

Parashat Vaera
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Parashat Vaera follows a failed attempt by Moses to get Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. And now the Israelites are angry with Moses for interfering because as a consequence Pharaoh intensified their slavery and made their work even harder. On top of that Moses is angry with God for setting him up, for failing to fulfill the divine promise that the Israelites would be freed.

Vaera opens with God charging Moses one more time with the sacred task of leading the people out of Egypt and reassuring Moses of the divine promise of redemption.

In Exodus 6:10-11: God tells Moses and Aaron to return to Pharaoh a second time and to plea for the release of the Jews. Once again, mirroring the episode of the burning bush, Moses initially refuses:

Verse 12:

“But Moses appealed to Adonai, saying, “the Israelites wouldn’t listen to me, how then should Pharaoh listen to me, and I am of uncircumcised lips!”

I want to explore these words with which Moses tries to get out of returning to Pharaoh, of taking his role of redeemer.

Aviva Zornberg offers some striking insights into our parasha in her book on Exodus entitled The Particulars of Rapture. I’ll share some of her thoughts and expand on them a little.

Rashi explains how Moses’s response is a classic example of a *kal vachomer*, an *a fortiori* argument:

If the children of Israel, who have a vested interest in redemption, will not listen to me, then how can I expect Pharaoh, whose interests are clearly opposed to the Jews’ freedom, to listen to me?

And the icing on the cake: “and I am of uncircumcised lips! I can’t speak properly! (Just like the burning bush scene!)

God’s plan for redemption seems to be blocked by all three human protagonists in the story: the Jews, Pharaoh, and Moses himself!

But here's a fair question: in seeking to evade God's plan for him, why didn't Moses just blame the whole thing on Pharaoh's not listening?

Moses and Aaron know already from their own experience that Pharaoh will not listen to their pleas ("who is Adonai that I should listen to Adonai's voice?"). Moses could have easily said to God: what makes you think Pharaoh would listen this second time? What is Moses suggesting by bringing Bnei Yisrael into his reasoning? And what's the connection to him being "arel sefatayim", of uncircumcised lips?

Listen again to his words to God:

"The Israelites would not listen to me; how will Pharaoh listen to me?"

Listen for the repetition of the root "shma" /"listen"

It seems that the problem is a "hearing problem". Neither the Israelites nor Pharaoh can hear, nor can Moses make them listen because he is of uncircumcised lips! We can sense Moses' feelings of impotence to remedy the situation.

But the Sefat Emet turns it all around and suggests that the inwardness, the refusal to listen, causes the verbal blockage. The Sefat Emet hears Moses saying this: Because they will not listen, I am of uncircumcised lips!!!

In the speech and hearing dynamic, we tend to think that speech is what leads to hearing. Speech is the initial stimulus that occasions the hearing by others of that speech. Here, in this teaching, the suggestion is that the dynamic is exactly the opposite, that when you listen, when you're open to hearing, you create the possibility for speech in another.

If there are no listeners, there can be no speech. A prophet can only prophesize if the people listen. Ps 50:7 "listen my people, that I may speak". Even divine revelation becomes silenced if we do not listen.

The Sefat Emet teaches that during the exile in Egypt, the function of language had ceased because no one was listening to each other. In Egypt the Israelites' senses were so blunted from their slavery that they couldn't absorb one another's presence; Bnei Yisrael couldn't hear. And their spiritual suffering made it impossible to hear the redemptive words of Moshe. Because of that, Moses' lips were blocked.

The Zohar called this the exile of the word / galut hadibbur.

Moses, the prophet of redemption, the speaker of freedom -- his words were in exile in Mitzrayim, in the meitzarim, the narrow places of constriction and restraint.

We know only too well from our own lives about this exile of the word, *galut hadibbur*. We know what happens when meaningful communication breaks down between people, particularly between people covenanted to one another: lovers, parents and children, people and their god.

Without the ability or inclination to hear one another, to listen to one another's words, emotions, needs and fears, meaningful speech, the verbal exchange of thoughts and feelings, is impossible.

The effect is that we become distant and estranged from one another, we disconnect.

The danger is that when people stop listening to one another, we stop moving, stop growing. Our relationships become stagnant and unchanging.

To offer a controversial example: the debate in the US over gun control is at a fever pitch. Everyone is talking about it: families, friends, communities, newspapers, radio programs, TV shows. Some, however, are yelling about it. Just Youtube the recent exchange between Piers Morgan and Alex Jones, the huge gun advocate and radio host. His diatribe on the show filled with venom for Piers Morgan and others in favor of gun control and him practically threatening civil war was terrifying. As people say, Alex Jones on Piers Morgan was the best advertisement for tighter gun legislation.

