

MOSHE'S HIDDEN STUTTERS

Shemot 5779

I.

PICTURE MOSHE RABBENU IN YOUR MINDS. What do you see? What does he look like? Here's the thing – despite how focal a figure Moshe is, there's absolutely nothing from the Torah we can glean to know what he looked like. And this is frustrating because we all try to picture him as we read the story. At best, there's one throwaway line in which Moshe, having fled to Midian, is described as an *ish mitzri*, “an Egyptian man” (Ex. 2:19). So, take that picture in your mind and make it so that he's Egyptian – more Arabian than European, more Moshe from DreamWorks' *Prince of Egypt* than Charles Heston in *The Ten Commandments*. But that's it. The Torah has no interest in describing Moshe in any detail whatsoever. And the simple reason is because the Torah isn't a history book, it's a theological treatise. What matters about Moshe is not how he looked but what he said: it's the *mitzvot* he teaches and his role as God's spokesman that matters.

But this makes the one thing we do know about Moshe striking. Despite his main role being teaching and talking, he's not very good at it. As he states after being charged by God to go to Pharaoh and demand before him and his court the deliverance of the Jewish people:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּלָּה גַם מִשְׁלֵשָׁם גַּם מֵאָז
דְּבַרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פֶּה וְכְבֹד לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי:

But Moses said to the LORD, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Ex. 4:10)

Moshe has a speech impediment. As translated by Rashi into Old French, *balbus*, a stammer. And while God agrees to let Aharon, Moshe's brother, speak on his behalf before Pharaoh, there is barely a *parashah* we will read nor story we will encounter that will not contain Moshe either speaking to God or the Jewish people. The entirety of *Sefer Devarim* is one long speech!

And this, I think, is fascinating. We struggle to picture Moshe in the Torah because we don't have any information. But we all ignore the one thing we know: Moshe's stutter. Every time we hear his voice in the Torah we should hear it differently. The *pesukim* we read should, to use the description by the World Health Organization, “be disrupted by involuntary repetitions and prolongations of sounds, syllables, words or phrases as well as involuntary silent pauses or blocks in which [Moshe] is unable to produce sounds.” *Moshe should stammer through every verse.*

II.

So then why does God choose Moshe? Why is the most vocal figure in the Torah also the one with a speech impediment? This question clearly bothers enough commentators, *Chazal* included, who

suggest that either God removed Moshe's stutter permanently or temporarily, or, alternatively, suggest that every time Moshe speaks it's actually Aharon serving as his mouthpiece. Others go even further still and understand Moshe's condition not as a physical disability but merely an inability to speak Egyptian fluently before Pharaoh. But, both in the understanding of many commentators as well as the *peshat*, the literal meaning of the Torah itself, Moshe's speech impediment remains and permeates almost every verse. So why is Moshe chosen by God?

I came across an answer that comes close to the one I wish to share soon by Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, the 12th-century tosafist and biblical commentator. He argues that the greatest leader of the Jewish people had a speech impediment to teach us that God's will can be manifest through anyone. God intentionally chose someone who struggled to speak to illustrate His own power. But here the focus is on God and not Moshe. I would like to flip it. God intentionally chose someone who struggled to speak to illustrate that disability need not impede our relationship with God nor prevent our religious growth.

III.

Honestly, I don't think I am speaking to a group of people who need to hear this message. I am proud to be the rabbi of a shul that would not think twice about acting no different should someone with a disability walk into our shul. But I am speaking in a building whose walls need to hear this message.

Our building is historic. And while that brings great beauty, it is not built to accommodate the needs of all Jews, especially in the 21st-century. In 1912, the clientele of this shul was different. There was no need to create a place more inclusive of women – something that, this week, we have continued to redress by enlarging the downstairs *ezrat nashim* – and there was no need to consider accessibility. But now, over a century after this building was first built, it is time to change that.

A committee led by Shelley Greene has begun working with the Ruderman Foundation to come up with ways to make our sanctuary more accessible to those with needs, be they physical or cognitive. It will be a slow process and there are limits to what can be done – but the goal is for our shul to testify to something we all believe and the Torah emphasises: disability is never a barrier to God. In fact, as the Torah tells us, the one person who talked face-to-face with God struggled to express himself with humans.

Our sanctuary must express that same belief. Regardless of a person's disabilities, they can talk to God. They can achieve the ultimate religious heights. We all need to remember this every time we hear Moshe's stutters hidden in the Torah's verses.