

Shemos

Tongue Un-tied

Moshe replied to Hashem, "Please, Lord, I am not a man of words, not since yesterday, not the day before that...for I am heavy of mouth, and heavy of speech."

Shemos 4:10

Moshe tells Hashem about his trouble speaking. When Moshe was a child, says the Midrash,¹

the daughter of Pharaoh would kiss and hug Moshe as though he was her own. She would not let him leave the royal Palace because Moshe was so beautiful that everyone desired to gaze upon him. Should a person see him, he was unable to tear himself away from him. Pharaoh would kiss him and hug him, and Moshe would take the crown from Pharaoh's head and place it on his own, as he would eventually do as an adult. The advisers of Pharaoh were concerned that this was the very child that they had foretold would usurp the throne of Pharaoh. Some suggested beheading him. Others suggest burning him at the stake. Yisro sat among them, and told them, "This child is not yet intelligent. Test him. Bring him a platter with a burning coal, and a piece of gold. If he chooses the gold, he is then intelligent and you may kill him; but should he choose the coal, he is not yet developed, and thus, you will see that his motions for the crown are insignificant." Moshe began to reach for the gold, when the angel Gavriel² came down and guided his hand toward the coal. Moshe picked it up and put it in his mouth, and it burned him. Thus he became "heavy of mouth, and heavy of speech."

What an unusual story. Was Yisro a fool? And how about the others with him? What child would not choose the shiny gold!?

The nature of Moshe's speech problem sounds like a lisp. And in fact, there are many who have interpreted the Torah to mean this.³ But R. Yosef Rosen, the Rogatchover Gaon,⁴ tells us something else. He explains that Moshe is so closely identified with the Torah that he could speak no other language but Lashon Hakodesh!⁵

1 Shemos Rabbah 1:26

2 This is not the first time that we find Gavriel looking out for Moshe. See also the comments to R. Bechaya to Shemos 2:6, where he quotes the midrash (Shemos Rabbah 1:28; see also Sotah 12b) that Gavriel hit Moshe in order to cause him to cry so that Pharaoh's daughter would have pity on him. Interestingly, Gavriel also shows up when Shlomo marries another "daughter of Pharaoh," but this time, he was forced to plant the seeds for Esav's ultimate ascent (Sanhedrin 21b). See *Maharsha* there.

3 Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ralbag and R. Bechaya quoting R. Chananel to Shemos 4:10. See also *Hakesav Vehakabbalah*.

4 In his *Tzaphnas Paneach*, ad loc.

5 A similar idea is found in Rashbam: "I am not proficient in Egyptian." Chizkuni adds that this was

This presents a problem. Toward the end of the Torah, Moshe teaches and writes the entire Torah in all seventy languages.⁶ Now, this clearly means that he was familiar with more than just Lashon Hakodesh. At Sinai, every word that came from Hashem's mouth immediately broke off and was expressed in all seventy languages.⁷ Now, if the Torah was only in Lashon Hakodesh – and thus, Moshe could speak only Lashon Hakodesh – what happened at Sinai that the Torah was now in all these languages? Herein lies the answer:

Language is our way of making sense of things. It is the way that we perceive the world. The Rambam⁸ makes much of the fact that in Lashon Hakodesh, some words do not exist. For, the way that we express things is ultimately the way that we think them. Words are the raw materials of thought; we cannot think without them. Each language is another manner of approaching the world. At the conclusion of the incident with the Tower of Babel, Hashem made certain that there would never be such unity for evil again by dividing the world into seventy languages. It would be silly to think that this would be accomplished simply by the language barrier. After all, they could have simply taught themselves a universal language – like Esperanto – and reunited. They were torn apart because suddenly, they could not understand one another. The one language that they all had spoken had united them, for they all thought alike. But this was no longer.⁹

God chose the Jewish people from among all other “nations and tongues.”¹⁰ The fact that we speak different languages is truly significant. The Jews in Egypt did not change their language.¹¹ At Sinai, the Torah went from being abstract divine wisdom to being part of this

due to the fact that Moshe left Egypt as a young man, and by the age of eighty, had forgotten Egyptian.

