

The “Wrong” Choice  
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One day in 1943, more than a decade before the event that made her famous, Rosa Parks boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, through the front door. This was, completely prohibited for an African American and the driver, one James F. Blake, insisted that she disembark from the bus and reboard “properly,” through the rear door. Fearing a violent reprisal, she exited per Blake’s instructions, though in the meantime, Blake roared off and she never boarded that bus. Parks vowed that she would never again ride a bus driven by James Blake, arranging her schedule to avoid buses he drive and sometimes waiting for another bus to come by if she saw him driving. Just over sixty years ago, on December 1, 1955, she boarded the bus without paying attention to who was behind the wheel. Sure enough, it was her old nemesis. Suddenly, the memories from her previous humiliation surfaced and she gathered the courage to withstand the relish with which he enforced the evil laws in place. In so doing, Rosa Parks became the symbol of the Civil Rights movement, but in truth, she was an unlikely heroine. In her book “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can’t Stop Talking,” Susan Cain wrote, “I had always imagined Rosa Parks as a stately woman with a bold temperament, someone who could easily stand up to a busload of glowering passengers. But when she died in 2005 at the age of ninety-two, the flood of obituaries recalled her as soft-spoken, sweet, and small in stature. They said she was “timid and shy” but had “the courage of a lion.” They were full of phrases like “radical humility” and

"quiet fortitude." ” How does someone like this change the course of American history, through one act of inaction?

Parashas Shemos introduces us to the complex and enigmatic figure of Moshe, as he transitions from pampered prince in Pharaoh’s palace to the savior of a beleaguered nation. What is most remarkable about this transition is that its subject, Moshe, was not a likely candidate for the role. No fewer than three times (four if you count next week’s Torah reading), Moshe protested vociferously to the call of leadership.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם מִנְשֻׁלָּשׁ גַּם מֵאֵז דְּבָרָךְ אֶל עַבְדְּךָ פִּי כֹבֵד פֶּה וְכֹבֵד לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי.

Please, God, don’t choose me. I’m not a man of words, not yesterday, not two days ago, not since You have spoken to your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and tongue.

The Medrash (Shemos Rabbah 1) tells a story I think many of us have heard, the story of baby Moshe, seated on Pharaoh’s lap in the royal residence. Pharaoh’s sorcerers had predicted that his throne would be usurped by a young Hebrew boy, and Pharaoh’s advisors were certain Moshe was the one. A heated discussion ensued in which the advisors debated whether to burn the baby or simply kill him, until Yitro spoke up. “He’s just a baby; He has no sense! Here, let’s conduct a simple test. Place a bowl of coals and a bowl of gold coins in front of the child. If he reaches for the gold, we will know that he is capable of rational thought, and is therefore dangerous. If not, he is safe.” The angel Gabriel took Moshe’s hand and pushed it into the coals, and he put it in his

mouth to extinguish it. From then on, he had a speech impediment- hence his self description as being of heavy mouth and tongue.

Ever the *pashtan*, focusing on the simple meaning of the text, the Rashbam (Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir) rejects this Midrashic account. How could a person who spoke to God face to face, and conveyed His word to the masses, have a speech impediment? The very idea is ridiculous, says the Rashbam, without any basis in the Mishna or the Talmud. Instead, the Rashbam explained that what Moshe had was difficulty *communicating*. He was not fluent in Egyptian, having left the palace as a young boy. The Sforno explains further that Moshe felt he was a poor public speaker who felt unable to craft an articulate argument in the and present it to a powerful person. These explanations may hew closer to the simple meaning of the text, but fail to answer a simple question. Whether Moshe's problem was a matter of speech pathology or speech class, why was he chosen to be the spokesperson and leader for the Jewish people? Surely someone more eloquent or articulate could have been chosen for this lofty task?

Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven, living in Gerona in 14th century Spain, answered this question in his work *Derashot Haran*, the work in which he explicated fundamental principles of Judaism. According to Rabbeinu Nissim, Moshe was not chosen *in spite* of his linguistic difficulties, but *because* of them. The pages of history are replete with sociopathic, silver tongued orators who have espoused the most despicable and mendacious ideas, yet have swayed vast multitudes to do their nefarious bidding through their eloquence and the force of their personalities. As the Ran put it, והשקר ממנו יהשב אמת, lies from such people will be considered the truth. In order to show

that the message was the key and not the medium, God created a situation in which the deliverer of the message was poorly suited to the task, through an inability to speak the language, lack of familiarity with royal idiom or poor public speaking skills.

The lesson of Moshe's selection as leader is a powerful one for us as well. Of course, we should always be aware and be wary of leaders who lead through charisma alone; often, these kinds of people are extremely talented- and extremely dangerous. Just this past week, the New York Times ran an article about a sick and dangerous man named Marc Gafni, a former Rabbi who has reinvented himself numerous times, this time attempting to position himself as a spiritual Guru. Gafni leaves a trail of carnage in every position he has occupied, whether betrayed wives or dozens, if not hundreds of other women he has sexually abused. He is able to do this because he is an enormously charismatic person who conveys what people consider to be deep thoughts, and is able to seduce people through his magnetic personality. There is a reason the Torah did not speak of any individual heroes once the Jewish people coalesced into a nation, but rather, it focused on nation building. Moshe isn't even given a name until his story is placed into the context of broader enslavement, because he was a part of the story and not its main character. Being swayed by silver tongues, shtick and stories is not an expression of freedom, per the Ran's reading. It is just another, more enticing form of slavery. The lesson for us is critical. We often evaluate ideas, initiatives, institutions and individuals less on their content and more on their packaging. Is there a gimmick of some kind, some kind of hook or flashy literature surrounding it? What do we think of the person who is pitching the idea? When we place an emphasis on these considerations, we run the risk of evaluating projects based on concerns that are extrinsic to

their intrinsic worthiness. We may end up supporting an inferior or even a dangerous cause solely because we like the person pitching it or are moved by his or her passion for the cause, or withholding support from a worthy one for the opposite reason. It's true as well when it comes to the way we experience religion, and especially Torah; there is a danger that content can take a back seat to charisma in choosing from whom to learn. As a result, we may choose antiheroes as our spiritual lodestars because we are moved by who we think they are. The corollary is true as well; sometimes we close off opportunities for growth because we somehow don't like, don't connect or aren't "wowed" by a person or an important project that may have a great deal to offer. One of the greatest Rabbinic leaders of the 20th Century was a person who completely lacked any charisma and any trappings of shtick. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l did not speak in soundbites, all his positions- and, indeed, everything he ever said- were carefully weighed and nuanced, he was not a flashy dresser or impassioned public speaker, though he spoke with passion. After his passing, there was a collective outpouring of grief from so many who were his students, and others who never studied with him but who were students of his thought and his Torah teachings. What many were afraid to admit, and only did so with great reluctance, was that he was difficult to understand. It was said at Gush that Rav Lichtenstein's shiur was difficult to understand on four levels:

1. It was an extremely sophisticated presentation of complex Talmudic topics that required great concentration to understand, and serious review to appreciate fully.
2. It was in Hebrew, hard to understand for Americans who have been failed by contemporary Modern Orthodox education such that they graduate after 12 years of it and are unable to speak the language.

3. His Hebrew was literary and flowery, not attuned to the idiom of even his Israeli students.
4. He mumbled and spoke in a monotone.

But what a world of ideas he inhabited, and what a treasure trove awaited those who were willing to listen! This is the message of Moshe's choice as leader- that the truth he spoke was much bigger than any self promotion, any external charisma and any gimmicks. Rosa Parks succeeded because it was time for the idea she embodied to come to fruition, such that the civil rights movement was way bigger than one person. No wonder the civil rights movement saw its antecedents in Moshe's struggle against his people's enslavement, because the lesson of her success was taught by Moshe long before- and is still relevant to us today. If we learn her lesson, we will be freed of the slavery of charisma, and will choose content and meaning in our lives.