

Words Fail Me

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Words fail me.

This common idiom—so casually tossed off in a moment of surprise—expresses a deep truth. Words do indeed fail us, sometimes to tragic effect.

That is the way the Zohar (the foundational text of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism) understands our exile in Egypt: as the exile of speech, a failure of words. In this reading, the breakdown of speech is both cause and effect of our enslavement, while healing and redeeming speech—finding our voice—is both the process and hallmark of redemption.

How does the exile of speech—failed, unredeemed language—manifest itself? Most commonly, it is what we call *leshon hara* (literally, negative or evil speech), typified by Pharaoh:

- false language, from outright lies to more nuanced falsehoods like partial truths and oversimplifications; (e.g. Exod. 5:8)
- language used to advance evil ends, such as words that are hurtful and destructive, or that incite fear, hatred or violence; (e.g. Exod. 1:9-10, 16, 22)
- words that limit possibility and prevent growth, or demoralize rather than inspire; (e.g. Exod 5:2, 4-5) or
- unreliable language, such as empty speech and unfulfilled promises. (e.g. Exod. 8:4)

But the Zohar's notion of the exile of speech points also to a deeper failure of language—not only the presence of *leshon hara*, but the impossibility of positive speech, what we might call *leshon hakodesh* (holy language, words of hope, healing and redemption). This failure manifests as a kind of muteness, as language that will not or cannot be

spoken—exemplified by Moses's famous reluctance or inability to speak in God's name (see Exod. 4:1, 4:10, 5:22–23, 6:12, 6:30). And it may also manifest as a kind of deafness: redemptive language going unheard or unheeded. In other words, failing.

It is this failure that opens our reading this week. God appears with a sweeping promise of redemption, to be communicated to the people by Moses:

I have now heard (*shamati*) the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelites: I am YHVH. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you . . . And I will take you to be My people and I will be Your God . . . I will bring you into the land . . . and I shall give it to you for a possession, I YHVH." (Exod. 6:5–8)

But where God has heard the cry of the Israelites, the Israelites are unable or unwilling to hear the word of God:

So Moses spoke accordingly to the Israelites, but they did not listen (*velo shame-u*) to Moses, because of crushed spirits (*mikotzer ruah*) and oppressive labor (*ume-avodah kashah*). (Exod. 6:9)

On the surface, we might empathize with a people so beaten down and demoralized by oppression and fear that they are unwilling to take seriously a message of hope. After all, they have listened and trusted Moses once and the result was a worsening of their condition. Their refusal to listen further might be understandable.

But the Zohar's notion of the exile of speech pushes us to a deeper, more timely meaning. The Exodus narrative is not

merely historic but paradigmatic, representative of an ongoing search for *lashon hakodesh*, Godly language with the potential to free and to heal. Notably, the Hebrew word for “pharaoh” is comprised of the letter *peh* (mouth) followed by the word *ra’ah* (evil). Thus, we can read Pharaoh as a symbol of *leshon hara* itself. And our exile is thus emblematic of the danger of physical and metaphorical enslavement and exile whenever a society becomes dominated by such negative, evil speech, and redemptive speech is silenced, drowned out, or dismissed.

On this level, the people’s failure to hear is shockingly tragic, and understanding that failure is essential to our own liberation. So how and why did Moses’s message fail?

The verse itself is susceptible of multiple meanings. *Velo* could mean “did not” (a simple failure) or “would not” (a willful failure). And *velo shame-u* might mean that they actually did not hear Moses speaking, that they heard him speaking but did not listen to what he had to say, that they heard Moses’ words but did not understand or take in their meaning, or that they understood but did not heed.

The cause of the failure is similarly open to interpretation. The Torah gives us two reasons. The latter, *avodah kashah*, refers to the hard and oppressive labor imposed upon the people. The former, *kotzer ruaḥ*, is less transparent.

Some commentators translate *ruaḥ* as “breath,” and the failure to hear as a physiological response. Rashi (11th century, France), for example, comments that “one who is under stress is short of wind and breath, and is unable to breathe deeply.” In a remarkably contemporary reading, the Netziv (19th century, Volozhin in present-day Belarus) notes that the physical impact of stress (shallow breathing) limits our attention span: “it becomes difficult to tolerate longer speech, which demands both explanation and an extended period of focus and concentration.”

Alternatively, *ruaḥ* might refer not to a physical but to an emotional, intellectual or spiritual limitation. Ramban (13th century, Spain) translates *kotzer ruaḥ* as “impatience of spirit” resulting from fear, and *avodah kashah* as lack of time to hear and consider resulting from the pressure of Pharaoh’s demands.

Especially rich is the commentary of the Or Haḥayyim (18th century, Morocco), who writes:

Perhaps because they had not yet been given the Torah they were unable to hear, and this is called *kotzer ruaḥ*, because the Torah expands a person’s consciousness.

Here, the study of Torah—both in its content and in its methodology, its use of words—is seen as offering training in how to hear and understand more deeply, more expansively, more generously, more hopefully.

Taken together, we see some striking and disturbing parallels to our own culture. Stress, overwork, impatience, narrow self-concern, and lack of intellectual and emotional discipline often prevent us from listening deeply, from taking the time to hear and attend to the voices that elevate, and offer genuinely constructive paths forward.

And perhaps it is our growing inability to listen that is silencing the very voices our world most needs to hear. The Torah text suggests that the people’s failure to hear, Moses’ difficulty speaking, and the empowerment of Pharaoh/*Peh-Ra’ah* are all interconnected and mutually causative (See, for example, Exodus 6:12 and 6:30). Speech enables hearing, but the reverse is also true: it is deep listening that makes healthy and meaningful speech possible. And the absence of either amplifies the voice of Pharaoh.

Leshon hakodesh (holy, healing language) is a demanding and courageous act. Words do indeed fail, and speech is always in danger of going into exile. But as the Torah teaches (Exod. 2:24), redemption begins with listening: “God heard.”

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