communication. Such signs might be our body

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language, the tone of our voice, or a cup of coffee and cake to accompany our conversation. As people grow older, often their hearing weakens, requiring greater face-to-face communication. Thus, our dwindling sense of hearing may actually engender deeper levels of communication, through the closeness of eye contact, reading facial expressions, body movements and other signs.

The Pitfalls of Internet Communication

We spend an increasing amount of time at the internet and social media, often at the expense of face-to-face communication. Some of us are so addicted to our smartphone that even when meeting with a loving family member that we haven't seen for a while, we each sit with our smartphone, messaging and multitasking while hanging out with each other. I personally spend most of my day at the computer, and write an average of 30 emails daily. The advantage of email is certainly speed. We can communicate with people across the world at the blink of an eye. Yet, big blunders happen more than once when we quickly press the send button forgetting to delete prior communication at the bottom of the email, not meant for this particular recipient. Fast email mode lends itself to misunderstandings. Often people don't take the time to read what they write before clicking 'send.' In the long run, this causes wasted time to clarify or, worse, unfriending and negative feelings as a result of email misinterpretation. Another pitfall of email is when we use it in place of a proper conversation. Many miscommunications take place because email recipients cannot see each other, and the emails do not have any voice inflection or emotion that can help with accurate interpretation.

Beware of one Letter Email Mistakes

The following joke highlights the havoc caused by one tiny careless email mistake: A Minneapolis couple decided to go to Florida to thaw out during a particularly icy winter. They planned to stay at the same hotel where they spent their honeymoon 20 years earlier. Because of hectic schedules, it was difficult to coordinate their travel plans. So, the husband left Minneapolis and flew to Florida on Thursday, with his wife flying down the following day. The husband checked into the hotel. There was a computer in his room, so he decided to send an email to his wife. However, he accidentally left out one letter in her email address, and without realizing his error, sent the email. Meanwhile, somewhere in Houston, a widow had just returned home from her husband's funeral. He was a minister who was called home to glory following a heart attack. The widow decided to check her email expecting messages from relatives and friends. After reading the first message, she screamed and fainted. The widow's son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and saw the computer screen which read:

To: My loving wife
 Subject: I've arrived
 Date: April 6, 2006

I know you're surprised to hear from me. They have computers here now and you are allowed to send emails to your loved ones. I've just arrived and have been checked in. I see that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then. Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.

P.S. it sure is freaking hot down here!!!!

Moshe's Speech Defect

Many great demagogues in the world manipulate others with their charisma and oratorical skills. They can make people agree to things and act against their own interest. Our greatest teacher and the giver of the eternal Torah can never be suspected of such vices.

ספר שמות פרק ו (יב)

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְפָנֵי הָשֵׁם לֵאמֹר הֲנִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעֵנִי פֶרְעֹה וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׁפָתַיִם:
 “Moshe spoke before Hashem saying, ‘They, the children of Israel did not listen to me and how then will Pharaoh listen to me who am of uncircumcised lips’” (*Shemot* 6:12).

Moshe's speech defect clarified that it was not his eloquent orations that swayed the people away, but rather the truth of his doctrine – the eternal Torah. The imperfection of the ‘messenger’ testifies to the perfection of the ‘message.’ The *Sefat Emet* offers a different interpretation of our Torah verse that sheds light on the nature of communication, “Because the children of Israel did not listen, therefore he was of uncircumcised lips...” Communication is a two-way street. Speech is in exile as long as the recipients are not ready to hear the words of Hashem. To the extent that the listener is unavailable, the words are hidden. The more ready and willing the recipients are the more open and revealed the message will be (*Sefat Emet, Parashat Vaera*, year 5659). I definitely experience this principle in my teaching. On a day when the students are tired and unfocused, my words are stuck and I am unable to teach a good class. On the other hand, when the students are excited and attentive, my words flow effortlessly with new insights that I hadn't even prepared. *Sefat Emet* further explains, “Just as there is a foreskin in the opening of the limb of circumcision – the covenant of the flesh, the covenant of speech is also incased by a foreskin of blockages. These two covenants are the only openings in our body to the inner dimensions. Wherever there is an opening to the inner dimensions, there are also blockages and concealment. Therefore, the Israelites had to go through all the difficulties in the Egyptian exile in order to merit removing the foreskin of the mouth, to be worthy of the covenant of the tongue and the Torah. By mentioning the Exodus from Egypt, we too can merit the opening of our mouth” (*Sefat Emet, Shemot, Parashat Vaera*, year 5654). Thus, when we experience miscommunications, it is possibly due to these blockages caused by the exile of speech, and we need a merit by means of Torah learning, prayer or other mitzvot to open these spiritual blocks.

Conversations with G-d

While good communication is vital at the workplace, with family and friends, the highest kind of communication is communicating with Hashem. Twenty years ago, Neal Donald Walsh published *Conversations with God (CwG)*, which became a publishing phenomenon, staying on the *New York Times* Best-Sellers List for 137 weeks. The succeeding volumes in the nine book series also appeared prominently on the List. At the lowest point of his life, Neal wrote a letter to G-d asking why nothing in his life was working. After writing down all of his questions, he heard a voice say, “Do you really want an answer to all these questions or are you just venting?” Neal felt answers to his questions filling his mind and decided to write them down. The ensuing dialogue became the *Conversations with God* books. What made this gentile merit to hear Hashem's voice and receive divine messages? I believe that because we are heading toward the final redemption, the exile of speech is beginning to dissolve as the entire world is becoming prepared to hear Hashem's message through his final redeemer – the Mashiach. It is funny because I have been exposed for

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many years to Rabbi Nachman's teaching about *hitbodedut* – talking with Hashem. However, after hearing an interview with Neal Donald Walsh about his conversations with G-d, I was inspired even more to have my own conversations with Hashem. Rather than speaking to G-d as if He is a friend, I began pouring out deep questions to Hashem about what I should do in a certain situation, and then I was silent, and just listening in. I had this amazing experience of hearing Hashem's soft reassuring answer reverberate inside of my own *neshama*, and His answer to me was, "You do not have to do anything, just let go, and everything will work itself out, trust Me and be happy!" In the beginning of this week's *parasha*, Moshe makes a *Kal v'Chomer* –fortiori, "If the children of Israel didn't listen to me how will Pharaoh listen to me?" I like to make the inverse fortiori, "If this non Jewish person, as righteous as he may be, was able to have a true meaningful conversation with Hashem, how much more so may we, the children of Israel communicate with G-d." Why not try it out? Just cry out expressing your most desperate burning questions to Hashem, and then listen and tune into His answers for you!