

Shouldering Burdens With Grace
Sh'mot 5780

There was a wonderful article in the Atlantic Magazine a little while back entitled "Why Won't He Just Say It." It's about stuttering - the author, John Hendrickson, writes that he started stuttering at age 4 and still struggles to say his own name as an adult. But it's also about VP Joe Biden as a presidential candidate and how some of the things people have come to describe as his verbal gaffes of his difficulty on the debate stage may actually be remnants of a childhood stutter. Biden describes himself as a former stutterer.

In this week's Parshah we meet Moshe Rabbeinu - who also had a speech impediment. Moses our teacher was born into a difficult world. A world of Israelite slavery and a decree against Israelite male children. He is saved by a conspiracy of women - the midwives who defy Pharaoh's order, his mother who set him adrift on the Nile, his sister who watched over him, and Pharaoh's own daughter who had compassion on him and saved him. We learn about Moses' innate sense of justice and compassion for an Israelite slave who is being beaten by a taskmaster and his rash decision to kill the taskmaster - sending him into exile in the wilderness of Midian. It is there that Moses encounters God at the *sneh bo'er* the burning bush - and is called to partner with God in redeeming the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.

When Moses gets the call to leadership in Chapter 4, he protests. Of his many objections, Moses says, *lo ish devarim anokhi gam mitmol gam mishilshom* - I am not a man of words - either in times past or now that you have spoken to [me].

Ki k'vad peh u'khvad lashon anokhi

For I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.

It's not clear what exactly, Moses is saying. Later Moses will describe himself as having uncircumcised lips - an evocative image.

Some commentators believe he was referring to the fact that he didn't have the right dialect of Egyptian to converse eloquently in the presence of Pharaoh. Rashi says it was a stutter. Notice the Hebrew of the verse "gam mitmol gam mishilshom" - the repetition is perhaps Moses stuttering over the words and the modern Hebrew word for a stutter is *gimgum*. Or perhaps public speaking just wasn't his thing.

Whatever the case may be, I find that many people are not aware of the fact that Moses had speech challenges. That's not often the popular imagination of Moses. That's not how Charlton Heston played him in "The Ten Commandments" nor how he is portrayed in the animated version "Prince of Egypt." And it's not the paradigm of rabbinic leadership that many people hold as their expectation. Moses is rabbeinu our consummate rabbi. But let me ask you, if Moses himself were interviewing for the position of rabbi of the synagogue and he had a heavy stutter, how would that be received?

A playful midrash seeks to explain the origin of Moses' stutter. They tell a story of how Moses as a child growing up in Pharaoh's palace used to steal the crown off of Pharaoh's head and put it on his own, much the way little children will play with a parent's kippah or hat. The court magicians said that this was a bad sign - that Moses would one day seek to dethrone Pharaoh - so they designed a test. They placed before him a piece of gold on one side and burning piece of coal on the other. The thought was that if he grabbed the gold, Moses was power hungry and wealthy hungry and he is a threat. The items were placed before him and little Moses began to reach for the gold, but at the last moment the angel Gabriel redirected his hand to the burning coal. It burned his hand and he put it in his mouth which burned his tongue and that's how Moses became slow of tongue.

Now, I learned from the Hendrickson article that this story, while playful and teaches a number of lessons is not an accurate explanation of stuttering - if that in fact was Moses' speech impediment. Stuttering is neurological and there is a strong genetic component - not usually something developed by burning one's tongue. But however it

came to be, it's a part of Moses, and so much a part of him that he references it as a reason God should choose someone else to lead the people.

When Moses says, "I'm not a man of words." God responds in a fascinating and instructive manner.

God says, *mi sam peh l'adam* - Who gives man speech? Who makes him mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go and I will be with you." and when Moses objects again, God finally concedes, "Your brother, Aaron, he speaks readily, he will be your prophet" - Ex. 4:11-15

I had the privilege of learning this passage with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Lauren Tuchman. Rabbi Tuchman and I overlapped at JTS - she is a rabbi and a disabilities advocate. She is blind. And she taught me that this verse used to bother her because the idea that God makes people blind or deaf was a troubling one for her. There is a conception in Christian thought that disability is a punishment from God for some kind of moral defect. So she heard those verses through that lens. But then she realized that Judaism has never claimed that God works in that manner. And in the text of the Torah God doesn't actually say that. God says I make each person the way they are - seeing, blind, deaf, mute. What God is saying to Moses, according to Rabbi Tuchman, is "I know you have a speech impediment. I made you that way. I make all people exactly as they are supposed to be." There's no negative judgment implied at all. In fact, you are created in my image.

