

Menachem Mendel of Horodak

Pri Ha'eiz

Parshas Va'eira

The questioner asked regarding the statement of our Sages: "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalms 23:4)—the "rod" refers to afflictions, and the "staff" refers to Torah. The rabbi began his teaching with the verse, "And I appeared... but My Name, Hashem, I did not make known to them," (Va'eira 6:3) and Rashi explains: "It is not written 'I did not make known,' for it was already stated, 'And Hashem appeared to Avram,' but I was not recognized by them with this Name." (See Rashi)

The Ramban raised a difficulty regarding the matter of Moses being "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." If the explanation is simple, the Talmud's difficulty regarding the verse "and behold, a boy is crying" becomes more pressing. Initially, the child is referred to as a "child," and later as a "boy," which the Talmud explains is due to his voice resembling that of a youth. However, this raises the question: does this make Moses, our teacher, appear as though he had some defect, for Levites are disqualified by their voice?

At first glance, this difficulty regarding Moses' speech seems far greater. The conclusion of the matter, however, is that the intent of the Holy One, blessed be He, was precisely this—that Moses' speech was not fluent or eloquent. For had he been eloquent and possessed a pleasant and refined manner of speaking, the greatness of Torah might not have been fully recognized. In truth, Torah is sweeter than honey, enlightening the eyes and restoring the soul. Everything was revealed at Sinai, but it might have been possible for them to attribute its sweetness to the pleasing tone and eloquence of Moses' speech.

Therefore, it was the opposite: Moses' speech was not naturally sweet or refined, and yet the people still found grace and sweetness in his words, emphasizing that the delight and depth came from the Torah itself, not from external factors. Indeed, the great ones sought a path to serve the Creator, may He be blessed. However, in truth, Moses was healed at the time of the giving of the Torah, as it is stated, "And God would answer him with a voice." Yet it is well known that the greatness of speech is of utmost significance, as it constitutes the essence of man. It is known that the ability to speak elevates man above the animal, as seen in the translation of the verse "And man became a living soul," which is rendered as "a speaking spirit." This reflects the vitality within man.

It is true that speech governs, commands, and directs everything. The essence of vitality is in the blessed Creator, and speech is its primary expression. Speech itself has no physical form or substance, though it is clothed in letters to enable comprehension by the listener. Without the garments of letters, speech cannot be grasped or understood. The essence of speech resides in the soul, where it exists in a more

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refined, adorned, swift, and clear form than the physical mouth could express in countless years. This is because "the spirit speaks within it, and His word is upon their tongues." Thus, speech serves as the conduit for expressing the soul's inner vitality, revealing its lofty and profound connection to the divine.

Any person who habituates their speech to be mindful and understand that their words do not originate from themselves but from the good God, who is the true speaker, essentially creates new heavens and a new earth. This parallels the beginning of creation, as it is stated, "By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made." What has changed since then? If a person comprehends, at the moment of speaking, how every single word that emerges from their mouth is a continuation of the word of God, descending through the spiritual realms, then every word they utter has the power to create anew.

This idea is exemplified in the story of Rabbi Akiva, whose study filled an entire valley with vegetation and gourds, and similar accounts are known of other holy individuals.

[NOTE The story mentioned about Rabbi Akiva, where his study filled an entire valley with vegetation and gourds, is not directly found in traditional sources like the Talmud or Midrash. Instead, it appears to be an allegorical or mystical interpretation often found in later Hasidic or kabbalistic writings. The idea behind the story reflects the belief in the transformative power of Torah study and the speech of holy individuals. According to this perspective, a tzaddik (righteous person) like Rabbi Akiva, through the purity of his study and the sanctity of his words, could bring about physical manifestations of divine blessings—such as vegetation growing miraculously. This symbolizes how the spiritual energy released through Torah study can bring vitality and renewal to the physical world. **END NOTE]**

The profound truth about the greatness of speech is that, when sanctified, it becomes a tool of divine creation. Conversely, Heaven forbid, if speech is misused for self-gratification or improper intentions, it creates "heavens of falsehood and emptiness," infusing vitality into the forces of impurity (kelipot) and empowering them. When one derives enjoyment or personal gain from such speech, they effectively strengthen those forces and place themselves under their influence. This makes the person subordinate to these forces, receiving from them rather than from the divine. However, when one speaks solely with the intention of God's will, without any trace of personal benefit, their speech becomes connected to the Creator. Through this connection, they govern their reality and partake in creation itself.

