



**RABBI AARON**

Editor, Torah Tidbits

**GOLDSCHIEDER**

# Redeeming Speech

**M**oshe is commissioned by God to go to the enslaved Israelites with God's message of redemption. He is rebuffed by his people and proceeds to complain to God, "Indeed the children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me, *when I have uncircumcised lips?*" (*Sh'mot* 6:12)

In an attempt to understand Moshe's complaint, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l cites an exquisite passage from the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* is puzzled by Moshe's claim that he is 'of uncircumcised lips.' Moshe already raised this objection earlier at the Burning Bush, "Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words, neither yesterday nor the day before...for my mouth and tongue are burdened" (*Sh'mot* 4:10). At that time, however, God promised Moshe, "I will be an aid to your mouth" (*Sh'mot* 4:12). So why does Moshe worry so much? Why does he harp on this point?

The *Zohar* answers that 'the obstruction of speech' that Moshe refers to is symbolic of something much deeper. "A secret", says the *Zohar*, "is being revealed here." The *Zohar* explains that during the exile and

enslavement of the Jewish people, speech itself - was in exile.

How do we understand this enigmatic answer of the *Zohar*?

In one of Rabbi Soloveitchik's most celebrated articles, "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," he begins by explaining the process of redemption, as conceived in the *Zohar*, as a three-step process which is rooted in Moshe's development. "A process must be undertaken which unfolds and reaches its completion at Mount Sinai, when God spoke all these words - and only then was the faculty of speech restored" (*Zohar, Va'eira*, 2:25b).

## *Absence of Words*

The *Zohar* identifies bondage with the absence of words and meaningful sound - with total silence. Redemption only begins with finding sound, while the words are still absent. Finally, with the finding of both sound and words, redemption attains its full realization.

According to the *Zohar* and Rabbi Soloveitchik, our ancestors in Egypt suffered a fate worse than other deprivations. It was not only the physical suffering that was so crushing. Without the ability to speak, and denied even enough voice to groan or cry, they literally could not object to their circumstance.

The Rav cited a contemporary example of Holocaust survivors who described a similar experience: “Former inmates of concentration camps have told me that they had, with the passage of time, become inured to any pain or torture, as if they had been totally anesthetized. They were dumb beings. They not only stopped speaking, but ceased to emit coherent sounds, as well” (Tradition, ‘Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah.’ p. 57).

We can more fully appreciate the Rav’s teaching by citing a memorable Chassidic insight from Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa. The Rebbe offered a unique explanation of the pasuk “And I will bring them out from the *sivlut* of Egypt” (*Shemot* 6:6). The word *sivlut*, said the Rebbe, is related to the word *savlanut*, which means patience or tolerance. The Jewish people became regulated to exile. They no longer felt the pain of servitude. They became desensitized to the suffering. This, exclaimed the Rebbe, represents the greatest danger (*Shiv’im Panim Le’Torah, Raz*, Vol 2. , p.31).

Rabbi Soloveitchik’s understanding that redemption can only be achieved when we discover words sheds light on a well known kabbalistic pearl of wisdom regarding the term Pesach. The great Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari Hakadosh (1534-1572), famously pointed out that the name of the holiday of redemption: ‘Pesach’, should be read as a compound word which means *peh* (mouth) and *sach* (speak). Evidently the Ari Hakadosh was not simply suggesting that Pesach is a time to speak about redemption but that formulating

words and expressing ideas is the key to redemption itself.

Moshe and the Jewish people will both undergo a developmental process in which they emerge from silence and find the words which will lead them toward true redemption.

### *A Free Man Who Is Enslaved*

It is in this context that Rabbi Soloveitchik makes the valiant assertion that slavery was not only experienced by the Israelites in Egypt, but actually can be applied to every individual in every generation:

“This story [i.e. bondage in Egypt] is indicative, not only of the political slave of antiquity, but of slavery today as well. Slavery is not only a juridic-economic institution of the past; it is also a way of life which is still a reality. The unfree man differs, existentially, from the free man: one may existentially, be a slave in the midst of political and economic freedom. To use Biblical terminology, slavery constitutes a *tohu va’vohu*, existence” (Tradition pp.60-61).

