

Parashat Va'era

Redemptive Speech

Parashat Va'era opens with God's command to Moshe to deliver a message of redemption to his enslaved brethren. On being rebuffed by his own people, He lodges a complaint with God, "Indeed the children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me, when I am of uncircumcised lips?" (Exodus 6:12). In an attempt to understand Moshe's complaint, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik cited the *Zohar*, which is puzzled by this objection—was it not already raised and addressed? At the burning bush, Moshe argued, "I am not a man of words... for my mouth and tongue are burdened" (Exodus 4:10), leading God to promise "I shall be with your mouth" (Exodus 4:12). Why is Moshe still insisting that he cannot communicate effectively?

The *Zohar* states, "a secret is being revealed here." This time, Moshe refers not to the impairment of his speech organs, but to the existential impairment of speech. In a seminal article, the Rav summarized this enigmatic *Zohar* as follows:

First [the *Zohar*] identifies bondage with the absence of words and meaningful sound, with total silence. The redemption only begins with finding sound, while the word is still absent. Finally, with the finding of both sound and word, redemption attains its full realization.¹

The Rav's profound exposition of the *Zohar* is presented below.

Wordlessness

In the first stage, the slave is comparable to an animal. Even though he can approximate human speech, it carries no coherent meaning. The slaves in Egypt did not rise up or even protest their conditions because they thought their fate inescapable. Holocaust survivors reported a similar experience to the Rav:

Former inmates of concentration camps have told me that they had, with the passage of time, become inured to any pain or torture, as if they had been totally anesthetized. They were dumb beings. They not only stopped speaking, but ceased to emit coherent sounds, as well.²

We can more fully appreciate this through a memorable Chassidic insight from Rebbe Simcha Bunim Bonhardt of Peshischa. The verse says, "I shall take you out from under the burdens (סבלות) of Egypt" (Exodus 6:6). Rebbe Simcha Bunim connected the word for "burdens" (סבלות) to the word for "tolerance" (סבולנות). The Jewish people became accustomed to the exile and learned to tolerate it. They no longer felt the pain of servitude. This desensitization represents a grave danger.³

¹ Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," 59.

² Ibid., 57.

³ Raz, *Shivim Panim*, 2:31.

The Rav's insight that redemption can only be achieved when we discover speech sheds light on a well-known kabbalistic pearl regarding "Pesach" (פֶּסַח), the Hebrew word for Passover. The Arizal famously divided the word into *peh* (פֶּה) and *sach* (נֹסַח), meaning, "the mouth speaks." Evidently, the Arizal did not intend that Pesach is a time to speak about redemption, but that formulating words and expressing ideas is the key to redemption itself. Moshe and the Jewish people had to undergo a developmental process in which they would emerge from silence and find the words which would lead them to ultimate redemption.

Spiritual Slavery and Redemption

In this context, the Rav asserted that the features of the Israelite slavery in Egypt remain current:

This story is indicative, not only of the political slave of antiquity, but of slavery today, as well. Slavery is not only a juridic-economic institution of the past; it is also a way of life which is still a reality. The unfree man differs, existentially, from the free man: one may, existentially, be a slave in the midst of political and economic freedoms. To use Biblical terminology, slavery constitutes a תהו ובהו (tohobohu) existence.⁴

In order for man to find redemption, he must learn to recognize and express his needs. Man is prone to live in ignorance of his actual needs by taking cues from the surrounding society:

What man fails to comprehend is not the world around him, but the world within him, particularly his destiny, and the needs of which he is supposed to have a clear awareness. [...]

Modern man is aware of many needs; in fact, there are too many needs which claim his attention. An entire technology is bent upon generating more and more needs in order to give man the opportunity to derive pleasure through the gratification of artificially fabricated needs.⁵

How is one liberated and redeemed? The answer lies in the paradigmatic redemption from Egypt. If the Israelite slaves had to find their voice and put it into words, we must do the same. In two essential practices do we do this and so (re)discover and come to express our true selves: prayer and Torah study.

