

# Words of Redemption, Words of Creation

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*Words are vehicles, and very powerful ones.*

- Adin Steinsaltz

The spoken word features prominently at the Pesach Seder table. This hallowed evening recounts the Biblical responsibility to speak to the next generation, to communicate to our children the story and history of our people:

*And you should speak to your son on that day saying for this reason Hashem did this for me when I left Egypt.*

**Shemot 13:8**

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים:  
שמות יג:ח

Most of our Seder tells the tale of the Exodus. This tale is told at great length and in as great detail as possible, knowing that *kol hamarbeh lesaper... harey zeh meshubach*, all those who speak at length... it is praiseworthy. The Mishna in Pesachim, a text we recite in our Haggadah, records the statement of Rabban Gamliel regarding the role of the spoken word on the night of Pesach:

*Rabban Gamliel used to say that one who does not articulate three things does not fulfill his obligation., and these are they: Pesach, Matzah and Maror.*

**Mishna Pesachim 10:5**

רבן גמליאל היה אומר, כל שלא אמר שלשה דברים אלו בפסח, לא יצא ידי חובתו, ואלו הן, פסח, מצה, ומרור  
משנה פסחים י:ה

The context of this Mishna, nestled among multiple descriptions of the Haggadah, would indicate that the ruling refers to the Haggadah; any recital of the Haggadah which lacks verbal expression of these three core principles is not a complete Maggid. Hence, the Tiferet Yisrael (Rabbi Yisrael Lifschitz, Germany, 1782- 1861) notes in his commentary on this Mishna that such a Maggid is not the *mitzvah bshleimuta*, it is an incomplete mitzvah. However, the Tosafot Yom Tov (Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, Poland, 1579- 1654) in his commentary on the Mishna understands that Rabban Gamliel refers to the actual eating of the Korban Pesach during the time of the Beit Hamikdash. He invokes the Pasuk in Shemot, *Vaamartem zevach pesach-* and you shall say it is a paschal offering, and highlights the phrase, and you shall say. This

suggests that even the actual fulfillment of the original Mitzvah of eating the Korban Pesach includes an aspect of speech, one that is essential to the mitzvah. How do we understand the central role of speech during the Haggadah?

Perhaps this phenomenon of speech is highlighted because through the Seder and the spoken word, we relive our redemption from bondage, which was a servitude of silence. In part of our Haggadah, we recite a passage of the Midrash with its exposition of *psukim* in Parshat Ki Tavo:

*And he went down to Egypt. Coerced against his will by the word, as it was said to Avraham, "as your children will be strangers in a land*

**Pesikta Zutreta Ki Tavo**

וירד מצרימה. אנוס על כרחו ע"פ הדבור שנאמר  
לאברהם אבינו [דף מו עמוד א] (בראשית טו) כי גר  
יהיה זרעך בארץ  
**פסיקתא זוטרותא (לקח טוב) דברים פרשת תבא**

The literal interpretation of this Midrash is that our unwilling descent to Egypt was in fulfillment of the word of Hashem, Who told Avraham that his descendents would be slaves. However, the Sfat Emet (Parshat Vayigash 5642) interprets the phrase homiletically that we descended to Egypt *על פי הדבור*, coerced by the word, the power of speech which was exiled. He cites a passage in the Zohar which describes that the actual words, the power of speech, was exiled.

*[And Moses spoke before the Lord, saying:] "Behold, the children of Israel have not harkened unto me, how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?" How did Moses dare say this? Had not the Holy One already promised him, when he said that he was not eloquent, that He "will be with his mouth" (Exodus 4, 10-12)? Or did the Holy One not keep His promise? However, there is here an inner meaning. Moses was then in the grade of "voice," and the grade of "speech" was then in exile. Hence he said, "How shall Pharaoh hear me, seeing that my 'speech' is in bondage to him, I being only 'voice,' and lacking "speech." Therefore God joined with him Aaron, who was "speech" without "voice." When Moses came, the voice appeared, but it was "a voice without speech." This lasted until Israel approached Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Then the voice was united with the speech, and the word was spoken, as it says, "and the Lord spoke all these words" (Exodus 20, 1). Then Moses was in full possession of the word, voice and word being united. That was the cause of Moses' complaint (v. 23), that he lacked the word save at the time when it broke forth in complaint and God spoke to Moses."*

**Zohar Parshat Va'era**

כתיב הן בני ישראל לא שמעו אלי ואיך ישמעני  
פרעה ואני ערל שפתים, מאי ואני ערל שפתים  
והא בקדמיתא כתיב לא איש דברים אנכי וגו'  
כי כבד פה וכבד לשון אנכי, וקודשא בריך הוא  
הוה אותיב ליה מי שם פה לאדם וגו', והוא אמר  
ואנכי אהיה עם פיד, ס"ד דלא הוה כן והשתא  
אמר ואני ערל שפתים אי הכי אן הוא מלה  
דאבטח ליה קודשא בריך הוא בקדמיתא, אלא  
רזא איהו, משה קלא, **ודבור דאיהו מלה דייליה**  
**הוה בגלותא והוה איהו אטים לפרשא מלין**  
ובגין דא אמר ואיך ישמעני פרעה בעוד דמלה  
דילי איהו בגלותא דייליה דהא לית לי מלה, הא  
אנא קלא מלה גרע דאיהו בגלותא ועל דא שתף  
קודשא בריך הוא לאהרן בהדיה, ת"ח כל זמנא  
דדבור הוה בגלותא קלא אסתלק מניה ומלה  
הוה אטים בלא קול כד אתא משה אתא קול,  
ומשה הוה קול בלא מלה בגין דהוה בגלותא  
וכל זמנא דדבור הוה בגלותא משה אזיל קלא  
בלא דבור והכי אזיל עד דקריבו לטורא דסיני  
ואתיהיבת אורייתא ובהווא זמנא אתחבר קלא  
דדבור וכדין מלה מליל הדא הוא דכתיב ה"ד  
(שמות כ) וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה,  
וכדין משה אשתכח שלים במלה כדקא יאות  
קול דדבור כחדא בשלימו ועל דא משה אתרעים  
דמלה גרע מניה

**זוהר כרך ב (שמות) פרשת וארא**

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l unravels the mystery of this Zohar in an essay entitled "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah" (*Tradition*, Spring 1978). He explains that the nature of exile and servitude is an existence that lacks words, speech:

*The slave lives in silence, if such a meaningless existence may be called life. He has no message to deliver... The slave has neither a story nor a curious audience. Moreover, he is not merely a speechless being, but a mute being, devoid not only of the word, but of the meaningful sound as well.*

The very essence of servitude is that the slave has no existence independent of his master. Hence, he has no life of his own and no message to speak. A slave has no identity - no past, present or future- as he exists only to perform tasks thrust upon him. He cannot formulate spoken words because he does not have any of his own. As slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, the Jewish people as a community, and Moshe as their leader, had no ability to speak, to formulate words. It is interesting to note that in the exile, many of the key figures in the narrative, including Moshe's family members, are anonymous. They are not called by names because as slaves they have no identity. When the Jews finally received a respite upon Pharaoh's death, they uttered a wordless, almost primordial cry, which pierced the heavens and set them on the path toward redemption, toward a speaking existence.

In contrast to the mute slave, the free man has a story to tell. He has a message to communicate to those who will listen. The transition from servitude and solitude to freedom and communication is redemption. The Rav elucidates:

*Redemption involves a movement by an individual or a community from the periphery of history to its center; or, to employ a term from physics, redemption is a centripetal movement. To be on the periphery means to be a non-history-making entity, while movement toward the center renders the same entity history-making and history-conscious. Naturally the question arises: What is meant by a history-making people or community? A history-making people is one that leads a speaking, story-telling, communing, free existence, while a non-history-making, non history-involved group leads a non-communing, and therefore a silent, unfree existence...*

*Redemption, we have stated, is identical with communing, or with the revelation of the word, i.e. the emergence of speech. When a people leaves a mute world and enters a world of sound, speech and song, it becomes a redeemed people a free people. In other words, a mute life is identical with bondage; a speech endowed life is a free life.*

In this light, we can appreciate why the role of speech is accented at the seder. This storytelling capacity, our use of the spoken word, manifests our status as free people. Our act of telling the covenantal story of our people is the fulfillment of our redemption and Divine mission. The charge given to us by the Torah multiple times is to tell our story to our children, to utilize our speech endowed life to ennoble our world.

Yet, perhaps, there is another profound lesson to be learned by the emphasis of the spoken word around the Seder table. The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 11b) records a debate between two sages of the Mishna, titans of their time, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar, regarding the timing of the creation of the world. Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that the world was created in Nissan, while Rabbi Elazar opines that the world was created in Tishrei. Tosafot note that we seem to accept both of these mutually exclusive opinions, highlighting conflicting texts which are part of traditional liturgy of the Chagim recited still today in many congregations:

*And that which Rabbi Eliezer Hakalir established the prayer for rain on Shmini Atzeret in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer who says that in Tishrei the world was created, and on Pesach in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbeinu Tam says that these and these are the words of the living G-d, and it is possible to say that in Tishrei it arose in the mind to create the world but it was not created until Nissan.*

**Tosfot Rosh Hashana 27a**

ומה שישד ר"א הקליר בגשם דשמיני  
 עצרת כר"א דאמר בתשרי נברא  
 העולם ובשל פסח יסד כר' יהושע  
 אומר ר"ת דאלו ואלו דברי אלהים  
 חיים ואיכא למימר דבתשרי עלה  
 במחשבה לבראות ולא נברא עד ניסן  
 ווספות מסכת ראש השנה דף כז.

Tosafot suggests that the world was created in stages, first in the “mind” of G-d in Tishrei and then in practice during Nissan. The creation of our world was not actualized until the month of the Exodus, the creation of the Jewish people, and the holiday of Pesach. This now can shed light on the role of speech at the Seder, as speech is the vehicle of creation. Rav Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745- 1812), the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, elucidates this basic concept in Chassidut in his seminal work known as the Tanya:

*It is written: “Forever, O G-d, Your word stands firm in the heavens.” The Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, has explained that “Your word” which you uttered, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters...,” these words and letters stand firmly forever within the firmament of heaven and are forever clothed within all the heavens to give them life as it is written, “And the word of our L-rd shall stand firm forever,” “And His words live and stand firm forever....” For if the creative letters were to depart even for an instant, G-d forbid, and return to their source, all the heavens would become naught and absolute nothingness, and it would be as though they had never existed at all, exactly as before the utterance, “Let there be a firmament.” And so it is with all created things, in all the upper and lower worlds, and even this physical earth and the realm of the completely inanimate. If the letters of the Ten Utterances by which the earth was created during the Six Days of Creation were to depart from it but for an instant, G-d forbid, it would revert to naught and absolute nothingness, exactly as before the Six Days of Creation.*

**Tanya Shaar Hayichud V’Haemunah 1**

הנה כתיב לעולם ה' דברך נצב  
 בשמים ופי' הבעש"ט ז"ל כי דברך  
 שאמרת יהי רקיע בתוך המים וגו'  
 תיבות ואותיות אלו הן נצבות  
 ועומדות לעולם בתוך רקיע השמים  
 ומלובשות בתוך כל הרקיעים לעולם  
 להחיותם כדכתיב ודבר אלהינו יקום  
 לעולם ודבריו חיים וקיימים לעד כו'  
 כי אילו היו האותיות מסתלקות כרגע  
 ח"ו וחזרות למקורן היו כל השמים  
 אין ואפס ממש והיו כלא היו כלל  
 וכמו קודם מאמר יהי רקיע כו' ממש  
 וכן בכל הברואים שבכל העולמות  
 עליונים ותחתונים ואפי' ארץ הלזו  
 הגשמית ובחי' דומם ממש אילו היו  
 מסתלקות ממנה כרגע ח"ו האותיות  
 מעשרה מאמרות שבהן נבראת  
 הארץ בששת ימי בראשית היתה  
 חוזרת לאין ואפס ממש כמו לפני  
 ששת ימי בראשית ממש  
 תניא שער היחוד והאמונה פרק א

We know from the Talmud that Hashem created the world with *asarah maamarot*, ten utterances. The Bal Shem Tov, according to the Tanya, expands this notion, teaching that the concept of Hashem's words (so to speak) as vehicles of creation continues to this moment, and that everything exists as some, albeit distant, derivative of the spoken word of Hashem. Speech is what transforms the world of the spiritual and the ethereal into the physical reality, the world in which we exist.

