

Of all of HaShem's creatures humans alone have developed the ability to communicate through language. But as the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) said: "Words—so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become, in the hands of one who knows how to combine them!" Our parashah contains vivid examples of both potentials. Being a language buff, I am fascinated by the Hebrew root דבר, a veritable multitasker, especially in biblical Hebrew. It forms the verbs to speak, follow behind someone's back, drive, lead/guide, destroy, and subdue; and a mixed multitude of nouns such as word, leader, speech, matter, occupation, cause, pasture, thing, and plague. According to the Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language [Ernest Klein 1987], it may have originally meant buzzing or humming, giving rise to the word *d'vorah* (bee, wasp hornet / the name Devorah). The relationship to the word *midbar* (desert) is also quite likely if we understand that *midbar* actually refers to any uninhabited space with wild vegetation. Most of HaShem's communication with Moses takes place in the desert, (*bamidbar* – the Hebrew name for the book we are now reading), and the Prophetess Devorah is seldom at a loss for words. As we know, words can be sweet as honey or they can sting. And they carry immense powers of persuasion. When HaShem tells Moses to send a representative from each of the 12 tribes to scout the land the Israelites will inhabit, ten of them return completely overwhelmed. "...We came to the land to which you sent us, and it is flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the land are mighty, and the cities are extremely large and fortified, and we even saw the offspring of the giant. The Amalekites dwell in the south land, and the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites dwell in the mountains. The Canaanites dwell on the coast and along the Jordan." (13:27-29) Their report is crafted to engage the people's deepest fears. After showing them the fruit, carefully selected for maximum effect, the scouts immediately present a litany of obstacles, beginning with the handy little word *efes*, which in this context simply means however, but with connotations of nullifying, exhausting. In modern Hebrew it means to reset, which is precisely what they are doing to the people. Beginning the list of inhabitants with Amalek is masterful rhetoric, something Midrash Tanchuma Shelach 9 notices: "Such is the way of those who recount slander. They open with what is good and finish with what is ill. Why did they open with Amalek? A parable: To what is the matter comparable? To a child who misbehaves and is beaten with a strap. When they wanted to intimidate him, they reminded him of the strap. Similarly Amalek had been an evil strap for Israel. Why did he post himself on the border in the way of Israel's entrance into the land? Simply because his ancestor Esau had so commanded him in order to forestall them in their way. ... Therefore the scouts intended to break the heart of Israel ..." When Caleb intervenes the men turn to unfavorable comparisons: the people are stronger; the land consumes its inhabitants; all the people are men of stature; we seemed like grasshoppers next to those giants. No wonder the people long for Egypt. In their frenzy they rebel and threaten to stone Joshua and Caleb, until HaShem intervenes and the second example of powerful rhetoric unfolds. Justifiably furious, HaShem resolves to "... strike them with a plague [*dever*] and annihilate them; then I will make you into a nation, greater and stronger than they." (14:12) Moses has heard these words before, after the golden calf incident. Then, he pointed out that the Egyptians would say that HaShem led the Israelites out of Egypt with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the mountains. Now, he again mentions the Egyptians, but goes on to reference HaShem's continual protection, ending with: "and if you kill this nation like one man, the nations who have heard of Your reputation will say thus: 'Since the Lord lacked the ability to bring this nation to the land which He swore to them, He slaughtered them in the desert.' Now, please let the strength of the Lord be increased, as You spoke, saying, 'The Lord is slow to anger and abundantly kind, forgiving iniquity and transgressions, Who cleanses [some] and does not cleanse [others], Who visits the iniquities of parents on children, even to the third and fourth generations.'" (14:15-18) Concern that HaShem will be perceived as weak, not merely evil, is followed by a cunning paraphrase of HaShem's words in Exodus 34:6-7 prefaced with by a plea for HaShem's strength to increase – a brilliant crescendo of persuasive rhetoric that culminates in words we know well from the Kol Nidre service: "Please forgive the iniquity of this nations in accordance with your abounding kindness, as You have borne this people from Egypt until now." And on Yom Kippur we emulate Moses' chutzpah by repeating HaShem's answer: "*salachti kidvarecha* (I have forgiven, in accordance with your word.)" However, as Moses emphasizes in his audacious paraphrase, and as the people learn after this encounter, HaShem will not allow slanderous words and disobedience to go unpunished. Indeed, expertly crafted words have led and misled people since time immemorial. Words have the power to inspire movements that change the world. And words have the power to build up or destroy not only a single person, but also the following generations. From interpersonal relationships to religion, politics, the advertising industry, and the media, words generate concepts and influence behavior. In the words of the psalmist: "Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully. Shun evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it." (Psalm 34:14-15)

Shabbat shalom!