



Dear Friends,

Moshe did not stutter!

I have no idea how such a ridiculous idea spread.

Moshe says in this week's parasha, Sh'mot, that **"I have never been a man of words... my mouth is heavy, and so to is my tongue"** (Sh'mot 4:10). Why is that understood as stuttering? Next week Moshe will complain to the Creator who is sending him on His mission that **"The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!"** (6:12) Again, not a word about stuttering.

So Moshe does not stutter. What, then, is the impediment to his speech? And why is Aharon, his brother, summoned to speak for him?

The issue of Moshe's speech appears in the meeting between him and the messenger of God at the Burning Bush. Until that time, no speech impediment is mentioned at all. What happened at the Burning Bush that highlighted his difficulty expressing himself?

The Burning Bush is one of the most beautiful and formative moments in the Torah. If one reads the text superficially, its point will be entirely lost. This is actually a profound metaphoric description of personal revelation. It is a moment of tremendous grace, of a meeting between a human being - simple and modest; a shepherd - and the exalted.

In this revelation Moshe is sent on a mission which is impossible, by definition! Anyone who has experienced divine revelation - even if not on that scale - will understand. There is absolutely no chance that Moshe will succeed in explaining to Am Yisrael - not to mention to Pharaoh - the truth that was revealed to him! I repeat, there is no chance that this can happen!

The mission that was given to Moshe was not political or sociological. The story of the Exodus from Egypt does not deal with workers' rights or freeing slaves. It also does not deal with mass migration from one country to another. The exodus from Egypt is NOT one story among many. It is **THE** story - the most important and formative story in the metta-history of Am Yisrael. There is nothing like it - not the act of Creation, not the Flood, not Avraham's "Lech Lecha" or the binding of Yitzchak; and not the night on which Yaakov becomes Israel.

It is through the Exodus story, that the essence of the God of Israel is revealed (and continues to do so)!

The essence of the God of Israel is, of course, freedom.

But again, we are not dealing with political or sociological freedom. These do not require God. A dedicated and charismatic flesh-and-blood leader will do - like Herzl or Gandhi, Ben Gurion or Jabotinsky, Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela. Moshe, in fact, is not charismatic at all, and the liberation he introduced to the world was very different from all of the great political struggles for freedom, even though many of them drew inspiration - and rightly so - from the Israelite story.

In what way, then, is the Exodus liberation so different?

This, my friends, is where our speech becomes impeded...

The Exodus and the Divine liberation that was revealed to Moshe at the Burning Bush touches on the deepest and most primal level of human experience. It precedes speech, and therefore precedes politics and history. Words can never describe it. Great artists may try to give it metaphoric expression; poets will dance around it working wonders with their words, but they cannot truly succeed.

This is also the source of the order of the Commandments which will be given fifty days after the Exodus. The first Commandment is **“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”** But that essence requires the second Commandment, which is **“You will have no other gods before me”**, and the third, **“You shall not make yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath,”** In other words, there will be nothing that will describe the essence of the God of freedom - not a carved image, a likeness, or words.

Moshe, the great but modest shepherd, knew that what was revealed to him cannot ever be described. It is NOT possible to transmit, let alone convince, other people. The moment one begins to talk about it, it becomes a “thing”, much like an image, a likeness, and then it becomes an ideology others need to conform to. From this point, the path to idolatry is short and inevitable.

The God of Freedom is uncompromising and ruthless. He has endless patience, but does not understand human limitations: (Sh'mot 4:11-16) **And the LORD said to him, “Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go! and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.”** Moshe, who knows that this mission is impossible, begs: **“Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.”** But God also insists, **The 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. You shall speak to him**

and put the words in his mouth... and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him.”

The choice of Aharon as spokesman was a huge compromise. Aharon apparently was a great speaker. The Divine was not revealed to him; he received the message second-hand, through Moshe. This is why, unlike Moshe, he WAS able to talk about it. For Aharon, the Divine took the form of an external description - a concept, a story, an image that can be conveyed. In a few months, when Moshe will be on Mount Sinai in the presence of God, Aharon will be the one who will create the Golden Calf for the people. And he will see: **“this is your God, oh Israel”**. And, shockingly, he will be forgiven for doing so. For, this, after all, is his role: to translate Moshe’s untranslatable experience into something concrete that the people could understand. It took the form of a golden calf.

So you see, Moshe did not stutter. In the Shabbat service he is called “a loyal servant”, for he is loyal to the Divine essence that has no words.

This is why Moshe was the greatest of Israel’s prophets - the only one who discovered the Divine essence within himself - the essence that precedes language and words.

This is why Moshe did not want the job in the first place, as well as throughout the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. He never stopped asking to be released from the impossible mission he was sent on.

This is why, at a moment of despair, Moshe removed his tent from the encampment and placed it far from people, who could not understand the Divine essence, and still don’t.

This is why - in the end - Moshe failed and did not enter the Promised Land. HE HAD TO FAIL, for he was sent on an impossible mission, and he knew it from the very beginning.

Indeed, Moshe did not stutter. He was very articulate. It’s just that we are slow of hearing and slow of sight.

Let’s be honest now... It is we who need graven images, pictures, and words. It is we who demand proof and evidence.

But the God of Freedom has infinite patience.

And the Bush still burns. Waiting.

One day we will discover God’s true essence, without words and without images. Maybe even without metaphors. Now that’s worth waiting for!

Until then, Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha

