

HEARING SILENCE, SPEAKING SILENCE:
BIBLICAL IMAGES OF DEAFNESS AND MUTENESS
AND THEIR REFLECTIONS IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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In memory of Nanci Stern, z"l
1950-1992

Yonati Hemet Rechokim
My silenced dove, far away.

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INTRODUCTION

R. Shimon ben Gamaliel said to his slave Tabi, go to the market and buy for me a good piece of meat. So Tabi went out and bought him a tongue. Later R. Shimon said to Tabi, go out and buy for me a bad piece of meat. Tabi went out and again bought him a tongue. R. Shimon ben Gamaliel asked him, why when I asked you to buy me a good piece of meat did you buy me a tongue, and when I asked you to buy a bad piece of meat did you again buy me a tongue? Tabi answered, because from the tongue comes good and from the tongue comes evil. When it is good, nothing is better than it, when it is bad, nothing is more evil.

—Vayikra Rabbah 33:1

The power of speech is manifest in the body of Jewish literature. Words make up the framework in which we operate. Speech is the divine gift that was given to humans and to no other living thing and, as the midrash attests, it can be used for good or for ill. The power of silence, too, has its place. "Silence", says philosopher Andre Neher, in his work The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz, "is the landscape of the Bible."¹ Silence is the backdrop which makes the spoken stand out, and silence itself stands out when it is sought out. A well chosen silence can speak

¹Neher, Andre, The Exile of The Word, David Maisel, trans., p. 9.

volumes. But what of silence that isn't chosen, well or otherwise? How do the Bible and its midrashic interpretations regard the qualities of deafness and muteness?

And Adonai said, "I will blot out humans, who I have created, from the face of the earth; humans and beasts and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them"(Gen. 6:7)...this is like a king who built a palace and gave rooms in it to mute people. They arose in the morning and greeted the king with signals with their fingers and their handkerchiefs. The king said, "If this is how they behave who have no speech, greeting me with finger-signals and handkerchiefs, how much better it would be if people with the power of speech were here!" So he gave rooms in the palace to speaking people, and they arose and seized the palace and said, "This palace doesn't belong to the king, it belongs to us!" And the king said, "The palace will return to its former state". So, too, from the beginning, praise for the Holy Blessed One only went up from the water, as it is written, "From the roar of many waters" (Ps. 93:4). And what did they say? "The Lord on high is mighty" (ibid.). The Holy Blessed One said, "If this is how they behave who have no speech, behold, how they praise Me, when I create humans, how much better it will be!" And the generation of Enosh rebelled, and the generation of the flood rebelled and the generation of the dispersion rebelled. The Holy Blessed One said, "Let these be turned back, and let those [the waters] return."

—Bereshit Rabbah 28:2

Throughout history, deaf and mute people have been treated as incompetent or mentally deficient, excluded from the mainstream of society. Only in the past thirty or forty years, thanks to new teaching techniques, technological advances and legal victories, deaf and mute people, along with other people with disabilities, have achieved greater access to jobs, transportation, independent lives. We know now that people who are unable to walk or see or speak or hear are intelligent, emotionally complete human beings. But have we changed in the way in which we regard disability? The images from past centuries remain with us, affecting social and legal progress. The Reform

prayerbooks we use today still use images of disability as metaphors for moral and spiritual shortcomings, as in this couplet from a responsive reading for Yom Kippur, "Eternal God, remove from us the deafness that keeps us from hearing You/ Eternal God, remove from us the blindness that obscures Your glory".² It must be very difficult for a deaf or blind congregant to see or hear such words prayed communally.

Those who live with silence--either hearing silence, speaking silence, or both--have always been a part of the human race. What are the images of deafness and muteness that come to us through Jewish tradition? How do biblical and rabbinic literature depict the qualities of muteness and deafness? How does the literature view mute and deaf persons?

The Relationship Between Biblical Text and Midrash

The style of the Bible is laconic. Very little background or description is given to support the text. It leaves wide gaps for the reader to wonder about the details, or, in the case of halachic text, how exactly the law is to be obeyed. When the text leaves out important details, or is unclear, midrash fills in the gaps. Midrashic interpretations of biblical texts, which began as a very early oral tradition, began to be collected and written down in about the third century C.E.. Midrash resolves the discontinuity that is created over time, reinterpreting laws as circumstances changed and rereading biblical texts in the light of contemporary values and beliefs. Midrash is an imaginative literature, adding the agendas of its own time and place, sometimes using word plays and sound plays to change the original meaning of the text. The great scholar of midrash, Joseph Heinemann, referred to this as "creative philology". Midrash finds many potential meanings in the biblical text, sometimes embroidering the plain meaning of the text in one paragraph and, in the next, playing it through changes until it gains a new meaning

²Stern, Chaim, ed., Gates of Repentance, p. 276.

that is entirely opposite the first. The rabbis did not see this as confusing or contradictory. It was seen as a means of uncovering all the meanings which God had placed in the text, to be revealed to those who study it.³

In order to present the progression from the biblical text to the different midrashic interpretations in the most effective way possible, this paper will be organized to proceed verse by verse, first examining the biblical content and context, and then the various midrashic interpretations of each verse.

Methodology

In order to understand the way in which the Bible and midrash depict deafness and muteness, it is first necessary to understand how these disabilities were viewed in ancient and medieval times. The first chapter will serve as an introduction by examining the derivation and etymology of the words *ileim* and *cheresh*, the biblical and talmudic understanding of the etiology and pathology of deafness and muteness, and the legal obligations and exemptions enumerated in Mishnah and Talmud that are incumbent upon the deaf, the mute and the deaf-mute.

