

Va'era 5779
Make Some Noise
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Every week I receive dozens of emails asking me to voice my outrage over something. Most of the time I care about the issue and would like to help bring change. Yet I do not have the time to follow up on even half of those emails. I guiltily archive many of them without reading beyond the first line. The most consistent feeling I experience when I face the daily barrage of opportunities to help is the tension between my desire to make an impact and a feeling of helplessness, a sense that whatever action I take from my desk in a small midwestern shul will only be heard in the echo chamber of a list serve. Who am I to make a difference, really? And is anyone really listening? Can my voice possibly make a difference?

I can really relate to Moshe in today's parashah. In a seeming *deja-vu*, God tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let the Israelites go. And, as he does in last week's *parashah*, Moshe tries to beg out. Today's narrative reads like a rerun of what we've already seen. Only one detail is different. Until now, Moshe's reasons why he is not the man for the job either are broad statements of personal inadequacy or specific concerns about the quality of his speech. This time, however, he only gives one reason why he should not go. It is new, and its meaning ambiguous. Moshe

says:

“וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵן אֲנִי עֶבֶל שְׂפָתַיִם וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמַע אֵלַי פֶּרְעֹה”

“See, I am “*aral s'fatayim*,” how will Pharaoh heed, or hear me (Ex. 6:30)? Moshe says that he is *aral s'fatayim*, which JPS translates as “impure of speech.” That is a poor translation, and like many poor translations it obscures what may be an important message.

Aral s'fatayim literally means that Moshe's lips are uncircumcised, not yet activated, blocked in some way. In light of of a narrative that essential

repeats itself here for no apparent reason, I am struck by this one and only new bit of information. What does Moshe mean when he says he is “*aral s’fatayim*?” I’d like to probe with you what it means to be *aral s’fatayim*, because I have a feeling I’m not the only one who can relate to Moshe here, called upon to effect change yet in state of “*aral s’fatayim*,” feeling like we’re not yet activated, we’re not really players, as if the notion that we will be heard is preposterous.

Aral- and its noun form, *orlah*, means that something is blocking or covering the full use or activation of something else. Usually it refers to the foreskin of an uncircumcised male member, to the uncircumcised member itself, or to a male whose member has not be circumcised. Occasionally it refers to other organs--ears, the heart, or here in our *parashah*, lips. It also refers to fruit trees in the first three years before they can be harvested. *Orlah* always has the connotation that something is blocking something else from being activated, or in play. Until that blockage is removed, whatever is blocked cannot be accessed. Often when the term is used it bears a pejorative nuance, but there are also times when the nuance takes on an endearing, childlike naivete.

In chasidic tradition--and others have emulated it--Jewish boys do not get haircuts until their third birthdays. They are compared to fruit trees, left to blossom freely and wildly until the time they are activated. Whereas fruit trees are put in play when we are permitted to harvest and benefit from their fruit Chasidic Jewish boys are activated when they begin their Torah education upon reaching three years, starting with the donning of a kippah and tzitzit. Until then they are considered babies. There is something appealing about living in a pre-activated state of blissful naivete, but we are not meant to live that way as adults. The enchanting lure of Sugar Mountain ultimately will not serve us or fulfill our need to make meaning of our lives. We know this.

Yet we are still vulnerable to being *aral s'fatayim* on different levels. We can be *aral s'fatayim* to ourselves when we fail to trust our inner voice and give it room to guide us. Somehow we do not believe that our lives can handle our own truth, so we bury it. When that happens, often it is not even destruction we fear, but change, or the new responsibilities and expectations that will come if we allow ourselves to change course. Rather than breaking free of patterns that cover our potential--some would call that getting woke, or coming out to ourselves, or becoming raising our consciousness, we hold back from exposing our very lives to the voice of their direction.

We are *aral s'fatayim* to those we know well--our partners, families, close friends, and colleagues, when we refrain from voicing a new way of thinking about something a different way to do things because we feel like we will come across as if we are speaking a foreign language, or because we fear what a change in our relationships or new ways of interacting will demand of everyone involved. It is easier to keep doing what we've been doing, and talking the way we've been talking, than to risk failing at a new approach and so we allow ourselves to be *aral s'fatayim*.

