

Communication Disorders in Tanach and in Judaism

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When G-d reveals Himself to Moshe through the burning bush, G-d commands Moshe to go to Pharaoh and tell him to free the enslaved Jewish people. Perhaps Moshe's most heavily discussed expression of hesitancy is when he says, (Exodus 4:10) "Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words, not since yesterday nor since the day before yesterday, nor since You first spoke to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech." The verses imply that Moshe had a communication disorder. This theory is supported by numerous incidents throughout Moshe's life where he acted out through non-verbal means, rather than verbally expressing his frustration. For example, *Chumash* relates a story of Moshe witnessing an Egyptian beating a Jewish slave and Moshe responding by killing the Egyptian. Moshe's temperament is further seen when he sees the Jews worshipping the golden calf and responds by smashing the tablets, as well as when he becomes angry with the Jewish people and hits, rather than speaks to, the rock as G-d commanded him. As a result, Moshe is told that he will not be leading the Jewish nation into the Land of Israel [1].

The exact nature of Moshe's communication disorder has sparked much debate among scholars in both Rabbinic and modern times. Perhaps the best-known explanation appears in the *Shmot Rabbah* (1:26), which relates a story of how Moshe tried on Pharaoh's crown, an action that was perceived to symbolize that Moshe would overthrow Pharaoh. To determine if Moshe should be put to death, Pharaoh devised a test. He put two bowls in front of Moshe, one holding his crown and the other holding hot coals. If Moshe would take the crown, he would be killed, but if he took the hot coals he would be availed of any suspicion. Moshe grabbed the burning coals and put them in his mouth, causing his tongue, and possibly other parts of his

mouth, to be burned, resulting in permanent speech impediments.

Another view of Moshe's communication disorder focuses on his description of being both *kvad peh* (heavy of mouth) and *kvad lashon* (heavy of lips). When used elsewhere in the *Tanach*, the word "*peh*" is always used in reference to the physical mouth, while the word "*lashon*" is used for language. Moshe's reference to being heavy of mouth implies that he may have had a physical deformity. Moreover, Moshe refers to his lips as being uncircumcised. Throughout the Torah, the lack of circumcision is referred to as a physical defect. Furthermore, Moshe's mother, Yocheved, "looked at him and saw that he was good" (Exodus 2:2) and subsequently hid him for three months. Usually, when the Torah tells of a child being born, it does not say that the mother looked him over. Why are we told that she hid him, despite seeing that he was good? Perhaps Yocheved hid him because of some physical defect, but she looked at him and knew he was worth saving. Uncircumcised lips could be referring to a congenital disorder known as cleft lip, which is accompanied by a cleft palate in two thirds of cases [2]. This condition is the fourth most frequent major birth defect, according to the American Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Association. This defect is more common in males, except for the presence of only a cleft palate which occurs equally in both genders. Cleft lip and/or palate occur when the palatine processes do not fuse properly to form the palate, which separates the oral and nasal cavities (this process takes place *in utero* during the first trimester). When this physical abnormality exists, the person is not able to pronounce certain sounds correctly due to a lack of intraoral pressure [3]. If Moshe in fact had a cleft lip, he would have been disqualified from serving as a *Kohain*, therefore causing the status to be granted to the family of his brother, Aharon [2].

Moshe was not the only prophet to have a speech disorder. When Moshe said that he is "heavy of tongue," he could be referring to a stutter. *Me'am Loez* comments on Amos 1:1 that, "According to the sages, he was called Amos because he was 'heavy laden' in speech. He found speaking difficult." The *Midrash Rabbah* on *Kohelet* (1:2) discusses how *Kohelet* received its name, and digresses to discuss meanings of other biblical names, stating that Amos was called so because he was "*Amus bilshono*," which is translated as heavy of tongue. Another disorder that makes speech difficult is stuttering, which is also known as dysfluency, and is characterized by a speaker repeating syllables or words while trying to produce speech. Dysfluency appears more in males than females by a ratio of three to one and usually surfaces between the ages of two and seven [5]. While an etiology for stuttering has not been isolated, biological, psychological, and environmental factors have all been suggested as contributing to dysfluency. Many say that Moshe had a stutter, which may have resulted from the story relayed in the *Midrash* [4]. People who stutter often fear situations in which they are forced to speak; therefore, Moshe having a stutter would go along with his resistance in terms of speaking to Pharaoh.