In the text of the Hebrew Bible, sixteen verses use the word *ileim* and eleven use the word *cheresh* in their respective meanings of "mute" and "deaf". Several of these verses contain both words in one verse or in two consecutive verses which will be treated as one unit. (i.e., Is. 35:5-6.) In some verses the word *ileim* or *cheresh* is essential to the meaning of the verse and its context, and in others it is almost incidental. The verses will be examined in biblical order, with each section of the Bible - Torah, Prophets, and Writings - forming one chapter. Each verse will be presented in its biblical context, with citations from the rabbinic commentators when applicable. Each verse's biblical context will be followed by the midrashic interpretations of that verse, and the author's comments

³Holtz, Barry W., Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts, p. 185.

upon the midrashic interpretation. At the conclusion of these three chapters, the next chapter will present a comparative analysis which groups all of the midrashim thematically, and examines them in that light. The sixth chapter presents two explanations of the meaning of Exodus 4:11 by the medieval philosophers Maimonides and Nachmanides, which reveal their philosophy of privations. Chapter seven will draw conclusions from the information presented in the preceding chapters.

Translations

English translations of the Hebrew Bible are from The Holy Scriptures, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1917. The English translation of the New Testament passage is from The New Testament, King James version, American Bible Society, 1993. Translations of the midrashim are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTIONS OF MUTENESS AND DEAFNESS

IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

According to the terminology used in the biblical text, deaf ears need to be opened, and the strings of the tongue of the mute need to be loosened. This can be inferred by the manner in which writers of the time describe these disabilities. The word *pikeach*, meaning "open", is used as the opposite of both seeing and hearing, as Ibn Ezra explains in his commentary to Exodus 4:11:

"Here we find "*ileim*" as opposed to "*simat ha-peh*" and "*iveir*" as opposed to "*pikeach*". And "*cheresh*" remains alone, and there is nothing in opposition to it. But really, the word "*pikeach*" is the opposite of both "*cheresh*" and "*iveir*", as it is written, "With open ears" (Is. 42:20) and "Opening eyes" (Is. 42:7)".⁴

The ancients believed that the underlying physiological condition of muteness was that the tongue was bound up. William Gesenius, in his Lexicon of the Old Testament, sees a direct connection between the meanings of "binding" and "muteness" of the root 'L.M. He compares the words *eilem* and *ileim* to the English "tongue-tied".

⁴*Mikra'ot G'dolot, Shemot*, p. 50.

Gesenius cites the following passage from the New Testament, in which Jesus heals a deaf and mute man, as an illustration:

And they bring unto him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed and saith unto him 'Ephphatha', that is, 'be opened'. And straightway his ears were opened and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.

—Mark 7:32-35

In biblical usage, *cheresh* is used to mean "one who cannot hear" and *ileim* "one who cannot speak". Even so, in discussing the root Ch.R.Sh., Gesenius' last of five definitions is "to be dumb, which often depends on deafness and is joined with it, to be mute, to keep silence...but the examples show that *cheresh* implies only voluntary silence, and so differs from *ileim* which refers to that which is involuntary".⁵ In later writings, the exact meaning of the word *cheresh* also comes into question. It may refer to a person who is deaf, or to one who is both deaf and mute. Deafness and muteness were often considered to be one disorder, since, in many instances, deafness caused a person to be unable to speak.⁶ In the Targum Onkelos to Isaiah 56:10, "His lookouts are all blind, they do not know, mute dogs who cannot bark...", the word *ilmim* is translated into Aramaic as *charshin*.

Derivations of the words "*ileim*" and "*Cheresh*"

The root Aleph.Lamed.Mem. (represented henceforth as 'L.M.') has three meanings: 1) "to sheave, bind, make a bundle" 2) "to be mute, silent, lacking the power of speech, disabled in the larynx or tongue, unable to speak" 3) "large, coarse, heavy, a

⁵Gesenius, William, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, p. 58

⁶Preuss, Julius, Biblical and Talmudic Medicine, p. 291.

violent brawler; one who uses physical force"⁷. Gesenius also includes the word "*almon*" as a derivative of this root, "to be lonely, forsaken, widowed, since solitary persons remain silent, mute", and points out that the comparable Arabic word means both "mute" and "unmarried".⁸ According to Ben Yehuda, the root stems from a Semitic source. In Assyrian, it is known that there were words that used this root, but it is unclear how they were used, or if there is any connection between them and words of this root in other languages. In Arabic, this is the root of words which mean "trouble" and "pain". In Aramaic, it means "strong", (without the negative connotation of definition 3 in the Hebrew) and also has the same meanings as the Hebrew.⁹ Jastrow concurs with Gesenius that the word "*almon*" and its derivatives have their root in 'L.M., and adds the meaning of "anonymous", as in "*ploni almoni*", (Ruth 4:1)¹⁰ In Syriac, it means "anger" and "wrath". The word *ileim* itself is a Hebrew and Aramaic word, but the source is unclear.¹¹

Ch.R.Sh. is the root for words with many varied meanings, and different dictionaries divide them in different ways. Ben Yehuda lists the following meanings: 1) "to plow", or "to sow", also understood figuratively as "to devise, to plot" as in "sowing seeds of evil" 2) "to work metal or stone (n).an artisan or craftsperson" 3) "to be deaf" 4) to be silent" or "to keep secret" 5) "to be pleased, charmed".

