I Cannot Do It

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

How many young men play in a pick-up game of basketball and glory in imagining themselves with the ball, time running out on the clock, their team down by one point ready to make the winning shot? Or, picture themselves in the bottom of the ninth, two outs, bases loaded, and they are coming up to bat…?

It is natural that we place ourselves in these positions of challenge and need – and that we rise to that challenge! We see ourselves striding heroic across the sporting arenas and fields we occupy. And yet, when Moshe finds himself assigned the most momentous task in Jewish history, to stand before Pharaoh and represent God by demanding that he “Let My People Go!” he meekly begs off. He demurs.

He says, I can’t.

“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.” (*Shemot* 4:10)

Rashi teaches that God pleaded with Moshe for *seven days* to accept the role of leader.

But he said, I can’t. I am a kevad peh. I am *kevad lashon*.

What exactly did these excuses mean?

Rashbam suggests Moshe was not sufficiently conversant in Egyptian. Rabeinu Chananel and others teach that Moshe struggled to pronounce sounds with his lips (teeth), his tongue.  Others say that Moshe simply did not feel adequate as an orator to address the king. He was at that time in his life, after all, merely a shepherd. And exceedingly modest. A modest shepherd – speaks to sheep, how could he possibly be expected to speak to Pharaoh?

In Vaeira (*Shemot* 6:12) Moshe again proclaims his inadequacy in speech. “B’nai Yisrael don’t listen to me; how then would Pharaoh listen to me, after all I am *aral sefatayim*?” He is a man of “sealed lips.”

 *Daat Mikra* understands *aral sefatayim* to be an idiom which means that he could not speak articulately; he could not “get his message across” to listeners.

*Kevad peh*. *Kevad lashon*. *Aral sefatayim*. With these descriptions, the Torah seems to suggest that Moshe’s speech impediment involved stuttering, articulation and psychological fear. As Aryeh Kaplan teaches, “I find it difficult to speak and find the right language” and – *aral sefatayim* – “I have no self-confidence when I speak.”

Moshe, it seems, has good reason to try and beg off the task God is assigning him.

We should have sympathy for him, no?

Let us accept that Moshe had these very real impediments. So, what? If God wanted Moshe to lead the people, couldn’t He have simply healed him?

Three times a day, we pray, “Heal us, Lord, and we shall be healed.”

Etz Yosef teaches that if we need physical healing, it is enough to ask God for a cure and then passively await that cure. However, if the healing we need is psychological or spiritual, God will hear our prayer but then it is up to us to realize the healing. That is, we must be *active* participants in our healing.

We see this often with stutterers. They need an initial push – “heal us!” – and then they put in the hard, hard work of training and retraining themselves to speak without a stutter. Certainly, Moshe could have been successful in overcoming his own speech inadequacies! Yet he didn’t.

Why not?

In a beautiful piece in *Aish.com*, entitled “Insulting God”, *Rabbi* Benjamin Blech relates how, as a young boy, he asked his teacher, “Since God can do anything, why didn’t He heal Moshe?”

The teacher answered that, yes, Moshe would seemingly be better off with the gift of eloquence but God didn’t grant him that because, “…Moshe never asked.”

“In all his humility, Moshe didn’t feel worthy to make the request. And God wanted to show us by way of His dealings with the greatest Jew in history that the prerequisite for His answering our prayers is for us to verbalize them.”  We should never shy from asking God for anything. “If you’re withholding a request because you think it’s too much to ask for, that’s an insult to the Almighty, almost as if you’re implying it’s too hard for Him to accomplish... Your role is to make clear you believe in His power to accomplish anything, no matter how difficult.”

Fair enough, but Moshe’s failure to ask for healing seems not to be due to a lack of faith. In fact, it seems to not come from him at all. It seems God *wanted* His emissary to be “heavy of speech”. It seems He was not interested in a glib or smooth spokesperson but rather He wanted something else.

