

Rabbi Noa Kushner  
Parashat Devarim  
July 21, 2023  
These are the words

1.

I heard a story once from an adult woman who told me  
That when she was little, she didn't speak until she was three  
Her parents were beside herself  
They tried everything  
Specialists, doctors, cajoling, nothing worked  
She didn't speak a single word  
They thought she would never speak  
Then, one day she went up to her mother in the supermarket  
and asked,  
"Can I have a quarter to play this video game?"  
Her mother, weeping, gave her the quarter  
Of course, that story, the story of how she began to speak  
In full sentences  
A little late  
Is part of her story and her family story

Moses is not interested in video games, not that I know of  
But he too, famously, goes from not speaking to speaking

When God asks him to go to Pharaoh  
Moses says he not a man of words

לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי<sup>1</sup>

Which could mean he had a stutter  
Or it could mean he didn't know the language of the palace  
Or that he was plain afraid of speaking to Pharaoh  
See, he knew what he was up against  
And the world was so out of balance  
We don't blame him

Because the silence of Egypt was resounding,  
The only narrative in that place was the narrative of Pharaoh  
It was a time when violence seemed inevitable  
So that when the lives of Hebrew babies are threatened, no one  
protested  
Not a word was spoken, not by the Israelites, not by anyone  
It was the kind of silence that reinforced itself,  
Endless and irrefutable  
And it was this silence that God asks Moses to break

And famously, Moses refuses again and again and again  
Not once, not twice but five times

2.

But torah heals

מִרְפָּא לְשׁוֹן עֵץ חַיִּים<sup>2</sup>

[Torah is] "the tree of life, healing the tongue"

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 4:10

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 15:4

And we know Moses eventually learns to speak  
Torah somehow how heals him  
He learns to speak  
I mean really speak  
Because in this week's portion  
The first chapter is of a book literally called, "words" / דְּבָרִים  
Moses is talking *the whole book*  
The whole book is Moses' speech!  
Not to mention the book itself, the portion itself begins with the  
phrase

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה<sup>3</sup>

*These are the words* that Moses said

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים

These are the words

All these words, a book of his words

In fact, in Midrash Tanchuma, the rabbis say that when Moses started his long speech, chapter upon chapter to the people, the people Israel, interrupted and said to him

"[It seems like just] yesterday you said,

לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי

'I am not a man of words.' And now you are speaking... so much?"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Deut. 1:1

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Devarim 2:1

You see once Moses starts talking, really talking, once he is able to erase the voice of Pharaoh

Once he gets past his fear of the desert and not knowing where he is going

Once he gets to the essence of who he is

He cannot stop, the holy words just keep coming out of his mouth

And so perhaps **אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים**

“These are the words”

Simply means a healing of the mouth, a resuscitation of speech  
Moses’ ability to eat from the tree of life, to speak words of Torah

Moses’ ability to speak where there previously was nothing but silence

Perhaps **אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים**

Simply means all the words of Moses that will follow in his book of words

That the *ruach hakodesh* of Moses – the holiness of his soul – can exist in the world in his words, that his words can be in the world

Perhaps this is enough

3.

But there is more because you see

In the world to come, we learn that trees will grow on either side of a beautiful river<sup>5</sup>

Trees, the rabbis say, that God will choose from the garden of eden itself

And their fruits, and their leaves will heal not just Moses but all of us<sup>6</sup>

Anyone who cannot speak will be able to say what she wants, to speak freely, without coercion or duress or fear

In the time to come we will all eat the fruits from these trees and our mouths and hearts will be opened

Maybe this is enough for us and we should wait for this river and those trees

But it's possible, I think, that in this world, too

Even before we ever taste the fruit from the trees from the garden of eden in the world to come

That, like it was for Moses, we can eat from the tree *of life now*

That we too can learn and speak Torah and be healed

That is to say

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<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, Devarim Rabbah

<sup>6</sup> Menachot 98a:13

§ The Gemara cites another dispute between Rav Ḥisda and Rav Yitzḥak bar Avdimi: With regard to the fruit trees that in the future will grow on either side of a river that will emerge from the Temple, the verse states: "And by the river upon its bank, on this side and on that side, shall grow every tree for food, whose leaf shall not wither, neither shall its fruit fail. It shall bring forth new fruit every month, because its waters issue out of the Sanctuary, and its fruit shall be for food, and its leaf for healing [litrufa]" (Ezekiel 47:12). The Gemara interprets the term "litrufa" as a contraction of *lehatir peh*, meaning: **To unlock the mouth**, and there is a dispute between Rav Ḥisda and Rav Yitzḥak bar Avdimi with regard to the meaning of this term.

