

**Moses: An Effective Speaker with Impeded Speech
(In Observance of Jewish Disability
Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month)**

(www.JDAIM.org)

Parashat Ki Tissa

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I remember how surprised I was as a child to discover that Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd president of the United States, the strong and energetic leader who had lifted America out of the Great Depression and had led the country during World War II, required leg braces and crutches to get around. About a dozen years before he ran for President, he had contracted polio, which left his legs partially paralyzed.

In those days, to be seen with a disability was a deal-breaker. There was no way, it seemed to many, that he could ever be elected to the presidency if he was seen to be disabled. And so, his campaign reached an agreement with the press and, remarkably, the press cooperated. They agreed not to film him walking or getting in and out of cars. (See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FM63wBsGzdg> .) And so, America elected, not once or twice, but *four times*, a president who required a wheelchair. *And yet*, that isn't what they saw in the public images that appeared in the newspapers.

Why was it thought necessary to conceal FDR's condition? **Because someone who had a disability -- someone who required accommodation -- would be thought of as *weak*, and people wouldn't support and follow a weak leader.**

(That wasn't so far-fetched. Yes, we've come a long way since the 1930s, but in some ways we haven't.)



Some disabilities, such as FDR's can be hidden. Others cannot.

One of the key figures in the Bible -- THE key figure in four of the five books of the Torah -- had a disability that could not be concealed. That figure is Moses, who had some sort of speech impediment.

It is unclear just what it was, because the words that describe it are ambiguous. In the beginning of the book of Exodus (4:10), Moses describes himself as "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." (כִּבְד־לִשָּׁן וְכִבְד־לִפְתָּיו) Elsewhere, Moses claims that he is a "man of impeded speech" -- literally, "uncircumcised lips" (עָרֵל שְׁפָתַיִם) (Exodus 6:12; see also 6:29-30). What does that mean?

There are many speech impediments. When I was a child, I had trouble with my "l"s and "r"s. I also had a lisp. I couldn't pronounce the letters "s" or "z". And so periodically I was pulled out of class to meet with a speech pathologist, who helped me develop a facility with speech.

Many Biblical interpreters came to understand the Biblical text as implying that Moses was a person who **stuttered**. (See: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/09/was-moses-a-stutterer> ; *Esau's Blessing: How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs*, Ora Horn Prouser, Ben Yehuda Press, 2011; p. 57) The reason is that Moses himself recognized that "his speech disorder [-- whatever it was --] impaired his ability to speak clearly and smoothly to others," which led him to doubt that he was the right person to lead the Israelites. Dr. Ora Horn Prouser suggests three characteristics of Moses' speech that point to stuttering: **frequent silences, surprisingly short speeches, and the requirement of a spokesperson, Moses' brother Aaron**. (Ibid., p. 58)

Do you remember that incident when Moses goes out to visit with his kinsmen and observes an Egyptian hitting an Israelite? If you go back and look closely at it, you will see that Moses doesn't say a word in the entire scene. The next day, he comes back and observes two Israelites fighting. This time he "tries verbal intervention and asks, לָמָּה תִּכֶּה רֵעֶךָ: -- "*Lamah takeh reyecha?*" -- only three words in Hebrew - meaning, "Why are you hitting your fellow?" That's it. That's the sum total of his

verbal intervention. (Note: the next three words attributed to Moses are generally understood to be words he says to himself; see Prouser, Ibid., p. 58, n. 100.)

Then, you may recall, “Moses flees to Midian, saves Jethro’s daughters from shepherds who are bothering them at a well, marries one of the daughters, and has a son with her.” (Ibid., p. 58-59; much of the following paraphrases the text there.) Throughout that entire narrative, he doesn’t say a word the entire time.

Now, Moses is not a coward. He is curious when he sees the Burning Bush, and willing to turn aside. Yet he is hesitant about going to Pharaoh. As Dr. Horn Prouser puts it, the reason is “likely a reaction to his fear of being forced to speak in a public, pressure-filled situation.”

After Moses finally confesses the source of his anguish and pain, God responds surprisingly: “God said to him: Who placed a mouth in human beings? Who makes a person mute or deaf or clear-sighted or blind? Is it not I, God? So now, go! I myself will be there with your mouth and will instruct you as to what you are to say.” (Exodus 4:11-12). God essentially acknowledges responsibility for giving Moses his speech impediment. He goes on to say, **this is not a disqualification.**

Now, you’d think that that would be enough for Moses, and he would simply say, “Fine. Let’s get going.” But he doesn’t. He can’t “transcend his stuttering and resulting feelings of inadequacy and does not willingly agree to God’s plan.” And so God responds by providing Moses with a human “crutch,” namely, his brother Aaron.

Now, was it a good idea to offer Moses this crutch? Or not? Speech pathologists hold differing opinions about devices that help speech-impaired individuals speak more fluently.

