



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

The Path to Eloquence

It is an experience common to all freshmen. One comes to a new campus, knows no one, and tries to orient himself by identifying the senior students who seem to have prestige. Then, he tries to connect with these campus big shots.

This was my experience precisely when, many years ago, I explored a new *yeshiva* at a transition point in my life. I was barely 19 years old, and I was trying to decide whether I would pursue an exclusively Talmudic education or combine my Talmud studies with college courses. I decided to spend the spring semester in an elite institution devoted only to Talmud, and to determine whether this approach suited me.

I quickly came to learn that the senior students were organized in a kind of hierarchy which reflected their respective degrees of erudition and their relationship to the world-famous dean of the school. I was somewhat impressed by all of them, but one in particular stood out for me. I do not recall his name now, but I can close my eyes and easily conjure up an image of him.

He was about twenty-five years old, of medium height, thin and wiry. He had a

precision to him which resulted from his carefully measured movements. When he walked, he seemed to be taking each step intentionally. When he moved his hands, there was a precision to his movements. The words that came out of his mouth were few and deliberate; and his comments, short and to the point.

I remember being impressed by how he sat down before the texts he studied, first brushing the dust off of his desk and chair, then opening his book cautiously, and then taking from his pocket a plastic six-inch ruler. He placed the ruler under the line of text which was his focus, almost as if he intended to literally measure the words on the page.

I was fascinated by him and began to inquire about his background. I soon learned that he was the wunderkind of the school. His scholarly achievements impressed everyone. In early adolescence, he had found his studies extremely frustrating. Had this occurred but a decade or two later, he would probably have been diagnosed as learning disabled. He was not as bright as his peers, had great difficulties in following the give and take of Talmudic passages, and couldn't handle the bilingual curriculum.

At the suggestion of his high school's guidance counselor, he made a trip to Israel to

study there, something more uncommon in those days. While there, still frustrated, he sought the blessing and counsel of the famous sage, Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, more commonly known as the Chazon Ish.

This great man, then in his waning years, encouraged the young lad to persist in his studies, but to limit the scope of his daily efforts to small, “bite-sized chunks” of text. He concluded the interview with a blessing, quoting the passage in *Psalms* which asserts that Torah study can make even a dullard wise.

I befriended the young man, easily five or six years my senior, and attempted to enlist him as my study partner. But I soon discovered that his keen intelligence and the broad scope of his knowledge were far too advanced for me. The advice and blessing of the Chazon Ish coupled with the young man’s years of toil and commitment had the desired effect. He may indeed have once been a dullard, but he was one no longer. He was now an intellectual giant.

Although I did not learn much Talmud from this fellow, I did learn a most important life lesson from him. I learned that one can overcome his limitations if he persists in trying to overcome them. I learned that one could undo his natural challenges with a combination of heeding wise counsel, becoming inspired spiritually, and devoting himself with diligence and dedication to the task.

It was much later in life when I realized that I could have learned the same important life lesson from this week’s Torah portion,

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Parshat Devarim, and from no less a personage than our teacher, Moses, himself. This week, we begin the entire book of *Deuteronomy*. Almost all of this book consists of the major address which Moses gave to the Jewish people before he took his final leave from them. “These are the words that Moses addressed to all of Israel...” (*Deuteronomy* 1:1).

Although it is now the long, hot summer, all readers of this verse remember that cold, wintry Sabbath day just six months ago when we first encountered Moses, back in the Torah portion of *Shemot*. We then read of how Moses addressed the Almighty and expressed his inability to accept the divine mission. He said: “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue...” (*Exodus* 4:10). Moses stammered and stuttered and suffered from a genuine speech defect.

How surprising it is, then, that in this week’s Torah portion, albeit forty years later, he is capable of delivering the lengthy and eloquent address which we are about to read every week for the next several months! How did he overcome his limitations? What

are the secrets of his path to eloquence?

These questions are asked in the collection of homilies known as the *Midrash Tanchuma*. There, the rabbis speak of the astounding power of sincere and sustained Torah study. They speak too of the effects of years of practice. And they emphasize the healing which comes about from a connection with the One Above. The rabbis of the *Midrash Tanchuma* could have cited the Lord’s own response to Moses’ initial complaint: “Who gives a man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”

But those rabbis chose another proof text entirely to illustrate that man, with God’s help, can overcome his handicaps and challenges. They quote instead that beautiful passage in the book of *Isaiah* which reads:

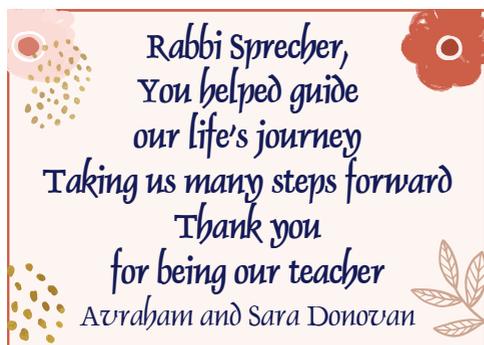
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

Then the lame shall leap like a deer,

And the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud;

For waters shall burst forth in the desert,
Streams in the wilderness. (*Isaiah* 35:5-6)

We seldom contemplate the development, nay transformation, of the man who was Moses. But it is important that we do so,



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because, although we each have our unique challenges and personal handicaps, we are capable of coping with them, and often of overcoming them. We all can develop, and we all can potentially transform ourselves.

This week, and in all of the ensuing weeks which lie ahead, as we read Moses' masterful valedictory and are impressed with the beauty of his language, we must strive to remember that he was not always a skilled orator. Quite the contrary, he was once an *aral sefatayim*, a man of impeded speech, who grew to achieve the divine blessing of shedding his impediments and addressing his people with the inspiring and eminent long speech that is the book of *Deuteronomy*.

He can be a role model for us all. ■



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Sunday, July 18 - 8:00 a.m.

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