

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Vaera
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פרשת וארא
א' בשבט תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 6:2-9:35

In this *parasha*, God brings the first seven plagues upon the Egyptians through Moshe and Aharon, but Pharaoh repeatedly refuses to allow the *Bnei Yisrael* to leave.

Twice in this *parasha* (6:12 and 30), Moshe says, “אני ערל שפתים – I am of uncircumcised lips.” In last week’s *parasha*, Moshe declared (4:10), “כי כבד פה וכבד לשון אנכי” – for I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.” Hashem doesn’t argue with this statement, but responds simply that “I will be with your mouth.” Almost universally, the commentators state that Moshe had some sort of speech impediment, perhaps a stutter or a stammer, and that is why Aharon was his spokesperson.

Moshe is by far not the only character in the *TaNaKH* who suffered from a physical or psycho-emotional disability.

Of course, we are familiar with the infertility issues suffered by Sarah, Rivka, and Rachel. Each of these women had her own reaction: Sarah offering her maid as a surrogate with negative emotional results; Rivka praying to God; and Rachel demanding from her husband that he give her a child.

There are others.

- Towards the end of his life, Yitzchak is described as “ותכהין עיניו מראת” – his eyes were dim so that he could not see.” (*Bereshit* 27:1)
- Chana, the mother of Shmuel, refuses to eat because she is so despondent at not having a child. (I *Shmuel* 1:7)
- Shaul (King Saul) suffers from melancholia, an archaic term for depression, so that he needs David to soothe his pathological sadness (I *Shmuel* 16:14-23).
- Mefiboshet, the son of Yonatan and grandson of Shaul, is described as being “lame of his feet” (II *Shmuel* 4:4). So, too, Asa, king of Yehudah, merits the

following verse in II *Divrei Hayamim* (Chronicles) 16:12, “And in the thirty and ninth year of his reign, Asa was diseased in his feet; his disease was exceedingly great...”

- *Midrash Rabbah* (*Vayikrah* 10:2) states that the prophet Amos suffered from some sort of speech impediment, just as Moshe did.
- Both Chezekiyah, king of Yehudah, and Achaziah, king of Yisrael, are described as suffering from diseases for which they searched for a cure (II *Melachim* [Kings] 20 and II *Melachim* 1 respectively).

The *TaNaKH* is an amazing work. It is the only literary product of the ancient near east in which the leaders are flawed. Sumerian, Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian leaders are all described as strong, wise, and invulnerable. Our Torah suggests that not only are leaders not all of those things, but there is no need for them to be all of those things. Our leaders became our leaders not because they were perfect, but because they compensated for and overcame their disabilities to excel at life.

This is one of many subtle messages that the Torah sends to us. The value of a human being or the quality of a leader is not directly related to his or her physical or emotional perfection. We are all human beings just doing the best that we can here on earth, and anyone and everyone can strive to surpass their own perceived limitations. This is an especially important message as we enter February, which has been designated “National Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month.” Let us all accustom ourselves to seeing beyond the superficial and into the depth of each and every human being, realizing the infinite value of every human soul on earth.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Discuss some famous personalities from the modern world who had a disability. What did they accomplish in their lifetimes and how did they overcome their disabilities?
- What other messages might the Torah be trying to relay by making some major characters disabled?
- What personal limitations do you have that you would like to overcome? How might you go about doing that?