The root Ch.R.Sh. also exists in other Semitic languages, in Arabic, Aramaic and Syriac, as Ch.R.Tav.¹² In Aramaic, in addition to the same meanings as the Hebrew,

⁷Even-Shoshan, Avraham, Milon He-Chadash, vol. 1, p. 96.

⁸Gesenius, p. 58

⁹Ben Yehuda, Eliezer, Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew, vol. 1, p. 245.

¹⁰Jastrow, Marcus, A Dictionary of the Talmud, p.71.

¹¹Ben Yehuda, p. 245.

¹²Ibid., p. 1785.

Jastrow lists: "To practice witchcraft, (n.) a sorcerer". This falls in with Ben Yehuda's fifth definition, "to be charmed".

As the midrashic texts are expounded, attention will be paid to the use that is made of word plays between the various meanings of the words "*ileim*" and "*cheresh*".

Etiology of Deafness and Muteness

In Biblical and Talmudic Medicine, Julius Preuss says, "The cause of deaf-muteness is thought to reside in the indecent behavior of the parents who are then punished in that their children are abnormal."¹³ He cites R. Johanan b. Dahabai, in Nedarim 20a:

R. Johanan b. Dahabai said: The Ministering Angels told me four things: People are born lame because they [those people's parents] 'overturned the table' (had unnatural intercourse); mute because they kiss 'that place'; deaf, because they converse during coitus; blind, because they look at 'that place'.¹⁴

However, Preuss neglects to mention that R. Johanan b. Dahabai's contention is immediately refuted:

R. Johanan said: The above is the view of R. Johanan b. Dahabai, but our Sages said: The halacha is not as R. Johanan b. Dahabai, but a man may do whatever he pleases with his wife.¹⁵

Mishnaic and Talmudic Limits and Obligations upon the Deaf and Mute

Mishnah Terumot 1:1 classifies the *cheresh* as one of the five categories of people who may not offer *terumah*, and, in 1:2 differentiates between the deaf person who speaks and the one who does not: "A *cheresh* who speaks but does not hear does not

¹³Preuss, p. 293.

¹⁴Epstein, ed., The Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim, p. 57.

¹⁵Ibid.

offer *terumah*, but if he does offer *terumah*, his offering is accepted. *Cheresh*, that is spoken of by the sages is, in all cases, one who can neither hear nor speak." However, the Tosefta on this passage disagrees, saying that *cheresh* is one who can speak but not hear and *ileim* is one who can hear but not speak, as is the biblical mode. Alan Peck, in his analysis of Mishnah Terumot says, "The *cheresh*, imbecile and minor are distinguished from other individuals in that they are not believed to understand the implications of their actions".¹⁶ In Hagigah 1:1, twelve categories of people are exempted from making pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the *shalosh regalim*: "All are liable for an appearance offering before the Lord except for a *cheresh*, an imbecile, a minor, a person with no visible sexual characteristics, an androgyne, and women, and slaves who have not been freed, the lame and the blind, and the sick and the old, and the one who cannot ascend on foot". In the *gemara*, Hagigah 2b goes on to interpret the meaning of *cheresh*:

Our mishnah speaks of *cheresh* similarly as of the imbecile and minor; just as the imbecile and minor lack understanding, so *cheresh* is one that lacks understanding. This teaches us in accordance with that which we have learned [from Terumah 1:2], *cheresh*, that is spoken of by the sages is, in all cases, one who can neither hear nor speak. This would imply that the one who can speak but not hear, or hear but not speak is obligated. We have then learned what our rabbis taught: One who can speak but not hear is termed *cheresh*; one who can hear but not speak is termed *ileim*. Both of these are deemed sensible in all that relates to them. And whence is it deduced that one who can speak but not hear is termed "*Cheresh*" and one who can hear but not speak is termed "*Ileim*"? For it is written: "But I am as a *cheresh*, I hear not; and I am as an *ileim*, that does not open his mouth" (Ps. 38:14).

¹⁶Peck, Alan J., The Priestly Gift in Mishnah: A Study of Tractate Terumot, p.31.

The *mishnah* and the *baraita* cited by the *gemara* would seem to be contradictory, the one stating that *cheresh* is one who can neither hear nor speak, and the other stating that *cheresh* is one who can speak but not hear. In the next passage, Rabina resolves the apparent contradiction:

'One that can speak but not hear, hear but not speak is obligated.' But surely it is taught 'one that can speak but not hear, hear but not speak is exempt!', said Rabina and, according to others, Raba. Our *mishnah* is defective and should read thus: All are bound to appear at the Temple and to rejoice, except a *cheresh* that can speak but not hear or hear but not speak, who is exempt from appearing at the Temple, but though he is exempt from appearing, he is bound to rejoice. One, however, that can neither hear nor speak, an imbecile and a minor are exempt even from rejoicing, since they are exempt from all the precepts stated in the Torah.¹⁷

Rabina explains that if the *Mishnah* were complete, it would state that there are two different kinds of *cheresh*. The first is a partial *cheresh* who can either speak or hear, and is obligated to rejoice, although not to appear at the Temple. (In his work *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, Julius Preuss states that nowhere does the word *cheresh* mean a person who can hear but is dumb¹⁸, but nonetheless that seems to be exactly what Rabina is stating here.) The second is the complete *cheresh* who, like the imbecile and the minor, is exempt from both. Rabina's argument would seem to agree with Peck's explanation of *Terumah* 1:2, that the issue is whether or not the person in question is capable of understanding. One can communicate with someone who can either speak or hear, but one who is both deaf and mute is assumed to be incapable of understanding, as are the imbecile and the minor. To cap the argument with proof, an aggadic passage follows with an account of mute people who are able to learn:

¹⁷Epstein, *Hagigah*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸Preuss, p. 292n.