This aligns with the essence of Torah, which constitutes the creation and governance of worlds, from the initial divine will to the physical realm. The Torah is fundamentally

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expressed in the Ten Commandments, acquired through speech, as emphasized in the phrase "And you shall speak of them." This underscores the ultimate unity with the Creator achieved through holy speech. In such speech, God speaks and manifests through the person as a mere vessel, devoid of any self-image or form.

However, speech that originates from emotional states (middot) is already clothed in those emotions and remains bound to the physical world, as all lower creations are derived through divine attributes. Only speech entirely free from self-interest or emotional influence can truly ascend and unify with the infinite divine source. Each attribute (middah) develops through habitual use, and thus, it becomes nearly impossible for a person to ensure that their words remain pure and clear as expressions of God's speech, because habit obscures the awareness of the one who acts and His wonders. Even the most refined ethical teachings, profound wisdoms, or thunderous voices lose their ability to inspire once they become routine. Habit dulls the recognition of the power and marvels of the Creator after repeated exposure to seeing, hearing, or knowing them.

This limitation can only be transcended when speech is entirely free from the garments of attributes and instead flows from faith in the words of the living God. This is the essence of what is called *mitzuvah v'oseh* ("one who is commanded and acts"), which is considered greater than one who acts without being commanded. The latter is driven by the attribute compelling their actions, whether through love or fear of God. By contrast, the former operates through speech directly connected to God's will, transcending any personal attribute. This distinction reflects the fulfillment of Torah by the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—whose adherence stemmed from their attributes rather than divine speech, as the Torah had not yet been given. Speech unbound by attributes is likened to an ever-flowing spring, as it is connected to the Infinite One (Ein Sof), from whom it flows. No mouth can adequately express these words, as they surpass all measure and capacity.

In contrast, speech clothed in an attribute is limited by the scope of that attribute, influencing the limbs and faculties accordingly. The attribute trains the organs to articulate in its manner. This distinction explains why Moses, who was entirely detached from attributes in his speech, is described as "heavy of mouth." As the verse states, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai)," referring to the attributes, which are limited revelations of divinity—"sufficient within their context." However, "My Name, Hashem, I did not make known to them" refers to the infinite connection (*vayivada*, "known") and intimacy (*deveikut*, "attachment") inherent in divine speech that governs all. Such speech, arising from the essence of God, is either a ruler

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over all or, Heaven forbid, subordinate to external forces if corrupted. Speech originating from attributes inherently connects to and relates to created beings, as they too are shaped by attributes. Moses, however, spoke beyond the attributes, his words emerging as a pure channel of divine will, untainted by the habitual limitations of the human experience.

This is why, in the portion of *Shemot*, Moses complained, "Why have You harmed this people? Why have You sent me?" Moses was fearful that perhaps he had caused harm through his speech, which was not as it should have been—failing to implant faith in their hearts through his words, as explained elsewhere. In response, the Holy One, blessed be He, reassured him: "Now you will see... for with a strong hand, he will send them out, and with a strong hand, he will drive them out." This refers to the power of speech, which operates with strength, like a ruling rod that governs all (Sanhedrin 5a). Thus, every person who speaks words of Torah in this manner is akin to Moses. This is the meaning of the verse: "Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me." The rod (*shevet*) represents afflictions, and the staff (*mishnet*) represents Torah, in the manner of speech that is "heavy of mouth," as explained above. Alternatively, it may refer to speech that is pure and authoritative—either governing or being governed. These are the trials of speech within Torah study, and they bring comfort, as our Sages taught (Kiddushin 30b): "I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah as its antidote." Through these trials, whether they manifest as afflictions or the effort to refine and purify one's speech, Torah provides both guidance and solace, elevating the individual and strengthening their connection to the divine.