6 Dvarim 1:5; see Rashi and *Haamek Davar*, ad loc. See also Sotah 35b, and Bereishis Rabbah 49

7 Shabbos 88b

8 *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:8

9 See Rashi to Sanhedrin 109a, where he asserts that no longer could they band together in following false doctrines because of the lack of a common language.

10 Morning prayers – *Bircas Kriyas Shema*

11 Bamidbar Rabbah 13:19 tells of three merits through which the Jewish people deserved redemption. They did not change their names or their language, and they guarded themselves from immoral relationships. Another midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:22, Midrash Tehillim 114) adds a fourth: “They did not reveal one another’s secrets.” Shir Hashirim Rabbah 4:25 and *Pesikta DiRav Cabanah* 11:6, substitute that with the similar, “They did not speak *lashon hara*.” Nowhere that I have been able to find does it state that the Jews did not change their clothing, and thus merited redemption. *Beis Halevi* to Shemos 1:1 quotes Yalkut Shimoni to Balak 768, which states that Jews among exile do not change their “clothing, food, bodies and entranceways.” He uses it to refer to the Egyptians, which is not clear from the context of the Midrash. That midrash, however, does not say that this was the reason that they were redeemed, and thus, the source for this oft-quoted “midrash” remains elusive. Buber, in his edition of *Pesikta Drabbi Kahane*, ch. 10 (3) made the same observation – that there is no such midrash. However, the encyclopedic R. Mendel Kasher (*Torah Shleima*, Shemos, Miluim 3) points out that in the *Lekach Tov* (Dvarim 26:5), there is a statement made that they did not change their clothing, though it does not say that this is the reason that the Jews were redeemed. He also mentions the many who understood the words of the Hagaddah saying that “the Jewish people stood out there” to mean that their clothing was unique. These include Ritva, Kol Bo and Abarbanel. R. Kasher mentions the verse in Zephania 1:8 as the source for this idea. However, in a later publication [*Torah Shleima* to Vaera, *bosafa* 2], R. Kasher writes that he discovered that in the early Kushta manuscript of Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah, it is, in fact, written that

Earth. The Torah was now “down here” and became accessible to all of mankind. The Torah’s reach was no longer limited to the Heavens; it could now be found through every individual’s intellect, via any possible way of thinking. The Torah could now be understood in seventy languages. It was then that Moshe learned to speak all other languages.¹² He was one with the Torah, and now that the Torah was in every language, his speech trouble disappeared entirely.

The Torah was now in this world, and the more physical parts of the universe now truly had the opportunity to be elevated by the Torah. Moshe’s physical body was now entirely holy. A light shone from him like the sun, for he had spent time in Heaven, living like an angel. His food had been Torah. Our bodies need physical food, but Moshe’s body had been elevated. The Torah was now able to reside in the physical.

Speech is a result of the combination of the physical and the spiritual. The expression of ideas in language is only needed because we are not beings of pure intellect. Thus, when Moshe became so spiritually advanced, but he remained a body, his ability to speak properly was off. The proportions were askew, for he was so much holier than his body. After he descended from Heaven, this was no longer the case. He was now physical, and his body no longer was out of sync with his soul. It was holy, too.

Moshe was more than just a man. When he was born, a light filled the room.¹³ He was perfect, in a way that no other person can ever dream of objectively reaching. Whereas Aaron, his brother, had to work for everything he had, Moshe rejoiced in “the gift of his portion.”¹⁴ On some level, he did not work for his greatness the way others had to.¹⁵ Moshe had an “angel” around him all the time, pushing him away from the physical

the Jews left Egypt in the merit of not changing their names, language and clothing, and that this was somehow left out in all subsequent printings!

12 Dvarim Rabbah 1:1 tells us that at Sinai, Moshe was cured of his speech problem. Thus, according to the Rogatchover, that his impediment was an inability to speak other languages, he was now capable of being multilingual. See *Sifsei Kohan* to Shemos 6:12, where he discussed this Midrash in light of the statement that in Egypt, “speech” was in exile along with the Jews.

