

MOSES: NOT A MAN OF WORDS

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One of the reasons Moses gives God for not being an appropriate emissary to Pharaoh is found in Exodus 4:10: being *kevad peh*, "slow of speech" and *kevad lashon*, "slow of tongue". Rashi uses the Old French term *balbus*, to explain that Moses was afflicted with stammering. Rabbenu Hananel likewise explains that Moses had a speech impediment. This may also be implied in God's response, '*Who makes one dumb, or deaf, or sighted, or blind?*' (Ex. 4:11), stressing that the Lord can heal all physical disabilities. Another approach is offered by Rashbam, who explains that Moses had been away from Egypt for years and felt he could no longer speak Egyptian fluently. While all these explanations are plausible, the larger narrative suggests another possibility: Moses may well have been a shy, inarticulate person, unskilled in verbal communication.

Pharaoh's daughter realizes that Moses is a Hebrew child, abandoned by his family in the wake of her father's order to kill all the male Hebrew children (Ex. 1:16). She brings him home and persuades Pharaoh to allow her to adopt him. Though raised in Pharaoh's palace, Moses is aware of his foreign roots, as indicated in Exodus 2:11, when he goes out to see the suffering of *his brethren*, the Hebrews. Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave, because he understands how and why he has been part of Pharaoh's court. Once he realizes that his act has been observed (Exodus 2:11-15), he runs away. Had he been self-confident and sure of his position at Pharaoh's court, he would have remained to defend his action. Not being certain of how his action would be judged, and lacking the ability to explain himself, he simply fled.

Even when Moses helps Jethro's daughters by saving them from the shepherds who chased them away from the well (Ex. 2:17), he stays behind until invited by Jethro. The daughters only identify him as *an Egyptian man* (Ex. 2:19), which may indicate that Moses did not even introduce himself to the daughters; they only identified him by his type of dress. Later, when he marries Zipporah, it is not stated that Moses took her for a wife, but rather that

Jethro gave her to him (Ex. 2:21), further strengthening the impression that Moses was not a socially outgoing individual.

Moses was certainly a man of action, having twice championed the oppressed, but as he later tells God: *'I am not a man of words, not since yesterday or the day before'* (Ex. 4:10). Moses had never used words to resolve a conflict or rescue a downtrodden individual, yet here God is asking him to do precisely that, against all of his previous experiences.

Moses finally agrees to return to Egypt, but only after God tells him that Aaron will go with him to do the speaking. Ultimately, however, it is Moses who speaks to Pharaoh (Ex. 7:16 through 12:31). At first, Moses asks Aaron to undertake what God had ordered Moses himself to do; not long afterwards, however, it is Moses who speaks directly to Pharaoh. Once the Israelites are liberated from Egypt, it is always Moses who speaks directly to the people.

Saadiah Gaon, in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (3:4), explains that God deliberately chooses human prophets whose mortal nature is apparent, so that people will not ascribe the miracles they perform to themselves, but rather to God. Choosing Moses – who was by no means a charismatic speaker – as His emissary makes it clear that the words he utters are not his own, but the Word of God.

This insight provides us with a different way of interpreting the fact that God commands Moses to have Aaron perform the physical acts that bring on the plagues of blood, frogs, and lice (Ex. 7:19, 8:1, 8:12). Midrashic explanations are generally given for this (see *Exodus Rabbah* 9:10), but it can be seen as a retraining of Moses to behave as a man of words, instructing Aaron rather than always serving as a man of action to achieve his goals.

The fact is that Moses learned God's lesson well and, in time, he became a true man of words, eloquently defending the Israelites and pleading successfully for their lives after the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:11-13).

In this light, the sin Moses himself committed by striking the rock rather than speaking to it (Num. 20:7-12) is crucially significant. The first time Moses was told by God to bring forth water from a rock, he was indeed ordered to smite it with his staff (Exodus 17:6), but that was when he had not yet learned to change from a man of action to a man of words. Forty years later, the command Moses received was to speak to the rock (Num. 20:8). His years of training as God's spokesman now required him to act in a different

way. He nevertheless struck the rock, in defiance of God's orders, showing that he had not fulfilled his role as God's spokesman – a leader who used words to accomplish his task. Instead, he had reverted to the man of action who was unable to communicate verbally, as in the early chapters of Exodus. By so doing, Moses could no longer remain the leader of the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land.



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