

# A model for inclusion...

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When Moses first meets God, he tells him that he is hard of speech and tongue. Then again, twice in this week's Parasha, we again hear of Moses' speech impediment<sup>1</sup>. As we will see from some of the commentaries, it seems strange that the man God chooses to carry out the mission of freeing his chosen people from the clutches of Pharaoh, primarily through the command of talking with him, would be impeded by such an affliction.

Whether this was an accidental impediment, as the Midrash explains (Moses taking a piece of coal and putting it in his mouth), or something natural, as Rabeinu Chananel explains (Moses being unable to pronounce certain letters or words) what we have is the leader of the Jewish people, the greatest prophet to have graced the earth, with a disability<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout history, disabilities have seen a person disregarded or worse. Unfortunately, our own texts are replete with examples exemplifying this. In fact, around the question of Moses' impediment, many of our commentators dismiss that there was a physical impediment at all, chalking Moses' words up to an over abundance of humility.

However, in exploring the Derashot HaRan, I believe that Moses' impediment is actually a statement, even a model, for inclusion. The Ran explores the various options that the impediment could be or could represent, including the suggestion to dismiss it as mentioned above. However ultimately settles on the fact that the impediment exists, and that God did not miraculously heal Moses, means that God wanted **everyone** to realise that he or she had a place in their connection with God, and in the receiving of the Torah<sup>3</sup>. In having the leader of the Jewish people be the chief communicator with the Almighty, a valuable lesson of inclusion is taught – everyone has a place in the tent, and everyone can connect with God.

Jeffery Tiggay reminds us that Moses was neither the first or the last leader to have a speech impediment or other disabilities<sup>4</sup>. In the end the words and deeds of Moses and these other leaders, were far greater than any impediment they might have had. This is a valuable lesson for all of us, we need to look past what we see, realising that the power to change or create impact comes not from one's physical or mental capacities, but one's deeds and actions.

Finally, the Midrash Tanchuma reminds us that while Moses begins his journey stating that his impediment will be an obstruction for his holy task, he ends up being the man of words<sup>5</sup>.

Moses overcomes his impediment. It doesn't go away, but it no longer defines him. This should be all of our guiding principles in ensuring that we create a society, religion, and community that is inclusive. Everyone has a place in the tent, and no one should be defined by the impediments that they experience.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**