13 Sotah 12a

14 Shacharis of Shabbos morning

15 *Kobeles Yitzchak* to Shemos. See also *Zohar*, vol. 1, 120b: “From the day that Moshe was born, the Shechina [Divine Presence] never departed from him.” See also the comments of R. Chaim Palagi in his *Chaim Ligufo* (Osiyos Gedolos, *tes*) where he explains that the letter *tes* in the word *tov* is written more largely in the Torah than the rest of the word to emphasize that Moshe was perfectly good. He also explains that this is why the letter *tes* is enlarged in the first *tov* of Koheles 7:1 – “*tov shem mishemen tov*” (a good name is better than fine oil)” – to teach us that just as oil does not mix with any other liquid, true *tov* is completely free of anything even remotely bad. There is the fascinating account of the Tiferes Yisrael (at the end of Meseches Kiddushin, 77) where he tells a story that he “saw written a lovely thing: When Moshe took the Jews out of Egypt, the nations of the world heard of it, and trembled. They were in awe of Moshe, who was the conduit for all of these miracles. One Arab king sent his best artist to sketch this great leader, and bring back his work. The artist did this and returned to the king. The king gathered his wise men together and asked them to tell him about Moshe based upon his looks and proportions. Every single wise man replied that this picture was that of a wicked man, arrogant and greedy. Every single flaw that a man could have was present in this man. The king was furious. ‘Is this some sort of a prank?’ he wondered. Those present feared for their lives. The artist claimed that his

world. He did not have the normal desires that we all have to reach for the gold. Moshe was simply not interested.¹⁶ If his base instincts were to pressure him to reach for the physical world, there was an angel there to stop him. What Pharaoh mistook for a lack of intelligence was, in fact, a lack on the side of physical desires; it goes without saying that our teacher Moshe lacked no intelligence at all!

Yisro sacrificed his position later in life, running away to Midian, order to prevent the death of Moshe.¹⁷ That being the case, why on earth did he suggest this plot to Pharaoh – could he have known that Moshe would choose the coal? Perhaps he did. Perhaps Yisro knew that for someone to lead the Jewish people out of exile, to stand up to Pharaoh and truly bring the Jews from the deepest levels of impurity to the Mountain of Sinai, he would have to be more than a man. Yisro knew that to lead the people of Israel to greatness would not be possible unless one would have the supernatural ability to completely ignore physical pleasures. Moshe was indifferent. He spoke only Lashon Hakodesh, the language of Heaven. Those who were too physical, like Pharaoh, could not speak Lashon Hakodesh.¹⁸ Until Sinai, Moshe spoke no other language, for he was removed in a real way from the physical world. But he came down from Sinai a different man. Moshe's body was now holy.¹⁹ He could now speak any language,

rendition was accurate, and the wise men had erred. The wise men blamed it on the artist. The king got in his chariot and traveled to the Jewish camp. He saw Moshe from afar and, sure enough, the picture was accurate. He went to Moshe's tent, bowed to him and told his story. Moshe replied, 'Your wise men are, indeed, quite wise. Know this: If I were perfect as I am now naturally, what would be the great accomplishment of that? I am not embarrassed to tell you that all of those flaws that your wise men listed are, indeed, part of my nature, but with great strength, I have managed to conquer them.'"