Marty Jezer was a political activist and lawyer with a severe stutter. When he appeared in court he worked with another lawyer who did his talking for him. And he also used an electronic device that helps reduce his stuttering. Yet it disappointed him that Moses was ultimately provided with his own spokesperson. He did not see Moses as a role model for that reason.

“Throughout Moses’ career as a leader, there is tension between God’s pushing him to ‘go it alone’ when speaking to the Israelites and God’s providing him with a mouthpiece to help him. This tension leads to periods of frustration and anger on Moses’ part, as well as to periods of growth and accomplishment.

When Moses goes to the Israelites, we know what happens: they don’t listen to him: “Moses spoke to the Children of Israel. But they did not hearken to him, out of shortness of spirit and out of hard servitude.” (וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקָּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה) (Exodus 6:2-9). “Why? Are they too burdened by hard labor to hear any message? Or is it simply too difficult and time-consuming to follow what he is saying? Is his speech so labored and stumbling that they do not have the patience to wait and hear him out? The phrase ‘*kotser ruach*’ ‘shortness of spirit’ can also mean ‘shortness of *breath*.’

If we read this phrase as referring to Moses and not the Israelites, we might infer that the Israelites do not ‘hearken’ because it takes such great effort to listen to one who does not speak fluently.” (Ibid., pp. 64-65)

Thinking of Moses as a stutterer helps us better understand the significance of several key passages in Exodus. For example, even though Moses is a stutterer, he does have periods of apparent fluency, as for example when he chants the Song of the Sea. This shouldn’t surprise us. “Several famous actors and actresses, even some known for their rich voices, stutter. They included James Earl Jones, Bruce Willis, and Marilyn Monroe (Jezer, 239).” (Ibid., p. 66, n. 120) Indeed, years ago, a young man in our congregation who stuttered, chanted from the Torah and chanted the haftarah here in shul on the day he became a bar mitzvah. And the son of an old friend of mine, who happens to have a serious stutter, is the Cantor of the Sutton Place Synagogue in New York City.

On several occasions, “Moses compensates for his disability with political theater. He uses his staff while bringing about various miracles, and he holds up his hands in order to win a war (Exodus 17:11). [Moreover, in today’s parashah,] he shatters the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32:19), and burns and grinds up the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:20) to express himself where words may fail him.” (Ibid., p. 66)

Dr. Prouser thinks that some of Moses' frustration and anger may stem from the fact that the Israelites do not listen to him because of his awkward speech. After all, he is putting forth a superhuman effort to deliver God's word to the Israelites, and yet they don't seem to appreciate it!

This may also explain one of the oddest episodes in the Bible. In Numbers 20, God tells Moses and Aaron to speak to a rock in order to draw out water from it. Previously, God had told him to hit a rock to get water (Exodus 17), but here he challenges him "to use words, rather than a non-verbal action, in an extremely stressful situation." Moses strikes the rock instead. God doesn't withhold water from the people, but he does prohibit Moses from entering the land of Israel.

Why?

Dr. Prouser suggests that perhaps God is giving Moses one last chance to overcome his speech difficulties. Perhaps God is hoping that Moses will recognize that God had chosen him on purpose, stutter and all, and that God will help him say the words. Moses doesn't live up to these hopes. When he is unable to use his faculty of speech in a terribly tight spot, he can no longer lead a people that will soon emerge from the desert. We needn't see this as a punishment, but rather as a recognition that he is no longer the right prophet for the situation. As Israel leaves the desert, God's role changes. He works fewer miracles and no longer is a constant presence. The people need a more confident communicator, who is more comfortable with words than with political theater and dramatic miracles. Because Moses has shown himself unable to fulfill these requirements, God informs him that he is not permitted to enter the Land of Israel.

We've certainly come a long way from the days of the Bible, and even from the days of FDR, and yet we need constantly to remind ourselves that there are many people among us who are disabled or differently abled or who have special needs of one kind or another and that if we are to fulfill our mission as a fully inclusive community, we need to do more than simply tolerate their presence. We have to embrace their presence. I am so grateful to the MHI, the Mental Health Initiative, that has brought so many fine and effective programs to our community over the

past several years, and that consistently reminds us that diversity is nature, and we should embrace that diversity rather than fearing it or excluding it.

I decided to speak about Moses's disability this morning because this month is Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month. You can go online to find out more about that, and about the organization that has created it, an organization that draws on and supports efforts in synagogues of all types, from Renewal to Chabad.

Yes, we know, that if Moses were alive today, he could have been elected President of the United States. But it is also true that the work of inclusivity remains to be completed. We needn't complete the task, but we shouldn't feel free to desist from it.

After all, the next Moses could be sitting here right now.

Shabbat shalom.