

Are We Just Speaking, or Truly Communicating?

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ויאמר יהוה אל־משה אמר

ויאמר יהוה אל משה אמר אל הכהנים בני אהרן ואמרת
אלהם

Forty years ago, I first encountered Haydn's famous oratorio, *The Creation*, while singing in a choir in elementary school. I was genuinely puzzled. In one section, based on verses from Psalm 19 where the celestial bodies praise God as creator, the text reads like something generated by an unfortunate adventure with Google Translate: "*To day that is coming speaks it the day; the night that is gone to following night.*" Later that afternoon, I jumped in the car and burst out to my father (who generally supplied answers to my endless questions), "What is '*to day that is coming speaks it the day*' supposed to mean?!" He replied calmly, "Mmm, Haydn, yes," and recited a more familiar translation of the psalm's opening verses by way of response. It quieted me at the time, but I'll admit I've secretly never been satisfied, so when Midrash Vayikra Rabbah offered an insight connecting this verse to the opening of our parashah this week, I was intrigued.

Peppered throughout the books of Vayikra and Bamidbar is a phrase so common as to be ignored. In a section of the Torah offering few stories, this little phrase stitches the seams of disparate material together like decorative thread on a patchwork quilt. In this week's portion it occurs so frequently, in fact, that it has one of the highest counts of any parashah for its appearance:

וידבר יהוה אל משה לאמר דבר. . . ואמרת. . .

"*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak...and say...'*"

It is this phrase that introduces most of the themes in the parashah: from priestly purity injunctions to observance of major festivals, and ultimately the avoidance of blasphemy—nearly a dozen times in all. It's surprising, then, that the parashah would open with an anomaly in the expected formula, resulting in its name, Emor:

"*And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them'*" (Lev. 21:1)

In Hebrew, the established formula has been *vayedaber . . . le'emor . . . daber . . .* but this verse uses *emor* three times: *vayomer . . . emor . . . ve'amarta*. Why is it different here?

Perhaps the breaking of the formula for our parashah's irregular *emor* is about more than just words. Using its characteristic wordplay, the Midrash connects the parashah's *emor* here to *omer* in Psalm 19:3 (spelled the same way, but as a poetic noun): "*day to day utters speech (omer), and night to night reveals knowledge.*" It explains that the day and the night are negotiating the giving and borrowing of time from each other to create the cycles of the year between the equinoxes. Reading the next verse in the psalm, we see "*there is no speech (omer) . . .*" Or as the Midrash puts it, "they pay each other back harmoniously, without a contract."

But this is a contradiction. How could day and night speak without speaking, and how is any of this related to the parashah? An answer might lie in the differences between *ledaber* and *le'emor*. *Daber* is generally translated as "speak" and *emor* as "say" or "tell"; in Hebrew their same spellings can function as nouns: "words" and "speech," respectively. While *daber* is used for speaking aloud, *emor* might also take on the meaning of "communication." And as any parent or teacher knows all too well, communication does not always require speaking, and speaking does not always result in communication. The day and night are communicating or telling (*emor*) without using speech (*omer*). Our parashah's opening verse then, might be translated, "And God said to

Moses, ‘**Communicate . . . tell . . .**’ because the material to come requires more than mere words.

It is no wonder, then, that speech and its importance echo across the parashah. The seasons produced by heavenly wordless discourse in the Midrash are reflected in the annual cycle of Israel’s major feasts discussed in the middle. Interestingly, while we use a visual word in English (*to observe* a ritual or holy day), here it is a verbal one: cried out or proclaimed (*mikra*):

וידבר ייְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ
אֲלֵהֶם מוֹעֲדֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ אֵלֶּה
הֵם מוֹעֲדֵי

Everett Fox’s translation brings this out most clearly: YHWH spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: The appointed-times of YHWH, which you are to **proclaim** to them [as] **proclamations** of holiness—these are they, my appointed-times (Lev. 23:1–2).

The theme of the importance of speech and communication continues with the strict admonitions surrounding the speaking of the divine name at the parashah’s close. Both the proclaiming of festivals and the avoidance of blasphemy carry the thread of the opening *emor* throughout the fabric of the entire portion.

In Eichah Rabbah (1:41), the Midrash offers an opposing example of a *vayomer . . . vayomer* redundancy from Esther 7:4, where the text attributes “he said” to Ahashverosh twice in a row. Here, the Midrash tells us, it is because at his first *vayomer*, he didn’t know Esther was Jewish and spoke to her directly, but later he only spoke to her through a translator. As in our verse, the Midrash interprets *emor* through the problem of words, meaning, and reception, but the second *emor* serves in this instance to distance the speaker instead of communicating effectively. It highlights difference, deliberately obfuscates, and creates barriers where there had previously been none.

In our world, there are protests and counter-protests; speaking, often at high volume, is part of it. Sometimes not much actual communication is happening in these exchanges. I didn’t know it back in elementary school, but I’d

stumbled onto an important truth in Haydn’s awkward libretto: every act of speech requires a kind of translation on the part of the recipient, and communication is not guaranteed. And after all, if even day and night can communicate wordlessly, is language sufficient?

From its first verse, Parashat Emor presents us with challenges to our voices. In our cultural and political moment, we are faced with *vayomer . . . emor . . . ve’amarta* choices every day. What are we truly saying when we speak? How might we move from just saying words to truly communicating?