



Why Was Our Greatest Leader Stricken by a Speech Impairment?

The Centrality of the Power of Speech in Torah Leadership

I grew up with a speech defect – a slight lisp. My caring parents, who foresaw that I may be involved in public speaking, when I would grow up, sent me to a speech therapist. Although she taught me to curl my tongue, I refused to continue speech therapy, so my lisp is following me my entire life. However, it seems that it is, after all, not impeding my teaching. I don't recall anyone ever mentioning it. My husband never even noticed it! Perhaps, people assume it's just part of my accent? Being eloquent and well-spoken is important in the Torah world, which centers around sharing words of Torah. This is what we say, daily, in the Shema prayer, "You shall teach them to your children **and speak of them** when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up" (*Devarim* 6:7 and 11:19). Of the three garments of the soul: thought, speech and action, speech is the intermediate garment. Thoughts are expressed through speech, and speech helps actualize our thoughts into action. I often find that when I speak about what needs to get done, I am much more prone to get it done. Moreover, we can heal and strengthen our relationships through rectified speech, as most of the strife between people is caused by lack of communication or by miscommunication. In the terminology of Kabbalah, the "word of G-d" is called *malchut*, (royalty,) for a king rules his kingdom through his speech as it states, "the word of a king rules" (*Kohelet* 8:4); (*Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh*, middle of Epistle 25). Since Moshe is considered our first king (see *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 52:1, based on *Devarim* 33:5), it is hard to understand how this well-known speech defect didn't impede his leadership ability. I also wondered about the nature of his flaw. How did it come about? Why didn't G-d heal it, before appointing Moshe as the Jewish leader? And, how did Hashem finally heal Moshe's speech defect?

What was Moshe's Speech Defect?

When Hashem revealed Himself to Moshe at the burning bush, in order to send him to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt (*Shemot* 3:10), Moshe hesitated to accept the appointment of leadership, due to his speech defect:

סַפֵּר שְׁמוֹת פְּרָקֵי דְּפִסְוֵקֵי וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָשֵׁם בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי גַם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשִׁים גַּם מֵאֵת דְּבָרָה אֶל עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כָבֵד פֶּה וְכָבֵד לְשׁוֹן אֲנִי:

"Moshe said to Hashem, 'I beseech You, Hashem. I am not a man of words, neither from yesterday nor from the day before yesterday, nor from the time You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue' (*Shemot* 4:10).

Rashi explains that "heavy of mouth" means speaking with difficulty, and stuttering. Rabbeinu Bachaya quotes the famous midrash: While growing up in Pharaoh's palace, Moshe once took Pharaoh's crown and threw it on the ground. The king wanted to execute him on account of this misdemeanor. His astrologers used this incident to point out that Moshe must be the boy of whom they had warned that he would become the redeemer of the Israelites. Pharaoh consulted with his closest advisors, who offered various advice. One said that the boy was guilty of death. The other said that it was a youthful prank not to be taken seriously. They devised a means to test if there had been an evil intent in Moshe's knocking off his foster grandfather's crown. They placed before him a bowl containing both a golden coin and a glowing coal. If Moshe were to grab for the coal, this would prove that he had no evil intention. If he were to grab for the golden coin, this would be a sign that

he was dangerous and would have to be killed. Moshe was about to grab the golden coin, when an angel pushed his hand toward the coal, and he burned his tongue, as he tried to taste it. This is what caused Moshe's stuttering (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Shemot* 4:10, based on *Pesikta Zutrata* and *Shemot Rabbah* 1:12). Yet, how come Moshe only burned his mouth and tongue, but not his hand, with which he grabbed the coal first? This is because, when the daughter of Pharaoh first brought an Egyptian nursemaid for Moshe, he pushed away her breast. Then, the nursemaid expressed milk directly into Moshe's mouth. Therefore, the hot coals came to purify Moshe from the impure milk that fell into his mouth (Siftei Kohen). Others explain that Moshe's speech defect was his inability to pronounce certain sounds. Being HEAVY OF TONGUE refers to the letters דטלנ"ת (d/t/l/n/th), whereas HEAVY OF MOUTH refers to the difficulty of pronouncing the letters of the teeth, pallet and throat, the letters of the lips בומ"ף (b/u/m/f) Moshe referred to the latter, when he called himself of uncircumcised lips (*Shemot* 6:12); (Toldot Yitzchak). When Hashem responded: "I will be with your mouth, and I will instruct you what you shall speak" (*Shemot* 4:12), it implied that he would put words in Moshe's mouth that didn't include the problem letters (Ibn Ezra).