...does this mean to say that one that cannot talk cannot learn? But behold there were two mute men in the neighborhood of Rabbi, sons of the daughter of R. Johanan b. Gudgada, and according to others, sons of the sister of R. Johanan, who whenever Rabbi entered the College, went in and sat down and nodded their heads and moved their lips. And Rabbi prayed for them and they were cured, and it was found that they were versed in Halacha, Sifra, Sifre, and the whole Talmud!

A passage with a similar point, to prove the capability of a deaf woman to perform the examination of *niddah*, appears in Niddah 13b:

MISHNAH. In the case of a *chereshet*, an imbecile, a blind or an insane woman, if other women of sound senses are available, they attend to her and she may then eat *terumah*.

GEMARA. Why should not a *chereshet* make her own examination, seeing that it was taught: Rabbi stated, A deaf woman was living in our neighborhood and not only did she examine herself but her friends also on observing a discharge would show it to her? There it was a woman who could speak but not hear while here the reference is to one who can neither speak nor hear: as we have learnt: The *cheresh*, that is spoken of by the sages is, in all cases, one who can neither hear nor speak.¹⁹

As we see, the apparent conflict is resolved by referring back to the rule from Terumot 1:2. Whenever the Talmud places restrictions or exemptions upon a *cheresh*, it is understood that the *cheresh* which is referred to is one who is both deaf and mute and, as such, can be assumed to be one who has no understanding, in the same category as an imbecile and a minor. A person who has one disability but not the other is held accountable to the same degree as an able-bodied person. This is made clear in the following passage from Gittin 71a:

¹⁹Epstein, *Niddah*, p.90.

R. Kahana said in the name of Rab: If a deaf-mute can signify his meaning by writing, a Get may be written and given to his wife. Said R. Joseph: What does this tell us [that we do not know already]? We have learnt [in Gittin 7:1] If a man is struck dumb and when they say to him, shall we write a get for your wife, he nods his head, he is tested with three questions [to make sure he didn't nod involuntarily]. If he signifies 'no' and 'yes' properly each time, then the get should be written and given for him. R. Zera replied to him [R. Kahana] You have quoted a statement about an *ileim*. An *ileim* is different, as it has been taught: One who can speak but not hear is called *cheresh* and one who can hear but not speak is called *ileim*, and both are considered to be in possession of their faculties for all purposes. What is your warrant for saying that one who can speak but not hear is called *cheresh* and one who can hear but not speak is called *ileim*? Because it is written, "But I am as a *cheresh*, I hear not; and I am as an *ileim*, who does not open his mouth." (Ps. 38:14). Or if you like I can say that we know it from the colloquial description of a dumb man as "*ishtekil miluleh*" [his speech has been taken away from him]²⁰.

On the other hand, the deaf-mute, along with the imbecile and the minor, in addition to having no understanding, were also believed to have no power of thought, as illustrated by the following mishnah, Machshirin 6:1:

The one who brings his fruit up to the roof because of vermin, and dew falls on it, then it is not as if water were put on it. If he intended it thus [that dew should fall on it] then it is as if water was put on it. If a deaf-mute, an imbecile or a minor brought it up, even if he thought that dew would fall on it, it is not as if water were put on it, for they have the power of deeds but not the power of thought.

²⁰Epstein, *Gittin*, p. 337.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERPRETATIONS OF VERSES FROM THE TORAH

The word "*ileim*" is used without "*cheresh*" once in the books of the Torah, in Genesis. The word "*cheresh*" is used without "*ileim*" once, in Leviticus. They are used together once, in Exodus.

Genesis 37:7 - Biblical Context

For behold, we were binding sheaves in the field and lo, my sheaf arose and also stood upright and behold your sheaves came round about and bowed down to my sheaf.

This verse occurs as Joseph is telling his brothers about his first dream, which they then interpret. In its biblical context, this usage of 'L.M. is clearly of the first definition, "to bind or sheaf", and has nothing to do with muteness. However, it is midrashically expounded in ways that bring the two meanings of the word together.

Genesis 37:7 - Midrash

Example A. - Bereshit Rabbah 1:5

This midrash presents three biblical verses which contain the word *ileim* in three different connotations in order to 'discover' the meaning of the word *t'almana* in Ps. 31:19, and explicates them as follows:

R. Huna in the name of Bar Kappara opened: "Let the lying lips be *"t'almana"*. (Ps. 31:19) This may mean "bound",

"made mute" or "silenced". "Bound": "for behold, we were binding sheaves" (Gen. 37:7). "Made mute": "Who makes a man mute?" (Ex. 4:11). "Silenced" is the obvious meaning [in this case].

Ps. 31:19 is used as an intersecting verse to introduce the matter of those who would contemplate *ma'asei bereishit*. "Bound" is clearly not the meaning the author wants, nor is "made mute". The meaning he wishes to derive from the verse is that what came before God's creation of the world is not a fit matter for discussion; only the arrogant would contemplate it, and it should not be taught. Why, then, does he bother to bring the prooftexts for the meanings he isn't interested in? A more complete form of this midrash is considered in Example B.

