

Parshat Va'era: Overcoming Social Anxiety

By Anna Veronese, Class of 2028

Recently I re-watched the 2010 film *The King's Speech*, in which King George VI struggles with a debilitating stutter as he prepares to lead his nation through World War II. Thousands of years earlier, the Torah presents a strikingly similar story: Moses, chosen to lead the Israelites out of slavery, faces Pharaoh with a speech difficulty and crippling self-doubt.

Three verses in Shemot describe Moses's speech difficulty. The first one is found in Parshat Shemot (4:10): after having been designated by Hashem to lead the people outside of Egypt, Moses tries to avoid the task, by saying: "I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am heavy of speech and heavy of tongue." Though Hashem finds him a solution—his brother Aaron will accompany and serve as his spokesman ("he will be your mouth" (Shemot 4:16))—Moses raises the issue again in our parsha, in verses 6:12 and 6:30, by telling God: "I am of uncircumcised lips."

These descriptions raise some questions about the nature of Moses's condition. Do these different terms all refer to the same underlying problem, or do they describe an evolving situation? What is exactly the nature of this difficulty—is it physical or psychological? What might be its origin, and is it a permanent condition or something that can change over time? Perhaps most intriguingly, why does Hashem specifically choose someone with such a challenge to be His messenger?

Commentators offer two main understandings of Moses's speech problems. Midrashic sources claim that Moses's impediment was physical in nature, causing him to stutter or mispronounce certain letters. Others, however, reject the possibility that Hashem sent a messenger with a physical disability. For example, Rashbam argues that after years in Midian, Moses was simply not sufficiently fluent in the Egyptian language, while Sforno maintains that he lacked oratory skills. According to Ibn Ezra, Moses's condition included both a medical condition from birth and a lack of eloquence.

Among modern commentators, Umberto Cassuto offers a slightly different perspective that moves away from both the physical and linguistic explanations. Cassuto's reading of the verse in our parsha (Shemot 6:12) is particularly illuminating. He argues that we are not witnessing a simple repetition of the doubt that Moses already expressed at Horeb. Rather, we see an escalation of the earlier situation, now operating at a fundamentally different level.

Initially, at Horeb, Moses was afraid that perhaps the people of Israel would not listen to him. He had already overcome this fear, and he had already witnessed in practice that, with Aaron's help, it was possible for him to gain the trust of the people (Shemot 4:31). But that is no longer the case in our parsha: after their workload is increased, the people have withdrawn their trust and no longer listen to him. When Hashem gives him the command to go and *speak* to Pharaoh, he doubts his powers of speech again, but in a new and far more severe form than before. Moses's reasoning follows a *kal vachomer* logic: if he did not succeed before his own people, how could he possibly succeed before the king?

I believe that Cassuto's interpretation aligns remarkably well with modern understanding of what stuttering actually is and how it relates to anxiety and social phobia. Contemporary research shows that stuttering is a neurological disconnect between intent and outcome during the task of expressing each individual sound. Importantly, acute nervousness and stress do not *cause* stuttering, but may trigger and exacerbate it in people who have the underlying neurological condition. Thus, stuttering is *not* a psychological problem, but psychological factors can make it significantly worse.

This understanding helps us reframe Moses's situation in a more nuanced way. Moses may indeed have had an underlying neurological speech difficulty, but his primary concern was not whether his mouth could form words—it was about his adequacy as a public speaker bearing enormous responsibility. His self-description—“I am not a man of words”—reflects a crisis of confidence in the face of overwhelming accountability. The progression we see across the three biblical passages reveals precisely how this anxiety escalates. At Horeb, Moses expresses initial fear of public speaking before his own people. Then, after the people's situation has worsened and they withdraw their trust, his anxiety deepens considerably. He has now experienced what feels like failure and rejection. Finally, when commanded to confront Pharaoh himself, the anxiety reaches its peak. For someone with an underlying neurological speech difficulty, this escalating psychological pressure would make the condition exponentially worse, creating a vicious cycle where anxiety exacerbates the speech problem, which in turn increases the anxiety.

Hashem's solution is profoundly psychological. Aaron is not given because Moses *cannot* speak, but because Moses *believes* he cannot succeed. Having Aaron beside him provides emotional security, shared responsibility, and a safety net that allows Moses to take risks and build confidence. Significantly, Aaron's role as spokesman diminishes as the narrative progresses. In the encounters with Pharaoh throughout our parsha and beyond, Moses increasingly speaks for himself. Aaron is there primarily to execute the miracles of Hashem, not to speak for Moses. This gradual transition reflects a therapeutic process—Moses builds confidence through supported practice.

The most compelling evidence comes in Deuteronomy, where Moses delivers eloquent addresses without the assistance of Aaron (who is already deceased). The Midrash Tanchuma (Devarim 2) captures the people's astonishment: “Yesterday you said 'I am not a man of words,' and now you speak so much!”

It is quite possible that the underlying neurological condition never fully disappeared. But what did change was Moses's relationship to his difficulty. Through forty years of experience, through the support of Aaron, through countless successes in leadership, Moses found his voice. He learned that his worth as a leader did not depend on perfect eloquence, and he developed the confidence to speak despite his challenges. The neurological disconnect may still have been there, but the crippling social anxiety that had exacerbated it was overcome.

Like King George VI, Moses teaches us that finding one's voice is not about eliminating our challenges, but about learning to lead despite them. Perhaps this is why God chose a leader with this particular challenge: to show us that our greatest strengths often emerge not despite our vulnerabilities, but through them—and that no one finds their voice alone.

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