

For several weeks our readings have included lists of names. Shortly after the beginning, our parashah abruptly launches into another one. When a story in the Torah is unexpectedly interrupted by an unrelated topic, it is always significant. A little over a month ago, the story of Judah and Tamar is interjected into the Joseph narrative. Judah's honorable behavior toward Tamar opens him to also repenting of his misguided behavior toward Joseph, and culminates in his assuming responsibility for his family and earning the kingship for his descendants. Listing the descendants of Jakob's three oldest sons, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (6:14-25), whose grievous misdeeds caused so much anguish, not only traces the ancestry of Moses and Aaron, it also illustrates the potential for repentance and growth through the generations. It is noteworthy that the genealogical account of Reuben and Simeon ends with their sons, while that of Levi continues through the birth of Moses and Aaron, and through Aaron's progeny down to Pinchas. Indeed, Aaron's grandson Pinchas' impetuous zeal punishes Simeonite Zimri's sinful behavior and ends the plague caused by the Israelites' idolatry, while Aaron's cousin Korach's reckless ambition ends in disaster for his entire family. Both have Levi's fiery temper and a deep sense of righteousness, however misplaced it is in the case of Korach. Manifested in Moses, these attributes are both asset and liability. Killing the Egyptian for brutalizing an Israelite and trying to separate the two sparring Israelites propels him into exile and onto his unique path; and for better or worse, they will influence his behavior throughout his life. In addition to impetuosity and righteous zeal, Abraham's descendants also have a gift for eloquence and an argumentative streak. Moses has generous helpings of both, despite his insistence that he is a singularly untalented speaker. I am always amazed and amused at the persuasive words Moses has for HaShem, but which he continues to claim will fail him when addressing Pharaoh or the Israelites. Our parashah opens with HaShem roundly scolding him for having dared to say, "Why have You mistreated this people? Why have You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has made it worse for this people, and still you have not delivered Your people." (5:22-23) His response after having heard HaShem review the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jakob and assure him that the Israelites' suffering has been acknowledged and redemption will be forthcoming, and in the wake of his ensuing failure to convince the Israelites, is as understandable as it is bold: "Even the Israelites have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me? For I am a man of obstructed lips." (6:12) After pleading "heaviness of lips and heaviness of tongue" (4:10), he now says his lips are *aral* (עָרֵל) – uncircumcised, insensitive, inattentive, i.e., closed off, useless. In his defense, how could it be otherwise? Having been raised in Pharaoh's court, he would undoubtedly have qualms about interacting with him again in this new and certainly unexpected role. What if he is recognized and accused of ingratitude or worse, and what if Pharaoh learns that he has killed one of his overseers? With all that on his mind, he is as powerless to really hear HaShem as the Israelites are to really hear him. After all, HaShem created us to respond to stress by fighting, fleeing, or freezing, all of which manifest in the body's autonomic nervous system and result in increased or decreased heart rate, rapid and shallow breathing, tense muscles, and dry mouth. The Israelites' "shortness of breath" and Moses' fears that he will be unable to speak convincingly to Pharaoh are normal reactions. Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 111a teaches that HaShem reiterates the covenant with the patriarchs to prove to Moses that despite all his misgivings, he is the one designated to lead the people from slavery to freedom. Acknowledging Moses' questions and accusations, HaShem responds, "Woe over those who are gone and disappeared; as several times I revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jakob as *El Shaddai*, and they did not question my attributes, and did not say to me, 'What is your name?' ... And you ask me initially, 'What is your name?'" In other words, if Moses is able to find words to question HaShem's behavior and ask HaShem's name, he is most certainly able to find words to speak to Pharaoh. Moses has finally understood that unlike Pharaoh and his ilk, who lead through by claiming absolute power and instilling fear in their people, he will lead through trust in HaShem, Who will provide him with the words he thinks he lacks. And Aaron, who was raised as an Israelite and is better able to relate to the people, will assist him. Moses will always vacillate, and he will always acknowledge HaShem as the Source of his power. Thus, he will counter Pharaoh's stubbornness and reliance on his godlike status with deep humility. He knows his authority comes from HaShem and that it is not he, but rather, HaShem, who will turn this downtrodden, fearful group of slaves into *Am Yisrael*. He, Moses, will be their unstinting shepherd and teacher, guiding, cajoling, and often scolding them along the way. By the time they arrive at the banks of the Jordan he will have found plenty of words for them, and his words with HaShem in their defense will become increasingly eloquent and bold. Although his temper will get the best of him more than once, he will never resort to the intimidation, deceitfulness, and cruelty that characterize people like Pharaoh. True leaders do not flaunt their power. They gratefully acknowledge its source and use it to encourage their people to discover and use their own potential for the good of all. In these troubled times we need more leaders like Moses to counteract the destructive power of the world's pharaohs.

Shabbat shalom!