Genesis 37:7

Example B - Yerushalmi Hagigah 2:1

This passage follows a discussion with the daughters of Elisha ben Abuyah, and here, the rabbis are pondering upon his folly in becoming a heretic:

R. Eleazar said in the name of Ben Sirah, Why attempt to find out what is hidden from you? Why search out what is deeper than Sheol? Reflect on what is permitted to you. Hidden things are not your concern. Rav said, "Let the lying lips be *t'almana* (Ps. 31:19). Let them be confounded, crushed, silenced. "Let them be confounded" as you say, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind?" (Ex. 4:11) Let them be crushed, as you say, "Behold we were binding sheaves" (Gen. 37:7). Let them be silenced, according to the literal meaning, "Which speak arrogantly against the righteous" (Ps. 31:19), who speaks concerning the Righteous One of the World words that he has withheld from his creatures.²¹

Genesis 37:7

Example C - Bereshit Rabbah 84:1

R. Levi and R. Aha. R. Levi said, "in the future you [the brothers] will make dumb idols before the calves of

²¹Neusner, Jacob, trans., The Talmud of the Land of Israel, Hagigah, p. 50.

Jeroboam, and say 'this is your god, Israel (Ex.32:4)'. R. Aha said, "in the future, you will cause words to come up about me before Father, saying 'an evil beast ate him', and what will stand up for me? The silence of my mother."

R. Levi interprets that *m'almim alumim* here foretells the future, that the descendants of these brothers will be the tribes in the wilderness who build and worship the golden calf and call it the God of Israel. He makes the connection through the fact that idols are dumb (*ileim*), and hence the use of the words *m'almim alumim*. R. Aha also makes the connection between the two root meanings, "sheaves" and "muteness", but he takes it one step further, going by association from the word *ileim* to the word *sh'tika*, silence. R. Aha suggests that Joseph will be saved by the merit of his mother Rachel, who kept silent from revealing that her father Laban was giving Jacob his elder daughter Leah as his first wife. Had Rachel not kept silent, the implication is, Joseph's brothers would not have existed at all, for Jacob would never have married their mother. As a side note, it is interesting that the midrash is intentionally unclear in its use of language as to who said what to whom. In the biblical text, the brothers do not lie except by implication. They present the bloodied coat and ask if Jacob recognizes it, and it is Jacob who jumps to the conclusion that a wild beast ate Joseph. In this midrash, the peculiar phrasing makes it seem as if it was the brothers who said, "A wild beast ate him" without actually saying so.

Exodus 4:11 - Biblical Context

Ex. 4: 10-15. (4:11 highlighted) And Moses said to God, My Lord, I am not a man of words, either in times past or now that you have spoken to Your servant, for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. **And God said to him, Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes a man mute or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I, Adonai?** And now go, and I will be with you, with your mouth, and I will teach you what you will speak. And he said, my Lord, please send by the hand of the one that you will send. And

the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and God said, behold, isn't Aaron the Levite your brother? I know he can surely speak. And also, here he is, going out to meet you, and he will see you and rejoice in his heart. And you will speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you will do.

Moses has just experienced the theophany at the burning bush and been given his mission. In these verses, he tries to refuse it, for the fourth time since God has told him what he is to do. In verse 10, he professes that he is "slow of speech", and therefore cannot perform his mission. In verse 11, God replies, indicating that it is God who made all people as they are, and therefore, knows what Moses' capabilities are. At Moses' next refusal God becomes angry, and tells him that Aaron his brother will be his spokesman.

Exodus 4:11 - Midrash

Example A & B - See Genesis 37:7, Example A & B

Example C. - Shemot Rabbah 1:31 (and similarly in Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro, Amalek, 1; Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Vaera 6:2 and Yitro 18:2; Dvarim Rabbah 2:29; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 7:4; Midrash Tehillim, 4 and Y. Berachot 9:1.)

"And Moses fled from before Pharoah" - R. Yannai said: And is it possible for a person to escape the monarchy? Rather, at the time that Moses was tried and was condemned to be beheaded, an angel descended from heaven and took the shape of Moses. And they took hold of the angel and Moses fled. R. Yehoshua b. Levi said: All of the counselors who sat before Pharoah became some of them mute, some of them deaf, some of them blind. It was said to the mute ones, "Where is Moses?", and they could not speak; to the deaf and they could not hear, and to the blind, and they could not see. Thus said the Holy Blessed One to Moses, "Who put a mouth in man?" Who put a mouth in Pharoah, that he said with his mouth, "Bring Moses to the platform and kill him." "And who makes a man mute or deaf or sighted or blind", who made the counselors mute, deaf and blind, that they could not bring him to you, and who made you sighted, that you might flee, "behold I am Adonai", I was with you there and today I stand with you.

In a variation, cited in Rashi's commentary to the Torah, Pharoah is made mute so that he cannot give the command to execute Moses, his counselors made deaf so that they cannot hear the command, and the lookouts made blind so they cannot see Moses fleeing.

In the biblical context, Moses feels incompetent to take on the leadership of the Israelites, and to represent them before Pharoah. This midrash is presented to remind him that God has been with him, and saved him from Pharoah before. It returns to Chapter 2 of Exodus, when Moses fled from Pharoah after killing the Egyptian, and imagines a scene of wonders worked on Moses' behalf which allowed him to escape. These wonders involve creating disabilities for Pharoah and/or his people as obstacles which prevent them from capturing the fleeing Moses, who is under God's protection. This is an instance of disability used as a miraculous tool to protect God's chosen one from his enemies. In all of the midrashim about Moses' enemies being struck with disabling conditions which prevent them from doing him harm, we could say that, although humans are commanded not to take advantage of a person's disability, God is capable of using, and does use, blindness itself as a stumbling block. A similar use is made of Ps. 31:19 as a proof-text for David fleeing from before Saul, in which Doeg is made mute, and unable to tell Saul where David has gone. See Ps. 31:19, Example D, Midrash Tehillim, 7.

