

Message and Messenger

This shabbat, we read *Parshat Vaeirah*. The subject of exodus and redemption are picking up momentum and Moshe strikes Egypt with the first seven of ten plagues. Moshe is the most feared man in all of Egypt. But the power of the plagues represents a very different tone from the opening of the portion. There, Moshe has tried to appeal to the Pharaoh – to no avail. Moshe has tried to appeal to the people – to no avail.

God begins the portion by redefining Himself to Israel. “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but My name – YHVH – I did not make known to them.” After this radical introduction of God’s new name, God presents the five point process toward redemption – I will take out, save, redeem, take, and bring. It’s God’s tour de force of Biblical promises. God then sends Moshe back to the slaves in Egypt to deliver this message. And what has to be the most deflating moment in the Bible, the Torah says: ‘they did not listen – from shortness of breath and hard labor.’ One minute we are soaring with God’s promise of deliverance, the next minute we are shuffling along in the gutter of despair and slavery.

We have to image that God is an excellent visionary. How could the ideal fall so far from the real?

Perhaps, the soaring rhetoric cannot be heard. Remember, God introduces His new name to Moshe – YHVH; but the name El Shaddai was known to the slaves. They heard it spoken to them by their parents and grandparents since they arrived in Egypt. They knew of the God of their ancestors. Now, an outsider – Moshe was unknown to the slaves – was bringing a lofty message of salvation from a God, who they’d never heard of.

It’s interesting to note how Moshe explains this failure in the following verses. God sends Moshe to Pharaoh to bring the message of redemption. And Moshe responds: ‘Israel did not listen to me, how will Pharaoh?!’ This is a logical conclusion. Israel should have been eager to hear this message, clinging to the hope and freedom; yet, they did not heed Moshe’s words. Going to Pharaoh would seem to be a pointless gesture. The message would need to be adjusted. Then Moshe offers his second objection: ‘And I have uncircumcised lips.’ Moshe’s second refusal is not about the message but the messenger. Even though we know that the slaves were too exhausted to listen, Moshe thinks his speech impediment was the reason for the poor reception by the slaves; too much substance, not enough style. In truth, their exhaustion and not knowing who sent Moshe – the slaves would not be receptive to his message.

This entire section offers great insight into the process of communication. Sometimes, the problem with hearing a message is in you – you are not ready or able to hear what I have to say; it's the message. Sometimes, the problem is within me – I am not effective in conveying a message and that's why I will not be heard. And sometimes it's both – it's the message and the messenger.

But as the Torah proceeds, it's exciting to see the poor messenger deliver the most important message in history to Israel.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach
Rabbi Menashe