

“Speaking Out”

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As Martin Luther King Jr. Day approaches, the media begin playing those familiar recordings of his stirring speeches. Even if we didn’t know them from the time of their original delivery, as in fact many of us did, we all certainly know them now.

We can recite them, parse them, even mimic them. And we can certainly turn to them in a flash for inspiration and hope in seemingly hopeless times.

One wonders how a man so young as Martin Luther King “found his voice.” He knew what he wanted to say, and what needed to be said. He knew how to home in on his message and send it forth. And he knew how to use his vocal gifts to his benefit.

Did Dr. King ever doubt his capacity to speak, and to speak out? It would seem that the answer is no. He was raised in a speaking-out tradition. His father was a Black Baptist preacher, as were all of his role models. The mellifluous phrases of Amos and Isaiah flowed from their

lips and resounded from the walls of their churches. That incessant call to belief and justice was literally his mother's milk.

And yet, one doubts whether he or anyone would be able to keep up the steady stream of righteous calling-out if those who needed that message simply cut the speaker off. Simply refused to listen. One cannot help thinking that it would psychologically and spiritually incapacitate the preacher.

Our teacher the S'fas Emes thinks that this is precisely what Moses is saying to God in our parashah. God wants Moses to go directly to Pharaoh and deliver the message of deliverance. Moses argues that if the Israelites themselves would not listen to him – as they did not in last week's portion – then how in the world would he be able to get his point across to Pharaoh?

I am *areil s'fatayim*, says Moses. My lips are uncircumcised. I cannot be your spokesperson.

Says the S'fas Emes, Moses is not saying that he has a speech impediment. He is not saying that he has a stutter, or even a bad speaking voice. He is saying that his people, the people of Israel, have in effect impeded his voice by refusing to let that voice come forth to them.

S'fas Emes writes, "The strength of the leader flows from the people. Therefore, were the people of Israel to hearken to Moses, their act of hearkening would open up Moses's mouth and his words. And then he would even be able to influence Pharaoh. But since they did not want to listen to him, he became *areil s'fatayim*. In which case, how could Pharaoh hear him?"

It seems that the miracle in the story is not so much that the Nile turned to blood or swarmed with frogs, or even that the Pharaoh ultimately relented and let the Israelites go. The miracle is that Moses found his voice in spite of everything.

Because the people never truly listened to him, even as they wept for his dying forty years later. He must have decided to uncircumcise his own voice, as it were; to go ahead and speak out, whether anyone was listening or not. And if the Israelites in the main did not hear him, at least we can hear him today – if we choose to listen.

Likewise Dr. King. If we play those old sermons and speeches, we don't hear someone holding his listeners in rapt attention, though there were certainly many who listened and joined the march. We hear someone speaking from a deeper place: not from stentorian expertise, but from that mysterious place where the *ruach hakodesh*, the divine spirit,

demands to be set free into the world through human words, and eventually through human deeds.

Most of Dr. King's followers, I would venture, only paid close attention to his message long after he was murdered. Shame on all of us for impeding those lips. And blessings on all of us who now know enough to empower our righteous leaders to speak the truth and summon us all to a higher, holier calling.