Exodus 4:11

Example D - Midrash Otivot d'Rabbi Akiva on the letter *Pei*

Don't read *Pei*, rather *Peh* (mouth). And "mouth" can only refer to Moses, as it is written, "For I am slow of speech and slow of tongue". It is taught that at the same time Moses said before the Holy Blessed One, "Master of the Universe, I know for myself that You are the Creator of all that comes into the world and You did not create the world for any reason but for Your glory, and You did not make creatures except that You would be dear to them, and You did not create humans except in order to apportion glory to You, as it is written, "All that are called by My name, and

to My glory I created", etc. (Is. 58). And every limb that You created in humans You did not create in vain. You only created the head to honor Your name and to praise You. You only created the eyes to see Your glory. You only created the ears to hear Your glory. (every organ of the body and its purpose are cited, ending with the tongue and the mouth, to converse and to speak). Now, give me words and speech to use with them in mouth and tongue. The Holy Blessed One answered and said to Moses, "Moses, who put a mouth in the first human, as it is written, 'Who put a mouth in man, etc.' I am the one who put mouth and tongue in the first human, that he might name all that came into the world, and call each one by its name, as it is written: 'and whatever the man would call every living creature, that was to be its name.'"

Various parts of the human body are cited to drive home the point that God creates nothing in vain. This midrash also makes reference to the biblical context, where Moses feels himself incompetent to speak on behalf of the Israelite people before Pharaoh. This midrash gives reassurance that God does everything for a purpose, and answers Moses' plea that God give him words and speech for his tongue and mouth. It does so by going back to the creation of the world. Just as God put speech in the mouth of the first human being, so God will be with Moses' mouth as he goes before Pharaoh.

Exodus 4:11

Example E - Midrash Mishlei 2:6

For Adonai grants wisdom - Another interpretation, that He adds wisdom to those who are [already] wise, as it is written, "He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to them that know" (Dan. 2:21). "Knowledge and discernment are by His decree" (Prov. 2:6)... That He gives speech to the mute, as it is said, "And God said to him, Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes a man mute or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I, Adonai?" (Ex. 4:11) It is not written "Is it not I, Moses?", but rather, is it not I, Adonai?"

This passage follows another which suggests that you cannot wait for Torah to find you, but must go out after it. The midrash wishes to point out that all that is correct comes from God, including correct speech.

Exodus 4:11

Example F - Shemot Rabbah 3:20

This midrash takes up the verse in its biblical context and carries it to a logical conclusion.

And Moses said to God, "You are the Lord of the world; do you want me to be your messenger? Behold, I am not a man of words". The sages said that seven days beforehand, God had appeared to Moses to go on his mission, but he did not want to go until the incident of the thornbush. As it is written: "Behold, I am not a man of words", that is one [day's refusal], "yesterday", two, "also", three, "now", four, "also", five, "since", six, "You spoke to me", seven. R. Pinchas ha-Cohen said that Moses said, "I am not a man of words, and I do not see here [a place for] words, for the man I go to see is a slave, and he will not receive correction, as it is said, "A slave cannot be disciplined by words". If I do not go to chastise him, I will not go". At once, God said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? If you are not a man of words, do not be afraid. Didn't I create all the mouths in the world? I made mute those whom I desired, and deaf, and blind, and seeing, and hearing. And if I had desired you to be a man of words, you would be so. Rather, I want to make you into a miracle. At the time that you will speak it will be with the appropriate words, for I will be with your mouth, as it is written, 'I will be with your mouth'".

This midrash expands upon the plain meaning of the verse, filling in God's explanation of the seemingly puzzling fact that God has chosen as spokesman for the Israelites a man who doesn't speak well. God assures Moses that if he had needed to be eloquent, the One who has made all the mouths in the world would have created him eloquent. It is being made clear to Moses that his own ability is irrelevant, as it is the word of God, not the word of Moses, that he will be speaking. What is almost, but not

quite, being stated is that, had God made Moses eloquent, it could have been said that he was speaking on his own, and not on behalf of God. However, when the words come from a man who is "slow of speech and slow of tongue", it is apparent to all that it is God who is speaking through him. Ramban mentions this midrash in his commentary to the Torah, and theorizes that the reason God did not cure Moses was because his speech defect came about through a miracle, as cited in Shemot Rabbah 1:31, where, upon the advice of his magicians, Pharaoh tested the infant Moses with a bowl of jewels and a bowl of hot coals.

Leviticus 19:14 - Biblical Context

You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling-block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am Adonai.

This verse appears in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, so called because it "contains a wealth of regulations that specify just how Israel is to express in daily life the holiness it must have as a people uniquely covenanted to the holy God."²² It is a manual of moral and ritual instruction at the center of the Levitical laws. The plain meaning of the verse is that one is not to take advantage of a person with disabilities, but is midrashically and halachically expanded to mean taking advantage of the morally deaf or blind.

Leviticus 19:14 - Midrash

Example A - Sifra, Parashat Kedoshim, Parashah 2

"You shall not curse the deaf [or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God; I am the Lord]" (Lev. 19:14): I only know this about the deaf. From where in Scripture do I know about not cursing the rest of humanity? Scripture says, "You shall not curse a ruler of your people" (Ex. 22:27). If that is so, why is it said "you shall not curse the deaf"? Just as a deaf person is special

²²Carmody, Carmody and Cohn, Exploring the Hebrew Bible, p. 77

because he is alive, the dead, who are not alive, are excluded.