Another place in *Tanach* where one can find a communication disorder is in *Sefer Shoftim*. Shortly after Yiftach *HaGiladi* defeated the nation of Amon, he became involved in a dispute with the tribe of Ephraim. As a result, Yiftach assembled the Gileadites and waged a civil war on the Ephratites. Further, Yiftach advised the Gileadites to ask anyone who attempted to cross the Jordan River to say a code word, "*shibolet*." If the person mispronounced the code word as "*sibolet*," the Gileadites would know that this individual was from the tribe of Ephraim and would then kill him (Judges 12:1-6). Apparently, a speech disorder prevented members of this tribe from pronouncing the "sh" sound, which is a postalveolar fricative. In other words, the "sh" sound is created by the blade of the tongue approximating the postalveolar ridge area, creating a narrow constriction through which the air stream must pass. If some physical abnormality exists then the sound will not be produced properly. This kind of speech disorder is referred to as a phonological disorder, where the speaker has difficulty producing certain phonemes, the most basic units of sound [3]. The *Tanach* records that as a result of this speech defect, 42,000 people from the tribe of

Ephraim were killed (Judges 12:6). That a certain speech defect was known to be present in members of the tribe of Ephraim parallels the belief that certain communication disorders are hereditary.

Further references to impaired communication appear in the Rabbinic literature. The third Mishna in the first chapter of *Masechet Eduyot* relates the dispute of how much drawn water renders a *mikva* (ritual bath) unusable. Hillel says "a full *hin*" (a certain measurement). The author of the Mishna "interrupts" and comments that one should state an opinion in his Rabbi's language. Various commentators, including Rambam and the Gr'a discuss the significance of this statement. They make reference to the fact that a *hin* is not a Mishnaic measure and that Hillel said a full *hin*, the word "full" being unnecessary. According to these commentators, Hillel's rabbis, Shemaya and Avtalyon, were unable to pronounce the "h" sound, which is a glottal sound and, like the "sh" sound, is a fricative. To produce the "h" sound, the restriction of airflow takes place at the glottis or at the opening to the larynx [3]. Shemaya and Avtalyon were converts, so it is possible that their original language or dialect did not make use of the "h" sound and they could not produce the sound. Therefore, they said a "full *hin*" so that the students would not mistake "*in*," which was how they pronounced the word, for "*ein*" and would therefore think they were saying, "*Ein mayim shoavin poslin et hamikva*," meaning that drawn water does not render a *mikva* unusable, which is an incorrect statement. Therefore, saying a "full *in*" would allow the students to know that they were referring to "*hin*" the unit of liquid measurement, rather than "*ein*," which is a word of negation.

As has been illustrated above, personalities throughout Jewish history have had deficiencies in verbal communications that have had some degree of ramifications. Even today, communication disorders have ramifications within Judaism. In Judaism, speech serves another integral function of our daily lives: prayer. Prayer does not only include what is said in synagogue, but also the blessings that are said before and after eating, as well as other blessing and prayers said in various situations and on special occasions. However, is someone who is unable to speak able to fulfill his obligation to say these prayers in other ways? One possibility is that the person should mentally reflect on these benedictions. However, the Talmud states that thought is inferior to speech

and therefore cannot serve as a replacement. Another possibility is the concept of *shomea keoneh*, which states that hearing someone else recite the blessing is equivalent to saying it. While it could be said that this only applies to one who can satisfy the obligation by reciting the prayer himself, the *Shaagat Aryeh* writes that listening to someone else serves as an acceptable alternative. To prove his point, he cites the case of a slave who is half-freed by his Jewish master. Normally, when a slave was freed, he would not only be a free man legally, but he would also become a Jew. However, the slave who is half-freed has a problem. He cannot fulfill his commandment to hear the *shofar* by blowing it himself because he is not a full Jew; therefore he must listen to someone else blow the *shofar*. From this case, the *Shaagat Aryeh* concludes that one who is unable to speak can listen to someone else recite the prayers and fulfill his obligation that way. Once we have determined that a mute can satisfy his obligation of prayer by listening to another person, we must ask if such a person is required at all in these commandments. The *Shaagat Aryeh* says that a mute is obligated in this area, while the Radbaz states that a person who cannot execute a commandment in the normal way is not required in those commandments. However, certain instances exist where a mute

person is not included in the obligation, such as the laws pertaining to a rebellious son. Moreover, a mute is not allowed to testify in a Jewish court because testimony must be given verbally [6].

Verbal communication plays an important role in our daily lives. We use words to express wants and needs, to convey ideas, as well as other communicative functions. A wide variety of communication disorders exist within the general population. These disorders can affect speech (the ability of the speech mechanism to function in producing a spoken language) or language (the set of symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, that have a common meaning for the group who shares them), and often both. Because of the importance of communication in everyday life, people with communication disorders require intervention in order to communicate more effectively. Various personalities throughout Jewish history have had communication disorders which in certain instances, resulted in significant consequences. Since Judaism places an emphasis on saying blessings and prayers at various times, in addition to requiring speaking for certain legal functions, certain issues must be addressed regarding a person who is unable to speak. The special role that speech plays in Judaism as well as life in general, requires that speech be used both effectively and properly. ■

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