Instead of resigning ourselves when there is so much in our world that seems to conspire against our words, urging us into silences

Instead of resigning ourselves into platitudes or nonsense or writing snappy things on social media with a lot of clapping emojis

Instead of lying and posturing –

Instead of this kind of endless layers of deception

Torah provides us with an alternative, one of trying to find true things to say

## אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים

“These are the words”

Which words? The words of Torah, the tree of life, the words that heal us

“But” I hear you say to me, “Torah has many words. Can’t we narrow it down?”

Okay. You have talked me into it

4.

You see, a few verses later

Moses reminds us that

אֲרַבְעִים שָׁנָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ, לֹא חָסַרְתָּ דָבָר<sup>7</sup>

“For 40 years in the wilderness, God has been with you, you lacked nothing”

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<sup>7</sup> Deut. 2:7

God gave us everything we needed

And R. Nahorai adds

“God carried you through the wilderness, like a father carries his son”

“Just like when you, leaving slavery, crossed through the sea on dry ground and one of the little children was hungry and all her mother had to do was reach into the walls of the sea and there was a pomegranate or apple waiting to be plucked”

In what seems like the holiest free vending machine ever  
That’s how God was with us

לֹא חָסַרְתָּ דָבָר

That’s what it was like: For 40 years, “You lacked nothing!”

But see, the word דָבָר can mean a ‘thing’ (you lacked no thing)  
but it also means ‘word’

דָבָר as in סֵפֶר דְבָרִים the book of words

So we could read this verse as, “God gave you every דָבָר /  
*everything* you needed”

But we could also read it as, “God gave you every *word* you  
needed.”

As if God is saying,

“In the wilderness, you didn’t lack a single word,

All the words you were missing for all those generations in  
Egypt came rushing back to you –

All the descriptions and dreams and associations and  
conversations and unfinished sentences  
A torrent of ideas and emotions all came pouring out, your  
mouths began to heal  
And you were connected to your souls again

So maybe the teaching is that, in the wilderness of our lives  
We need to remember that God is there, giving us permission  
to say the words we think we don't remember or maybe don't  
deserve or are not allowed to say  
Those are the very words God is giving us

Maybe by reading Torah, we just remember what it is we so  
wanted to say  
Maybe that is enough

5.

We could stop there – but, you see

לֹא הִסְרַת דְּבַר

Doesn't just mean God gave us every thing we needed  
And it doesn't just mean God gave us every word we needed,  
In a creative reading, midrash teaches that

לֹא הִסְרַת דְּבַר could also mean, God gave us everything but  
ONLY the word was *lacking*  
ONLY the word was *lacking*



As if God was saying, “For 40 years, all you had to do was to *remember the word* for what it was you wanted, you just had to ask for it, and I brought it for you – <sup>8</sup>

“Everything you needed  
...Food? I sent it from the sky.  
You didn’t like my scorpions? Gone.  
You wanted more shade? I had you covered.  
No sooner had you said the word, I provided it”

“But,” says God, “The catch was that you had to remember the words yourselves, you yourselves had to *ask for what you needed* – the truth, what you need – that part I cannot do.”

So perhaps אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים is just what it is we need, in truth, not lying, what it is we truly need that we can each only say for ourselves.

6.

However, there is one last level to this teaching –

Because if לֹא הָסַרְתָּ דְבָרַי means God gave us everything but ONLY the word was lacking

Maybe the missing דְבָרַי was not simply a matter of us articulating what we truly needed, as difficult and rare as that is

Maybe the missing דְבָרַי was a specific kind of word that was lacking in our 40 years in the great wilderness

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<sup>8</sup> Shemot Rabbah 21:10

Perhaps, says our midrash  
The only kind of words that were lacking in the wilderness  
The only words God cannot truly ever provide  
Are the words of *t'shuvah* / of turning inward / of knowing we  
want our lives to be different, to start in a different place  
altogether  
The kind of words that begin a return to our very essence  
The kind of words that come from so deep within us, they cause  
us to move mountains and change our lives

God loves this kind of change, this return, *this t'shuvah*  
God waits for it, longs for it  
But it is truly the one thing God cannot ever do for us, cannot  
say for us  
God can give us everything save these words of *t'shuvah*  
These words we have to find ourselves

So what are אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים these words that start the book of  
words?  
Nothing less than the words of *t'shuvah*

These are the words that make up the heart of the torah, they  
are the fruit on the tree of life  
And now we understand why they healed Moses  
Because in his *t'shuvah*  
When Moses remembered he could grow into someone else  
Then not only did he become more powerful than Pharaoh  
The holy words just started coming out of his mouth  
The silence was broken see

And from then on, Moses could not stop speaking<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי הָאֵלֶּה / Hosea 14:3