"Or put a stumbling block before the blind", before one who is blind to 'that thing' [Neusner translates: "one who cannot see in that particular context"²³] One comes and says to you, 'the daughter of so-and-so, what is her status to marry into the priesthood?' do not say to him that she is fit if she is not fit. Or, if one came to you for advice, do not give him unfair advice. Do not say to him, 'go early in the morning' so that robbers will prey upon him, or 'go at noon' so that he will get sunstroke. Do not say to him, 'sell your field and buy a donkey' and then seek an occasion to take it [the donkey] from him. Perhaps you will say, 'But I am giving him good advice', but the matter depends on the intention of the heart, as it is written, "but you shall fear your God; I am the Lord". And in reference to all the intentions that are in your heart, "you shall fear your God".

The first passage considers the phrase "you shall not curse the deaf" in its literal sense, and sets parameters as to whom it actually applies. If you are told not to curse even the deaf, how much the more so should you not curse someone of a higher position, and so the prooftext from Ex. 22:27. The unquoted first section of this verse is "You shall not revile God", and thus from the highest to the lowest, provides scriptural proof that we should not be cursing anyone. But in that case, why does the verse name the deaf? Because there is a lower parameter, too. A deaf person is alive. Even though neither the deaf person nor the corpse is able to hear, the deaf person is entitled to the dignity of not being cursed, while the dead are excluded. The second passage deals with the figuratively blind, with those who cannot see the consequences of a particular matter. The inference is that the person giving the advice is better able to foresee the consequences or, at least, should be giving advice with the benefit of the listener in mind. The end of the verse is brought in to underscore that when we advise another, our intent

²³Neusner, trans. *Sifra: An Analytical Translation*, p.105.

is really the core of the matter. The second half of the verse is used often in the Talmud, and is consistently understood in this same figurative manner, so that placing a stumbling block before the blind comes to mean, in the words of the notes to the Soncino translation of the Babylonian Talmud, "...the supply of misleading information which leads the unwary into sin."²⁴

Leviticus 19:14 - Midrash

Example B - Babylonian Talmud, Baba Mezia 75b

In this passage, both Ps. 31:19 and Lev. 19:14 are used as prooftexts for business law:

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: He who has money and lends it without witnesses infringes "and thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind". Resh Lakish said: He brings a curse upon himself, as it is written, "Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous"²⁵

Rab Judah is using "placing a stumbling block before the blind", the second half of Lev. 19:14, in the way it is generally understood in the Talmud, of placing the temptation to sin before the unwitting. In this case, he says, the lender, by lending money with improper documentation, is tempting the borrower to sin by denying that the loan was ever made. Resh Lakish agrees as to the substance of Rab Judah's argument, but disagrees as to the proof, citing instead Ps. 31:19. His argument is that when the lender asks for the return of the money and the borrower denies that there was a loan, the lender will be cursed for making an unjust claim.

²⁴Epstein, *Kedoshim*, p. 156.

²⁵Epstein, *Baba Mezia*, p. 436.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERPRETATIONS OF VERSES FROM THE PROPHETS

In the books of the Prophets, there are six verse-units which use the word "*ileim*" without "*cheresh*", four which use the word "*cheresh*" without "*ileim*", and one which uses both. Of these eleven instances, six occur in the book of Isaiah, three in Ezekiel, one in Micah and one in Habakkuk.

Isaiah 29:18 - Biblical Context

And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of a book and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness.

This verse comes from First Isaiah. The prophet is speaking about the return of the divine presence to Israel and Judah. The prophecy that the deaf will hear and the blind will see is typical of Isaiah's conception of the messianic age, a time in which all infirmities will be healed. Its message is similar to that of Isaiah 35:5-6, and will be expounded more fully below.

Isaiah 29:18 - Midrash

None found.

Isaiah 35:5-6 - Biblical Context

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be opened. Then the lame shall skip like a hart and the tongue of the mute shall sing, for water has broken out in the desert and streams in the plain.

This verse also is from First Isaiah, part of the prophecy of the restoration of Jerusalem and the return of the Israelites to Zion. It is a prophecy of great joy and hope, telling of the end of days, a messianic age in which all creatures of God shall live in peace, in which the very rules of nature itself will be changed. All those with disabilities will be healed, animals who were previously natural enemies will become allies, and wasteland will become fertile with water. Rashi understands the curing of the disabilities not as physical miracles, but as a new obedience on the part of those who had previously defied God's law. The blind, he explains are:

those who were blind from recognizing My awe upon them. Deaf - who did not hearken to the voice of the prophet until now, will be opened and unstopped, for I will give them a proper spirit to fear me. He says this concerning Israel, whom he called blind and deaf as the matter is stated (Is. 42:18), "you deaf ones, listen". Lame - Israel, who are now lame and weak. Mute - the tongue of Israel, who are among the nations as mutes, for they hear their scorn and do not respond.²⁶

This verse in its biblical context refers to the time-to-come, the messianic age when, according to Isaiah, the order of nature itself will change. Not only will there be no disabilities, but natural enemies (the wolf and the lamb, for instance) will cease their enmity. In one midrash, this verse is used to refer to two outstanding times in history, first, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, which has already occurred, and second, the coming of the messianic redemption, which is yet to come.

