

Romemu Dvar Torah Jan 8, 2016

Honestly, the resistance of Moshe Rabbeinu is legion. His kvetching is hard to understand. In last week's Torah portion, Moshe is called and resists.

Not once, not twice. Over and over again, God beckons Moshe to his destiny, and over and over again, Moshe says, no thanks. No thanks.

At various moments, Moshe gives different reasons and rationales, and each one is met by God's explanation. Chief among them, of course, the one that all of us are familiar with is, lo ish d'varim anochi, I'm not a man of words. God responds, of course, misam, who is the one who gives speech? Who is the one who implanted that power? Who is behind that? You don't have to worry, in essence, God says.

I got that one covered. And so Moshe is finally convinced, and he goes to Pharaoh, and it doesn't go that well. Me'az bati lefaro l'daber bishmecha.

From the moment that I came to speak to Pharaoh in your name, it has not gotten better, it has only gotten worse. Now they don't even have tevzen, they don't even have straw to make the leveni, to make the bricks. La'ma re'ot, la'ma zev, la'ma ze'ish.

Why did you send me? I told you that I'm not the guy. And so we left last week's Torah portion with Moses' resistance and his complaint, his, in essence, his prosecution of his own capacities. I'm not the guy.

And so God will reassure him in the beginning of this week's Torah reading. And again, Moshe will say, Nope. Even though you're giving me the Wi-Fi code.

Even though you're telling me, u'shmi'adonai lo'no dat'lehem. I gave them El Shaddai, whatever that means. There was a name of God that was given to the avot, to the ancestors, but I didn't give them this name, now go back to them.

And so the problem now, Moshe says, is not that I can't speak to them, but I don't know what to say to them to make them believe that I'm really the one. So, you know, you gave me this name, but it's apparently the wrong name, and I need a new name. You gave me Ehyeh, I will be, and now I need a new name.

And so even after God gives him a new name, He gives him this name called Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh, a name that has already appeared. We're not going to talk about that, but God says it never appeared before, and now it's going to appear. Whatever that means, Moshe still feels the need to resist.

And in chapter 6, God bless you, in chapter 6 of the book of Exodus, 3.53 in your Yitzchaim, tomorrow morning when you go home, God and Moshe do a dance, and Moshe says, I'm going to go to the Jewish people, just like you said, and give it to them. And so he goes, after five verbs of God's potency, וְהוֹצִיֵּתִי וְיִצְלֵתִי וְלִגְלֵתִי וְלִקְהֵלֵתִי וְהוֹרֵתִי, all of these five verbs of God's tremendous power, Moshe says, OK, OK, enough, I'm going to go. וַיֵּדְבֶר מֹשֶׁה בֵּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, and he goes to speak to the Israelites, וְלֹא נִשְׁמָו אֶל־בְּנֵי בְצִרוּחַ אֹמִי אֶבְדָּה בְּשָׁה, he goes to speak

words of redemption, of liberation, of freedom, וַיִּדְבֹּר מִנְשָׁה בֵּן, Moshe says to them the name of God, the power of spirit to redeem them, וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ, they couldn't hear.

The text tells us in prosaic terms, הָיָה בְּגִלְיוֹנָא, וְהָיָה אִתָּם בְּפִרְשָׁה מִן לֵן, The Zohar says, you know what's going on everybody, on the surface it looks like there's a hard working group of people, and this Moses comes and he gives them good news, but something else was happening, Moshe experienced something known in the Zohar, introduced in the Zohar, as the exile of the word. גְּלוּת הַדְּבָר.

We know what the exile of human beings feels like, we know what the exile might look like to be in the exile, but the Zohar says there's such a thing called the exile of speech, and Moses when he approached the Israelites, experienced the exile of speech. Interesting because of course Moshe is the one who can't speak, the one who has a wounded mouth, the one who eventually will have to overcome his deep woundedness, to be the wounded healer. The one who can't speak enters into a place where speech is in exile, where words are not available, where articulation and eloquence are absent.

Moshe comes to a place called Egypt, which we think is a geographical location, and the mystical Midrash called the Zohar says, no, no, no, Egypt is any place where you can't find words, and Moshe comes and he brings breath to a breath starved people. How's that, Stephen Flam? A breath to a breath starved people, they couldn't, and Moshe is identified in the Zohar as he is sound without speech. It's as if Moshe comes and says, Ah... He allows something to escape the narrow place of the throat.

He allows sound to come forth, and he begins the process of liberation by inviting them to release some of that which is trapped in them, that might be the impediment to their being able to hear. He can't speak, but he can offer breath. And on an interesting twist here, a Hasidic master, the Sfat Emet says, that it wasn't just that Moshe couldn't find words because Moshe had a speech impediment, וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ אֵלָּב, and they couldn't hear him, means that their inability to hear Moshe also made him unable to speak.

