

Why Did Moses Have a Speech Disability?

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Moses is the quintessential prophet in the Jewish tradition. Moses's job, like the task of all other prophets, is to convey the word of God to the people. He fulfills this role, the Torah tells us, in exemplary fashion: "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses" (Deut. 34:10). Moses is not just the paradigm for all prophets that follow, he is the best in the business. But if Moses is supposed to serve as the first and foremost prophet—that is, to be the expert at telling people what God wants from them—why would God choose a mouthpiece who has a speech disability?

Moses wonders about this himself when faced with his first task as a prophet, which is to beseech Pharaoh to release the Israelites from bondage: "How then should Pharaoh heed me—who gets tongue-tied!" (Exod. 6:12). Moses has already pointed this issue out a few chapters earlier, protesting that he has "never been a man of words" and is "slow of speech and slow of tongue" (4:10). And in verse 6:30 he again repeats that he is tongue-tied and wonders how he can get Pharaoh to listen to him.

As surprising as it is for God to choose a prophet who has difficulty speaking, God's response to Moses after the third time he points out his disability is perhaps even more surprising: God promises Moses, "See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet" (Exod. 7:1). What does it mean for Moses to be in the role of God? And why is this God's response to Moses's concerns?

Most classical commentators believe that "in the role of God" refers to some position of power that Moses will hold in Pharaoh's eyes—for instance, that he will be seen as a judge, according to Rashi, or even as a kind of god or other heavenly being, per Ibn Ezra. I would like to offer an alternative read, however, and suggest that God mentions

"the role of God" not because Pharaoh is going to be impressed by Moses, but rather in order to reassure Moses by offering a useful analogy. "The role of God" here, in the context of the verse taken as a whole, is the role of someone who needs assistance with speaking. Just as God is a being who speaks through a prophetic agent, so too will Moses have his own mouthpiece, his brother Aaron. God is thus simply explaining to Moses that just like God can't and doesn't speak directly to most people, so too Moses does not have to do all the speaking himself.

God not only reassures Moses that he will have support, but also admits to Moses that God's own role is one that requires assistance, too. God's response to Moses is thus a demonstration of true empathy. Consider the difference between a child asking for help and the parent saying "Sure, you can have help," as opposed to a parent saying "Sure, everyone needs help sometimes—I know I do!" God understands what Moses needs because God needs the same things. In fact, God seems to suggest that, astonishingly, to require assistance is part of what it means to be in the role of God!

This radical theological idea also fits with an earlier exchange between God and Moses. The first time Moses mentions his worries, God responds: "Who gives humans speech? Who makes them dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, God?" (4:11). Again, we might wonder: How is this statement meant to assuage Moses's concerns? God may have made Moses the way he is, but how does that help Moses feel better about being asked to step into a role that will publicly highlight his speech disability? There is even something potentially disturbing about this verse, in its gesturing at a theology in which people should simply "accept their lot" and not complain or ask for help, as well as its use of categories that do not reflect the experiences of

people with disabilities themselves. (The category “dumb” is typically considered to be offensive as well as inaccurate.)

Again, however, I would like to offer an alternate reading of this verse. We know that God reveals God’s glory by making humans who are physically different from one another, as the Mishnah states: “When a human stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme Ruler of Rulers, the Holy One, Blessed be God, stamped all people with the seal of the first human, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). And we also know that God made humans *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God. Perhaps, then, God is reminding Moses of that: all humans are created by God, humans are physically diverse, and therefore all humans in all their differences are created in God’s image.

Being created in God’s image, then, does not mean that humans are endowed with some kind of divine perfection, but rather that humans are granted both abilities and disabilities, and that this mirrors something essential about the divine as well. It may seem strange to consider God as having a disability, perhaps even a kind of speech impediment. Yet this is also a potentially powerful way to conceptualize a God who gave the Torah through a revelation that was incomplete and in need of human interpretation. To be godly, then, as well as to be human, is to have both power and limitations, to be both abled and disabled. In that case, a prophet with a speech impediment is not a person with a flaw to be overcome, but rather the truest representation of the divine voice.