And, of course, we are *aral s'fatayim* on a grander scale when we hold back from getting involved, speaking up, making noise because of those same fears that hold us back on a more personal level. The stakes may be higher or more public, or they may not be. At the end of the day, we are *aral s'fatayim not* because of the largesse of an issue that arises but because we feel incapable of expressing what we are called to express, however much we may believe in it or want it. It is just so much easier to keep having a nice day.

But if we are lucky, we do not remain *aral s'fatayim*. At some point, if we are going to thrive and contribute in this world, we must find our voice and use it.

Something amazing happens with Moshe in today's *parashah*. After God tells Moshe for the third time that Aharon will speak for him, and just when the reader has come to trust that reality, God brings the second plague--frogs everywhere, especially where least welcome. Pharaoh summons Moshe to pray for God to remove the frogs. And the one who answers Pharaoh directly, in words, is Moshe. From that moment on, Moshe speaks to Pharaoh. The change goes unremarked and is easily missed. And it turns out that Moshe speaks directly to Pharaoh a lot, even speaking on his own initiative. With no mention of struggle or gradual progress from encumbered to unencumbered speech, Moshe has found his voice and become a change agent. His former impediment clearly is not based on an organic speech problem but on a spiritual struggle to speak as if his voice matters.

God has already told Moshe that God is the source of all speech, but the Torah and rabbinic commentary leave unexplained exactly how that works and why it happens at this point in the biblical narrative. My question is, can God help *us* transform from "aral s'fatayim" to change agents? If so, how might that work?

Honestly, I do not know how that might work for every person, but I can tell you that prayer is one way in which Jews lay groundwork for making redemptive noise. Prayer has the potential to raise our consciousness and empower us in a variety of ways, and in time we will explore them. For today, let me mention a few ways that prayer can help us find our voice. When we *daven* (pray), we experience gratitude, which fosters compassion, humility, and generosity. We confront ideals and values that cause us to refine our own. We pray for rights to be wronged and realize we need to be part of the solution. And yet prayer, itself, can be fraught with all kinds of real challenges.

Perhaps raising our awareness of when we are *aral s'fatayim* is enough of an idea to take away from this d'rash, but since I have attempted to offer a way that God can help us overcome *orlah* like Moshe does, I want to leave you with a few thoughts about prayer that you may find helpful--tips that have worked for me and that I hope may work for you as well.

#1: Remember that scripted prayer came on the scene long after spontaneous prayer. Prayer was never intended only to happen in a sanctuary like this one, and any moment can be ripe for tuning in to what's going on beneath the surface.

Whether in here or out there, sometimes just showing up for an encounter with the Divine is almost everything. Sometimes it *is* everything. When I am able to calm my ego enough not to take over all the air around me, sometimes I end up feeling like I spent a few moments in another dimension. So I try to show up with a certain openness and centeredness on the moment. It does not always work. Sometimes I am too distracted. But when I create the possibility to be moved by the Power that animates the universe.

Secondly, keep in mind that it's easier to get the free throw when you practice often. The more I make prayer a regular practice, the more I prime myself for a more expanded consciousness.

Next, in a formal prayer setting, I accept that the real work of prayer is way beyond what's printed on the page. The words are like music to a dancer--they set me up but the dance is mine, and it's different every time. I find that I am much less apt to get stuck on the words when I see them as metaphor and jumping-off points toward what I need to be working on.

There is much more, but I'll end with this: After many years of trying to develop a faith grounded in reason, I finally came to accept that the

exercise of connecting with the Source of Life or the Holy Blessed One or your truest, most infinite self, or whatever you call God, extends beyond what I think of as rational. Science will not explain faith any more than it explains why a flute in the desert moves us differently from a flute in a concert hall. I do think about theology but I no longer try to think my way to God.

I would love to hear how you make space for God to bring you into the world more fully than you feel is possible.

Friends, it's 2019. Let's be woke, out, aware, and free of foreskins. Seriously, let us help each other to speak and act in this crazy, beautiful world so that our lives may give voice to our deepest truths and our voices will bring us all a bit closer to redemption.