Yeah? He came with words of yes. That's the way I like to read, וַיִּדְבֹּר מִנְשָׁה בֵּן. He came with בֵּן, with yes.

וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ, they couldn't hear him. They were people of the no, the N-O. They had no breath, they had no sense of that anybody wanted to hear their cries, and so they stopped.

They stopped listening to each other, they stopped speaking. Speech was in exile, and Moshe comes and he finds a no people. He finds what Mark Nepo calls the industry of no.

People are born, Mark Nepo says, in a river of yes. But they look for love, and they wander into the industry of no. Where the no police left warnings of don'ts, and the no ministers preached their morals of can't.

And soon, he couldn't help himself, this one. He wanted to try on no. So when his dog pawed his shirt, he scalded her, no.

And when two kids ran a shopping cart into his parked car, he cuffed them, no. And when someone he liked started to come close, he let her near, but then said he wasn't ready. He said no.

Now he discovered there were other ways to say no when he was hired as a no engineer. He was sadly happy to work alone. Suddenly he designed signs that said stop, and electronic guns that fired bullets with a muffled no.

The work of no kept him very busy. If you called, you heard him. I am the engineer of no, and I am not here to take your call.

If you like, leave a no message, and I will gladly send a no reply. The industry of no. The industry of no is both an answer to a desire to be heard internally, and, of course, paralyzes the one who wants to speak.

Often said that speakers create listeners, but listeners create speakers as well. When victims cry out, when those who have been wounded, when those who don't have breath, scream and say, hear me, and there's no one to hear them, and their cries become muffled. They lose their voice.

They lose their breath. When peoples are marginalized to the sides of society and their stories aren't heard, they stop telling their stories until someone comes along and says, you have a story. And in the beginning they say, no, we are the people of no.

We can't hear your liberation, yes. We're so used to not being heard, not being asked to speak. The great Judith Plaskow was here last night talking about the birth of feminism in this country and her own amazing work in articulating stories of women who were completely absent from Jewish history, the stories of women who stood at Sinai, but whose stories were not told, and she wrote her incredibly important work standing again at Sinai to say, until we hear, until we listen, until we're willing to hear, to make room for, we birth speakers in how we listen.

Listen for yes. Listen for yes. Listen to yes somebody from a place where they are in no mind.

And your listening in its fructive, active way can bring something out in them that they did not even know was there. To listen in that way is to speak through our listening. I know that I was a lucky young boy at seven years old.

I was lucky because in that camp that I was in sleep away for my first summer, eventually when I told the people that someone had hit me, who was an adult, they listened to me. Eventually when I told them that I had been abused, they could hear me say that I had been beaten. I was lucky because as a victim I had an audience that could hear my cry.

I wasn't yet inured to my own pain. I wasn't yet told to shut it down and shut it off and clamp down on the truth that I knew. And I was lucky enough that when emotion came and said I want to hear what it's been like for you and I said oh this and this happened, they listened to me.

But we live in a culture where we give the benefit of the doubt to those who have power and we silence the ones who want to bring truth. We live in a fear that if we say the truth something might happen. We live with that fear culturally, socially and in our marriages and in our work.

We clamp it down and then Egypt lives right here between our heart and our voice and we beg for emotion to come and say I'm here to save you and by that point it's too late. Even the voices of friends who say I'm here to hold your hand to be a support will say no, no thank you. I'm right here.

I'm good with my silence. Oh me, I don't need deeper breath. I'm Kotzer Ruach.

It fits me just fine. I was reading yesterday about a woman. I'm not going to say her name but she probably wouldn't mind if I told the story but in her own biography of her life there was a moment in her own evolution where she realized that she was in love with another woman in a class that she was in and I was so moved by this.

She said that as soon as she spoke the word out loud she did not tell it to her eventual partner but she spoke it out loud in a room. She said I love this woman's name. I love her.

She physically felt her chest open. She felt Egypt open. When breath and word married truth was born.

Listen. Listen for yes. Listen for yes.

Listen to ourselves. Listen to our stories. Listen to the victims.

Listen to those who cry out in pain. Come to them with support, with love, with acknowledgement. A world of love is a world that we are trying to build.

The purpose of our religious tradition is to become more attentive, more attuned, more Shema Yisrael, more able to hear God's voice in ourselves and in the other. I don't know what it took for Moshe to finally be able to hear his own inner truth, to give up his own inner no but when he finally did and he brought his yes to the people it was their no that brought him back to that place of I can't lead. So I want to bless you.

Bless each and every one of you from the depths of my heart that we become listeners who birth yes in our friends, listeners who birth yes in our lovers and in our parents and in our children, listeners who clear a space where someone else's reality might be that much richer. Olam Chesed Yibaneh. We have to build a world of love one listening moment at a time.

That's our religious work. That is a new religion. Listen for yes as we rise.