In fact, the Midrash writes that the injunction to serve God, *le-avdo* (Deuteronomy 11:13), encompasses both prayer and Torah study.⁶ Both endeavors are meant to make man more aware of his role and responsibilities in this world. This explains why Ezra ha-Sofer found it pertinent to place prayer and Torah reading alongside one another in the weekday and Shabbat services. This twofold undertaking is "cathartic and redemptive."⁷

Self-liberation through Prayer and Torah Study

⁴ Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," 60–61.

⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁶ *Sifrei*, §41.

⁷ Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," 70.

Both prayer and Torah study guide us in the discovery of our true self, with all its aspirations and hopes. Let us begin with prayer:

To pray means to discriminate, to evaluate, to understand, in other words, to ask intelligently. I pray for the gratification of some needs since I consider them worthy of being gratified. I refrain from petitioning God for the satisfaction of other wants because it will not enhance my dignity.⁸

Although there are a few prayer modalities, the Rav posited that the essence of prayer is *bakashah*, the petition that forms the backbone of the *Amidah*. We are to cry out to God for knowledge, healing, sustenance, peace:

Of the nineteen benedictions in our *Amidah*, thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions (שִׁים שְׁלוֹם and רְצֵה) are of a petitional nature. The person in need is summoned to pray.⁹

Another fine example of a prayer that helps us appreciate our true spiritual selves and purpose is the daily morning prayer *Elohai Neshamah*, in which we declare, “My God, the soul You have placed within me is pure.” We thereby affirm our endowment with a soul, our inseparable attachment to the Almighty, and the soul’s imperviousness to our repeated transgressions and concessions to our corporeality.

The necessity of prayer for redemption is underscored by the halachic requirement that there be no interruption between the blessing affirming God as our Redeemer (אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְשׁוּעָנוּ) and the *Amidah*. The Talmud even says that observing this practice brings a person a share in the World to Come.¹⁰ While the commentators struggle to understand what makes this practice so special, it is clearly illuminated by the Rav’s analysis. Redemption can only be achieved with the emergence of the word, making redemption and prayer conceptually inseparable.

Turning to Torah study, the Rav quoted the famous Talmudic passage about the fetus learning the entire Torah in the womb and the angel forcing it to forget everything upon birth.¹¹ Isn’t this a pointless exercise? The Rav said the point is to convey that the Torah is a deep part of us. When we learn Torah and it feels familiar or natural, it is the case because Torah reflects our own inner ambitions and goals.

In other words, by learning Torah man returns to his own self; man finds himself, and advances toward a charted, illuminated and speaking I-existence. Once he finds himself, he finds redemption.¹²

According to the Rav, prayer helps a person recognize his most basic needs and longings. Torah study provides the underpinnings and constructs for working out and through spiritual-intellectual quandaries and longings.

⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰ *Berachot* 4b.

¹¹ *Niddah* 30b.

¹² Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” 69.

Exploring the Rav's Insight

Rabbi Dov Singer, principal of Yeshivat Makor Chaim high school in Kfar Etzion, has recently emerged as a significant teacher of *Chassidut* in the *dati le'umi* (National-Religious) community. He, too, is intrigued by the notion of the redemption of speech in the Exodus narrative. He contends that the kind of speech which frees a person relates to the way one communicates with others. When we express ourselves more deeply, when we truly listen to others and our conversations create connections that generate empathy and understanding, we open the door to true redemption of ourselves and of our societies.¹³

In sum, the *Zohar's* description of redemption from Egypt applies to us today as well. We can identify three stages in our pursuit of personal and communal freedom. We first must emerge from a silence that typifies insensitivity and unconcern. We then find a voice, being awakened to a new perspective or insight. After that, we formulate and use speech—prayer, Torah study, and intimate interaction with family, friends, and colleagues. In this way our intellect begins to find the words to speak and express ourselves. When these three steps occur, we are, in the words of the Rav, “on the road towards discovering ultimate redemption.”¹⁴

¹³ Rabbi Dov Singer, “*Pesach- Peh Sach: Mi-Galut ha-Dibur li-Ge'ulato*,” <https://www.lifnim.co.il/-nos> פסח-פה סח-מגלות-הדיבור-לגאולתו-הרב-דוב (accessed March 1, 2021).

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” 70.