The Rav states that in order for man to find ‘redemption’ man must learn to recognize and express their needs. Man is prone to live in ‘ignorance’ of their true needs. “What man fails to comprehend is not the world around him, but the world within him, particularly his destiny, and the needs of which he is supposed to have a clear awareness” (Tradition p.62).

The Rav clarifies this point and says that we often take our cues from society and confuse our true needs with false needs.

“Modern man is aware of many needs; in fact, there are too many needs which claim his attention. An entire technology is bent upon generating more and more needs in order to give man the opportunity to derive pleasure through the gratification of artificially fabricated needs” (Tradition p.62).

We now must ask the essential question: How can one redeem oneself when man is prone to be enslaved to multiple forces and influences?

The answer is rooted in the very first story of redemption. Just as the Israelite slaves had to find their *voice* and utilize *words* - we must do the same. There are two essential areas in Jewish life in which we utilize voice and words: *Prayer* and *Talmud Torah*. It is when we engage in these modalities do we discover our true selves.

### *Prayer*

Prayer guides us in discovering our true aspirations and hopes. “To pray means to discriminate, to evaluate, to understand, in other words, to ask intelligently. I pray for the gratification of some needs since I consider them worthy of being gratified. I refrain from petitioning God for the satisfaction of other wants because it will not enhance my dignity” (Tradition p.67).

Although there are a variety of expressions in prayer, the Rav posits that the essence of prayer is *bakasha* (*petitional*); it forms the center of the Amidah. we petition God for our wants and desires and for our genuine needs. We are meant to cry to God for healing, for sustenance, for knowledge,

for peace. “Of the nineteen benedictions in our Amidah, thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions (*Re'tze* and *Sim Shalom*) are of a petitional nature. The person in need is summoned to pray” (Tradition, p.65).

Another potent example of a prayer that helps us appreciate our makeup and purpose is the daily morning prayer of *Elokai Neshama* (‘My God, the soul You placed within me is pure.’) In this prayer we affirm the principles that we are endowed with a soul, that we have an inseparable attachment with the Almighty, and that our soul remains cleansed even when we transgress and blemish other parts of our human makeup.

Put simply, prayer is a means by which we clarify and identify our longings and discover true values. By way of words of supplications, through *tefillah*, we unearth our ambitions and lofty visions.

### *Talmud Torah*

Similar to prayer, *Torah Study* provides man with the means to discover his true self.

Rabbi Soloveitchik cited the well known passage in the Talmud that describes the embryo inside a mother’s womb learning the entire Torah. At birth the angel forces the child to forget everything he learned in utero. The obvious question is why teach the Torah to the fetus if it will all be forgotten?

The Rav answered that the Talmud conveys the concept that when we learn Torah

and it feels familiar or natural this is the case because Torah reflects our own inner ambitions and goals. "In other words, by learning Torah man returns to his own self; man finds himself, and advances toward a charted, illuminated and speaking I-existence. Once he finds himself, he finds redemption" (Tradition p.69).

The Rav distinguishes between prayer that helps a person recognize his most basic needs and aspirations and Talmud Torah which provides the underpinnings and constructs for one's intellectual quandaries and longings.

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In sum, the *Zohar's* description of redemption from Egypt applies to us today as well. We can identify three stages in our pursuit of personal and communal *freedom*. We first must emerge from a **silence** that typifies insensitivity and unconcern. We then find a **voice** - we are awakened and are cognitive to a new perspective or insight. We then employ **speech** in which we single out our true aspirations and visions; engaging in Prayer and Torah study are the most effective means to achieve this clarity. When these three steps materialize we find ourselves on the road towards discovering ultimate redemption. ■

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