The deeper issue plaguing the debate over gun violence is that neither side is really open to hearing the other. It's difficult for those shocked and terrified by the gun violence in the US to really listen to the reasoning of those who insist on the freedom to own firearms. In my own principled opposition to guns, I'm sure I'm guilty of this deafness. And it's difficult for those who own firearms to listen to the concerns of those who think there is no place for weapons in our society. But whatever side you take, no matter how articulate you may be or how loud you may yell, there is no real dialogue without the necessary precondition of a willingness to listen on the part of your opponent.

The question is WHY are we unable to listen? Why is it that we sometimes stop being able to hear those around us? Even those we love?

Because of our fear: our fear of change and our fear of becoming vulnerable; our fear of death, and our fear of life. And because of our fear of being wrong.

Fear is a defensive strategy that makes hearing, and consequently speech, impossible. Fear narrows our channels and closes our openings.

In the story of the Exodus, we know the Israelites feared their freedom as much as they yearned for it. Later scenes in the Torah have the Jews begging to return to Egypt and complaining about the conditions in the desert. They're terrified of the uncertainty of the freedom for which they yearned.

And we know how we too call up various measures of defense to hide from the challenges and risks of change and growth. We too find ways to stick our fingers in our ears so as not to hear the calls, to silence the voices of those around us who may ask hard or inconvenient things of us, requiring us to change. We experience this in our personal relationships, in politics, in confrontations between enemies.

So how do we overcome our fears? How do we return to the powers of listening and speaking? How did Moses eventually come to take his place as not just a speaker of words, but as the speaker of God's words to a nation of listeners, a world of listeners, listeners not even born yet at the moment he spoke? How do we learn to listen to one another so that we actually talk to one another?

I'll offer three quick thoughts on becoming better listeners:

1. Learn to listen not only to words spoken to us but to what's behind the words. When Sarah tells Abraham to banish Hagar, God says, "Sh'ma Bekolah", Listen to her voice. Most read that and think God is telling Abraham to do as she says, which he does. But others understand God to be saying more literally, "listen to her voice" and not just her words. What is her voice telling you about how she's feeling? Does the quality and tone of her voice reveal that she is scared? Vulnerable? Ashamed? Angry? What are the feelings behind her words? Maybe you don't have to accept at face value what's coming out of her mouth. Maybe there's room to discuss and compromise when you listen for what's behind the words that are shared.

We may not always be moved to accept the concrete ideas coming out the mouths of people speaking to us but we might be able to respond to

the feelings behind them and be able to create productive exchanges that way, inviting more words and more speech through more expansive and compassionate listening.

2. In order to listen better to the others with whom we share our lives and our planet, we must work on cultivating courage and confidence in a world filled with difference. We have to find that point of inner validation that is independent of needing everyone else to agree with our points of view. If we could reach a place where we didn't feel threatened or undermined by the presence of values and opinions different from our own we may be able to listen more to one another and consequently achieve better dialogue between us. That doesn't require relinquishing our views, but it does require relinquishing the notion that our views are perfect for all people and for all circumstances.

Of the most compelling lessons I learned in rabbinical school 25 years ago came from one of our teachers, Rabbi Joel Roth: Pluralism doesn't mean the other's right to be wrong; it means their right to be right.

That's not an easy idea to embrace; but it's a worthy one.

3. The Sefat Emet spoke about the many things we have within us that block our ability to hear. And he spoke about the importance of emptying ourselves of those distractions in order to clear the passages of hearing and to invite speech and dialogue. How do we empty ourselves? Through contemplative practices of prayer, meditation, song, even study, but also through memory.

Recall the moments and stories in our lives as individuals and as a people that clarify for us who we are, what matters to us, what it is that we believe. By listening to those stories we unclutter ourselves of the feelings or judgments which clog our sensory pathways and reopen ourselves to hearing the call to live righteously and purposefully, and reopen the possibility of speech to articulate that call. For this reason, taught the Sefat Emet, the Amidah prayer in our morning services is preceded by the retelling of the Exodus. For our memories of being liberated from oppression open our ability to hear the call to be liberators ourselves and move us to speak with love and loyalty to the ultimate divine Liberator. As the Amidah begins, *Adonai Sefatai Tiftach Ufi Yagid Tehilatecha*, Adonai, open my lips and let my mouth speak your praises.

I'll close with this thought: Isn't it interesting that in the closest thing we have to a creed, the Shema, the demand is not that we proclaim

anything, as in the Muslim tradition where the Shahaada, the verbal declaration of belief in Allah and in Mohammed his prophet is key to spiritual communion. Our creed demands not a verbal expression but an auditory one: Shema Yisrael – Listen Israel. Our creed challenges us to be open to the sounds and messages of the world around us. Because it is our openness, our listening, that will prompt the world, God, nature, and humanity, to speak to us and that will allow us to be dialogue with all of creation.

Shema Yisrael. Listen.

Shabbat Shalom.