



RABBI JUDAH

MISCHEL

Executive Director, Camp HASC
Author of *Baderech: Along the Path of*
Teshuva (Mosaica 2021)

Let Me Hear Your Voice

Rav Zalman Sender Shapira was a towering Rabbinic figure in Lithuania at the turn of the 20th Century, a genius in Torah renowned for his righteous ways. He authored a multi-volume work on *Seder Kodshim* and was the primary influence and rebbe of his son, Rav Avraham Dov-Ber, the last Chief Rabbi of Kovno and author of *Devar Avraham*.

In their shtetl, there lived a *pashut* water carrier, a simple, gentle soft-spoken person. Velvel made up for his lack of education and sophistication with his hard work, stellar *midos* and endearing *Temimus*, sincerity.

One day, the *vasser treiger* came to Rav Shapira with a heartfelt request. For too long he had been ‘on the outside’ of what was happening in the *beis medrash* in their town; he desperately desired to understand what the learned men were discussing while engaged in *chavrusa* learning, to be able to follow and participate in the Rabbi’s *shiurim*. Velvel wanted to be a *talmid chacham*: “Bless me,” he pleaded with quiet yearning, “to become a *talmid chacham*...”

Rav Shapira took the earnest request

רפואה שלמה
אורה בת ראינה

seriously. “Please say it again, loud and clear — loudly, like you really mean it: ‘I want to be a *talmid chacham*!’ Go ahead...”

Velvel blushed with emotion and said it with increased volume and determination. “Again, louder,” answered the Rav, “Shout it!”

Unaccustomed to raising his voice, Velvel took a deep breath, and cried out with all of his strength, “I want to learn Torah and be a *talmid chacham*! I want this so, SO MUCH, Rabbi! I WANT TO LEARN TORAH!! Please...” he burst into tears, “please bless me...”

Velvel’s passionate cries pierced Rav Zalman Sender’s soul. He closed his eyes, and a heartfelt blessing poured forth for his success in *talmud Torah*.

The next morning, Velevel arrived early to the *Beis Medrash* for davening, sat down in his usual spot, and began to learn. Line after line, page after page, he sat motionless and fiercely focused. That evening, after work, he returned to the study hall and continued to apply himself. Day after day, week after week, Velvel’s *hasmada*, his determined, uninterrupted learning, began to bear fruit. The words and ideas on the pages began to come alive and flow with grace and power, and his mind and heart filled with insight, clarity, and the bright, holy joy of Divine Presence.

The great Rav of Slutsk (and later the Rosh Yeshiva of Eitz Chaim in Yerushalayim), Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer would repeat this *ma’aseh*, and describe how

extraordinary it was to see Velvel's transformation from a 'regular' person into a full-fledged scholar. He would marvel and note how the entire town had witnessed how an 'underprivileged' middle-aged man completely changed his identity, making learning the center of his life, growing day by day until he was recognized as a knowledgeable and brilliant *talmid chacham* in every sense of the word.

.....

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-ה', בִּי אֵד-נִי, לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי
 גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם מִשְׁלֵטִים, גַּם מֵאִזְ דְּבָרְךָ אֶל-עִבְדְּךָ:
 כִּי קָבֵד-פִּיה וְכָבֵד לְשׁוֹן, אָנֹכִי.
 וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָיו, מִי שָׁם פֶּה לְאָדָם, אוּ מִי-יִשׁוּם
 אֵלָם, אוּ חֵרֵשׁ אוּ פִקֵּחַ אוּ עִוֵּר-הֲלֹא אָנֹכִי, ה'.

“Moshe said to Hashem, “Please, my Lord, I have never been a man of words, neither in times past nor now that You have spoken to Your servant. I am slow of speech and I am slow of tongue!” And Hashem said to him, “Who gives man speech? Who makes him mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, Hashem?”

Our Sages relate to Moshe Rabbeinu's speech impediment, and his struggle to communicate clearly and confidently, as the existential condition of Am Yisrael in exile. Enslaved and traumatized, we were stuck, broken in body and spirit — and collectively 'mute'. The bodies of Jewish children dammed up the Nile river, and all were constantly exposed to the bottomless depravity, immorality and violent cruelty of Pharaoh. After generations of oppression and helplessness, what was there to say?

What words could appropriately express the exhaustion, fear and suffering of a nation enslaved? These days we are accustomed to social media posts, reacting to ongoing

tragedies such as, “No words...,” followed by a long-form rant. In Mitzrayim, however, there actually were literally #NoWords. We had lost our collective ability to express ourselves, our hopes and dreams, even the ability to express or give voice to our pain.

A human being is classified as a *medaber*, a 'speaking being' — speech being our defining capacity. The *Zohar HaKadosh* reveals that in Mitzrayim, speech itself was exiled (2:25b). In our enslavement, we had become so dehumanized and demoralized that we lost the ability to voice our wants, needs, beliefs or desires. We lost the freedom we needed to develop ourselves personally and nationally, and to state our purpose.

.....

Rav Zalman Sender's *bracha* could only be effective with Velvel's heartfelt self-expression. Once he was able to liberate his speech from constriction and exile, he was able to 'receive the Torah', the 'speech' of the Ribbono Shel Olam.

May we have the courage and strength to raise our voices and tell the world — and ourselves — what we really want and who we really are: a compassionate people, bearers of the *Shechinah*, conduits of the Divine word, bringers of a complete redemption, MAY IT BE VERY, VERY SOON! ■