If you take a step back, Moses sees his speech impediment as a disability, something that makes him less suited to be a leader. God says, "you think I don't know your strengths and challenges? You think I don't know who you are? I am God! I know exactly who you are! And I choose you!" Perhaps, God is trying to say to Moses, you think that your speech impediment is something that needs to be overcome. I think it's part of the reason you're suited for this mission.

In the article, Hendrickson describes a debate in the field about whether to treat a stutter as a pathology or to embrace and accept it as a neurological difference - similar to a debate about people with Autism. The trend is to view it more as a difference that should be embraced because it both benefits the person who stutters - making them less self-conscious - and benefits the listener to encourage them to be more patient. I wondered if that's what God was trying to do for Moses. Moses said, I'm not the right person. And God said, you're the right person, we just need to figure out the appropriate support for you to do the job.

As I read the article and learned more about Biden's childhood stutter and Hendrickson's, I learned that for some, growing up with a stutter or any physical or neurological or other difference or disability. Hendrickson writes:

Stuttering can feel like a series of betrayals. Your body betrays you when it refuses to work in concert with your brain to produce smooth speech. Your brain betrays you when it fails to recall the solutions you practiced after school with a speech therapist, allegedly in private, later learning that your mom was on the other side of a mirror, watching in the dark like a detective. If you're a lucky stutterer, you have friends and family who build you back up, but sometimes your protectors betray you too.

He tells about how there was a Nun at Biden's Catholic school who mocked his stutter when he was in seventh grade. Biden left the class in protest and embarrassment. He walked all the way home. And his mother Jean drove him back to school and confronted the nun saying something like, "You do that again and I'll knock your teeth out."

And yet, as Biden reflects on the experience, he also points to the experiences he had as a child as formative. Biden says his father taught him about the importance of "shouldering burdens with grace - never complain and never explain."

We all have challenges in our lives. Aspects of our own personality or body or character that we imagine are deficits that make us unfit for service or leadership. We might all take God's words to heart. That the very things we perceive as deficits have given us

the ability to feel compassion towards others who have burdens or challenges. To shoulder our own burdens with grace and to be a champion for those who struggle.

Moses certainly learned how to shoulder his burdens - how to help us shoulder our burdens. It turns out he was precisely the right person for the job. This fits with a larger understanding of Judaism about the nature of heroes.

In many ancient civilizations the founding myths told amazing stories about gods fighting with each other - battling it out until one god emerged victorious and often that god would parent the line of kings or Pharaohs who would rule the civilization. In that narrative, the leader or the king is divine - infallible. Pharaoh thought he was god and ruled as if all people should bow down to him and do his will. He was arrogant, able bodied, thought himself to be invincible. Until he met Moses - a humble servant, an adopted child with a complex upbringing, a refugee from Egypt, a person whose stutter perhaps gave him a point of compassion and empathy for others who feel different, betrayed, hurt, who need a champion.

The Jewish story does not imagine gods battling which leads to the establishment of a divine monarchy. Instead it imagines God's pain at seeing a slave people subjected to harsh punishment and indignity. Broken individuals, broken people, partnering with the one true God, to tear down the false gods of monarchs and bullies to bring about a more just and compassionate civilization.

So the lesson I want to leave you with this morning this Shabbat, is be like Moshe - not because he was so great and perfect. He was great, but hardly perfect. He had a temper, he had other challenges. He was made exactly as God had wanted. But he learned to shoulder his burdens with grace and changed the course of history. My blessing to you is know that whatever challenges you face, God made you exactly this way. That you are worthy of your calling. That you can shoulder your burdens with grace and your brothers and sisters will be by your side to help you and so will God, and so will I.

Shabbat Shalom