Why Did Hashem Choose a Leader with Speech Impediments?

When Moshe told the elders of Israel, פָּקֹד פִּקְדֹתַי אֶתְכֶם /*Pakod pakadeti etchem* – "I have surely visited you" (*Shemot* 3:16), the people immediately believed him, because they had a tradition from Ya'acov, that the true redeemer will be verified through pronouncing these codewords (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 5:13). Yet, why would this convince the elders that Moshe was a verified redeemer? Couldn't anyone have used this code? However, due to Moshe's speech impediment, he would naturally have been unable to pronounce the sentence correctly (The "p" sound of *Pakod pakadeti*). Yet, the fact that, despite his speech defect, Moshe somehow miraculously was able to pronounce the code phrase perfectly, authenticated Moshe's credentials. When the Israelites saw that Moshe was unable to speak any words correctly except for the code phrase, they were convinced that he was the true redeemer (Pardes Yosef). Thus, being "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" was necessary to make Moshe their undisputed redeemer. Moreover, we often find, throughout the ages, that also great demagogues become popular leaders, through their ability to speak, although their message may be rotten. This is due to their charisma and ability to entice people with their slick words. The eloquent speech and magnetism of a great orator, may blind his followers from judging the essential content of his message. Therefore, Hashem retained Moshe's speech defect, so that no one could claim that it was his smooth speech that convinced people to accept the Torah. The fact that the Israelites accepted Moshe's message, despite his speech defect, affirmed the Torah's Divinity (Ran, *drashot* 3).

Healing Moshe's Speech Impairment

It seems to me that we often come across obstacles in connection with our greatest strength and mission. The purpose of these obstacles is to sharpen our ability to excel in the task that we came into this world to fulfill. Life is like an obstacle course. It challenges the rider to maneuver through a series of obstacles, while gaining skill and finesse. Thus, Moshe's speech impairment was the obstacle intended to enable him to achieve his mission to become the greatest speaker ever. The fact that Moshe's soul perfection is through speech, is alluded to by his being a reincarnation of Hevel (Arizal, *Sha'ar Hapesukim, Shemot*), since הֶבֶל/*hevel* can refer to the breath that precede speech as in, "the world only exists because of the הֶבֶל/*hevel* – 'breath,' [i.e., reciting Torah,] of schoolchildren" (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 119b). Taking the Jewish people out of the Egyptian exile also entailed redeeming them from the exile of speech. Therefore, after the Exodus, their mouth was opened, as it states, "then Moshe sang..." Together with Moshe, the entire Jewish people were initially of uncircumcised lips. They had to go through the hardship of the Egyptian exile to merit the removal of the foreskin from the mouth, which is necessary for receiving the Torah (Sefat Emet, *Parashat Vaera*, Year 5654). Hashem healed Moshe of his speech defect on Har Sinai, before He gave him the second

tablets, since Moshe gave up food and drink for 40 days on Mt. Sinai. When nothing went into his mouth, he could forgo materiality and attain a high level of spirituality. Then, Hashem rewarded him by healing his mouth to speak well (*Yalkut Shimoni* 3:172). At the end of his life, Moshe's speech reached its ultimate perfection during his 36-day monologue, that became the Book of *Devarim*, meaning 'speech.' *Devarim* opens with "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all Israel..." (*Devarim* 1:1) and continues with "Moshe commenced [and] explained this Law, saying..." (Ibid. 5). EXPLAINED THIS LAW - implies that Moshe explained the Torah to Israel in seventy languages (Rashi based on *Midrash Tanchuma* 2; *Bereishit Rabbah* 49; and *Sotah* 32a). Haketav Vehakabbalah explains that Moshe gave seventy interpretations to every passage. Clearly, this is a far call from Moshe's initial speech impairment. Just as Moshe was able to transform his Achilles heel to become his greatest accomplishment, so can we, by acknowledging our vulnerabilities and working consistently to overcome them, prevail over our greatest weaknesses!