According to Tosafot, Nissan is the month of creation in actuality. We now understand this to mean that Nissan is the time when Hashem showered those first utterances into emptiness, and each year we celebrate and commemorate that initial creation and the fact that Hashem recreates us continually. Hence, on the eve of Pesach, the celebration of this creation by Hashem's word, we create our own worlds, worlds filled with spirituality and light, by our spoken word. Pesach, the contraction of Peh Sach, the speaking mouth, reminds us of the power of words. They are vehicles of redemption, from servitude to emancipation, but on a more basic level, they are vehicles of creation. They enable us each year to tap into the spiritual energy of Nissan and recreate ourselves both on a national and individual level.

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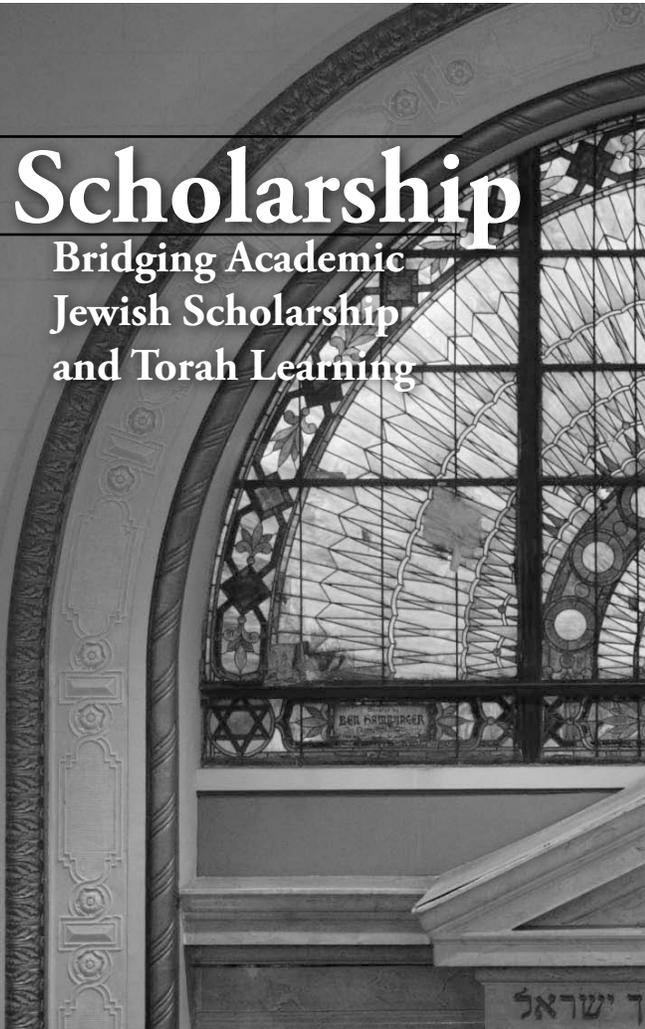
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*Halakha and Rape: Three 20<sup>th</sup> Century Perspectives on One Rambam*

**Rabbi Daniel Feldman**  
*Bound by Time? Women and Sefirat Ha'Omer*

**Mrs. Nechama Price**  
*Strong or Weak? Women in Tanach*

**11:30am**  
**Rabbi Mark Dratch**  
*Love, Honor and Obey? Marital Relations and Relationships in the Talmud*

**Rabbi Shmuel Hain**  
*Family Redeemed and Marriage Sanctified: An Overview of Seder Nashim*

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*Rabbinic Readings of a Radical Book: Esther in Hazal*

**Mrs. Shoshana Schechter**  
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**12:30pm**  
**Rabbi Yosef Blau**  
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