Rav Soloveitchik alludes to this “something else” in his comment on *kevad peh u’kevad lashon*. “God specifically wanted a person who was heavy of speech to confront Pharaoh. When Moshe spoke to Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded derisively (5:2), a response which God specifically wanted to elicit.”

Looking more closely at the “discussion” between God and Moshe, we see God assign Moshe the task of going to Pharaoh to initiate the *Geula* process and then Moshe says, I can’t do it. God’s response? “Who makes a mouth for man, or who makes one dumb or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, Hashem?  So now, go! I shall be with your mouth and teach you what you should say.”

Our Rebbe, Rav Asher Freund ZT’L asks, what then is God’s response to Moshe’s seemingly legitimate point. Yes, God makes a mouth for man, but Moshe is a stutterer who can’t speak to Pharaoh. Pharaoh will mock him. God’s response hardly changes that?

Rav Asher explains by returning to the most foundational aspect of our *emunah* – It is all in His hands. Without God, we are helpless. With Him, we can do anything. This simple statement of faith is one Rav Asher taught throughout his many decades of sharing wisdom, inspiration and faith.

Rav Asher hears in God’s response a very human message, what are you saying? So, you’re a stutterer. You think if you were a perfect speaker then all will be well?

God is clear in his message, If I send you to speak with Pharaoh, there is no difference if you are a stutterer or a polished speaker. Whatever will happen at Pharaoh’s court, it is all from Me.  Without My granting you the chiyus every second, you can’t utter even one word. (Ohn mein chiyus vos ich gib dir yeden sekunda hostu nisht kein ein vort).

We are helpless without Him. We are powerful with Him. Stutterer or orator, strength and success come only from God.

This lesson, is plain in Parashat Terumah, as well, when God tells Moshe, “Veasita – you shall make – a Menorah of pure gold, hammered out shall the Menorah *te’ase* – be made.”

“You shall make.”

“It shall be made.”

Active voice. Passive voice. These are at odds, no? A contradiction. But in this “contradiction” we find a pure example of Rav Asher’s tremendous insight.

Rashi cites the Midrash Tanchuma which teaches that making the menorah was such a difficult task that Moshe was unable to visualize how the menorah was to appear, so God showed him a menorah of fire. But even then, Moshe could not visualize it, whereupon God instructed him to throw the ingot into the fire, and lo and behold the completed menorah appeared!

That is why the *posuk* says ‘*te’ase*’ – it shall be made and not, as initially phrased, ‘you shall make’.  Rav Asher asks again, If the menorah appeared miraculously (it was “made”), why then does the *posuk* begin, “You shall make”?

Rav Asher answers that Moshe claims that he can’t make this menorah. God’s response is that even if Moshe did “make it” did he really think it was *he* who made it? All is from God. Without God, nothing is made or done in this world.

Which crystalizes Rav Asher’s insight into the issue at hand. Knowing that he cannot utter one word without God enabling him to utter it, is *exactly why* Moshe can go to Pharaoh!

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Many years ago, I sat at Rav Asher’s holy Shabbos table and I reminded him of something he said about a particularly difficult event many years earlier. He listened closely, looking at me with his piercing and shining eyes, and suddenly said, Ani amarti ka’zeh davar?

“I said such a thing?”

Yes, I said, you said that.

Rav Asher responded, *Atah choshev she’ani medaber*? “You think that I am speaking? My voice is simply a *Keli*, a vessel, through which whatever God wants me to convey comes through.”  He reiterated, “You think I am speaking?  I say nothing. God sends me a message which He wants me to utter through my vocal chords, but it is not *me*.”

That is precisely what God responded to Moshe, stutterer or not. “Who makes a mouth for man, is it not I Hashem?”

Go and say what I tell you to say. Externals are irrelevant. All that is relevant is the chiyus I grant man to accomplish.

It is true in our baseball and basketball daydreams. It is true when we stand before the “pharaoh’s” in our lives. Our success is by God’s hand, not our own.