This story is contested by one Torah giant after another. The Tiferes Yisrael was denounced for this story, and a small pamphlet called "Klil Tiferes" was published disproving the validity of this story. In fact, however, the Tiferes Yisrael is not to blame for anything more than the incredible success of his *sefer*. For, though the story became famous through his commentary, it had been published just over fifty years before in a *sefer* called *Ohr Pnei Moshe*. (See R. Menachem M. Kasher's *Torah Shleima* to Shemos, where he cites this source.) Aside from the fact that it has no source in previous Torah literature – though there is such a story in the *Shita Mikubetztes* to Nedarim (at the end of chapter 3), which is, in fact, just a story of two scholars, one of whom looked naturally like a wicked man – it is also not in sync with the things that we know about Moshe. For example, we are told in Brachos 32b that for Moshe, the fear of G-d was a very simple thing. In fact, this very same story is told about Aristotle in other sources, and even about Socrates elsewhere. (The sources regarding Aristotle and Socrates can be found in *Ishim Utekufo*s of Rabbi Mordechai Hakohen, in the chapter titled "Pnei Moshe.") It thus seems that the approach that most commentaries take – that Moshe was closer to perfection by his very nature – is a mainstream approach, and that this account is not an alternative opinion, but rather entirely false, of a dubious and unreliable source. Regarding overcoming the personality traits that are embedded in one's face, see Chida's *Midbar Kedemos*, *maareches peh*, 6.

16 See Targum Yonason to Dvarim 32:1: "Moshe was close to Heaven and distant from Earth."

17 Shemos Rabbah 1:9

18 I was pleased to find R. Moshe Shapiro's discussion of this very point in *Afikei Mayim*, Chanukah, 12. In a parenthetical note, he explains why it was that (according to Sotah 36b) Yosef could not learn any language other than Hebrew until the letter *beh* was added to his name. He explains that since we know that this world was created with the letter *beh* (see Rashi to Bereishis 2:4), Yosef could not relate to the more physical ways of perceiving the world without the addition of the letter *beh*, which connected him to this world in the proper way.

19 In fact, this very idea is found in *Meshech Chochmah* to Shemos 20:18. He explains the differences between Moshe and Aaron as relating to the personalities of Hillel and Shammai. See also *Chiddushei Harim* to

for the Torah is here. There is no area of our lives to which it does not apply. There is no person that it does not speak to, in his own language. Our bodies are not too distant from the Torah, and neither is our past. There is nothing in our lives that cannot be influenced, and made better and more meaningful, by the Torah. Our relationships are enhanced and elevated by it. Everything that we do will be touched and changed for the better by the Torah, if only we will allow it. And we must know that everything we do – in any language – must be done according to the Torah. For the Torah reaches every person, on any level, in any country, and in his native language.

Tu Bishvat (published along with his *chiddushim* on Chumash in the back of several of his other published works), where he explains that the first letters of the words “*Hu yihyeh licha lipel*” spell out “Hillel,” and the last letters of “*lo ish dvarim anochi*” spell “Shammai.” Moshe could not be understood well before Sinai, much the way that we cannot live as Shammai did, and that his words don’t reach us. Thus, Hillel is the one who tells us to learn from Aaron, to “love creatures and bring them close to the Torah!” Moshe, on Mount Sinai, was told by Hashem, “*Haya licha liozraini*” – the first letters of which spell “Hillel,” as the Arizal points out! Moshe transformed into a Hillel on Sinai. R. Avraham Palagi, in his *Avraham Es Einav* to Shabbos 88b, explains that this is what was behind the interaction between Moshe and the angels when he came to receive the Torah. They asked Hashem, “What is this child of a woman doing among us?” But they did not understand that when a man grows great, and does *tshuva* for his failings, he receives a new soul, and is no longer simply born of a woman, but rather of a spiritual source. Thus, he is no longer a “child of a woman.” Hashem, therefore, told Moshe, “Give them a *tshuva* [response],” really hinting to him to “reply to them explaining the concept of *tshuva*.” Moshe went up and was perceived as a “*yelud isha*,” but his job up there was to explain to the angels that, in fact, it is man’s failings that make him great. He showed that it is this that makes us great. See also similar comments in *Einei Shmuel* (Rabin) to Brachos 32a, s.v. *vayidaber*. See also *Maharsha* to Horayos 12a, s.v. *sheyotzasa*, where he describes Moshe as the most developed man ever intellectually, and Aaron as the most developed man ever in his character. It would seem that character development is related to the challenge that one encounters along the way, and thus, Aaron, who was imperfect from birth, grew to be great as a result of the challenge. But intellectual knowledge and is not a product of struggle alone, and thus, Moshe, who was born perfect and Godly, was a better candidate for perfection in that area.