²⁶Rosenberg, A.J., trans., *Mikra'ot G'dolot, Isaiah, vol. 2*, p.284

Isaiah 35:5-6 - MidrashExample A - Pesikta de Rab Kahana 5:16 (and also found in Pesikta Rabbati 15:22)

This shall be a new experience for you (Ex. 12:2) R. Nachman, R. Eleazar bar R. Jose and R. Aha commented on this passage. According to the one, [R. Nachman] the Holy One said to Israel: My children, here [in Egypt] you are to have a new and unprecedented experience in redemption. And according to the others [R. Eleazar and R. Aha]: Soon after your exodus you are to have a completely new experience which you will have again only in the time-to-come. As in the time-to-come, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Is. 35:5), so too after your exodus, for Scripture says, "All the people saw the thunderings" (Ex. 20:15). As in the time-to-come "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Is. 35:5) so too after your exodus, for Scripture says, "All the people...said 'all that the Lord has spoken we will do as we hear'" (Ex. 24:7). As in the time-to-come "Then shall the lame man leap as a hart" (Is. 35:6), so too after your exodus, for Scripture says, Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the Mount (Ex. 19:17). As in the time-to-come, "The tongue of the dumb shall sing" (Is. 35:6) so too after your exodus, for Scripture says, "All the people sang out together" (Ex. 19:8)²⁷

This interpretation of the verse compares the giving of the Torah at Sinai with messianic redemption. The logic of the passage works as follows: if all of the people saw, heard, stood and sang, there must have been no disabled persons there. By juxtaposing the verses from Isaiah with corresponding verses from Exodus, the midrash ties together the promise of the messianic age with what has already occurred at Sinai.

Isaiah 35:5-6Example B - Pesikta de Rab Kahana 12:19

...But there were blind, lame and deaf among them, so that the Holy One, saying "The Torah, all of it, is whole and unblemished"—"The Lord's Torah is perfect" (Ps. 19:8)—

²⁷Braude, trans., *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, p. 118.

declared: Shall I give it to this generation among whom are men with physical blemishes? On the other hand, if I wait until a new generation, their children, rise up, I shall have to delay Israel's joyous nuptials with the Torah. What did the Holy One do? He healed those who were blemished and after that gave Israel the Torah. And the proof that He healed them? He who had been blind was made to see, as it is said, "All the people saw the thunderings" (Ex. 20:15). He who had been deaf was made to hear, as is said "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and hear" (Ex. 24:7). He who had been lame became whole, as is said "They stood at the nether part of the Mount" (Ex. 19:17). "Now", said God, "there is to be a renewal; as I make you new again, I show you a kind of earnest of the world-to-come. As in the time-to-come, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Is. 35:5), so at Sinai "all the people saw". As in the time-to-come "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Is. 35:5) so at Sinai "They said: all that the Lord has spoken we will do and hear" (Ex. 24:7). As in the time-to-come "The lame man shall leap as a hart" (Is. 35:6), so at Sinai, "Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the Mount" (Ex. 19:17). As in the time-to-come "The tongue of the dumb shall sing" (Is. 35:6) so at Sinai, "All the people sang out together" (Ex. 19:8).²⁸

This midrash begins with the theme that the people Israel had to be perfect in order to receive the Torah, so, rather than wait a generation to create a perfect people, God cured those in this generation who were imperfect. From there it goes into the prooftexts, that which is promised in the world-to-come has already occurred at Sinai. This theme is a classic midrashic one, that finds comfort by going both forwards and backwards. The greatest age of Israel, when we were closest to and most beloved of God, is the revelation at Sinai. But, according to this midrash, that which happened there will happen again, in the world-to-come.

²⁸Ibid., p. 242.

Isaiah 35:5-6

Example C. - Bereshit Rabbah 95:1 (and, similarly, Tanhuma, Buber ed., 11.9)

"He sent Judah before him to Joseph, to appear before him in Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen" (Gen. 46:28). "The wolf and the lamb shall feed as one, and the lion and the ox will eat straw" (Is. 65:25). Come and see how all that the Holy Blessed One uses to smite in this world will be used to heal in the world-to-come. The blind will be healed, as it is said, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Is. 35:5). The lame will be healed, as it is said, "then the lame shall skip like a hart" (ibid.). The dumb will be healed, "and the tongue of the dumb shall sing". All will be healed, but just as a person went out [of life], so will he come. If he went out blind, he will come back blind, if deaf, he will come back deaf, if mute, he will come back mute, if lame, he will come back lame. Just as he was dressed when he went out, so he will come back. Where do you learn this? From Samuel. When Saul saw him [when the witch of Endor brought him back from the dead] what did he say to the woman? "What is his form?" and she said, "An old man wearing a robe". (1 Sam. 28:14) So was he dressed, as it is written: "And his mother made him a little robe" (1 Sam. 2:19). And why is it that as a person comes back as he went out? So that the wicked of the world will not say that after they died, the Holy Blessed One will heal them and then bring them back to life. It seems that it is not these, but others who have died. The Holy Blessed One said, "If so, let them rise up as they went out and afterwards I will heal them". Why is this so? "That you may know that before me there was no God, and neither shall there be any after Me." (Is. 43:10) And afterwards the beasts will be healed, as it is written, "The wolf and the lamb shall feed as one". All will be healed, except the one who injured all will not be healed: "And dust shall be the serpent's food" (Is. 65:25).

Two points seem equally important in this midrash: 1) That all the faculties that are taken from humans in this life will be restored in the world-to-come, and 2) that the order that events will take in the world-to-come is that first they will be resurrected as they were when they died, and only afterwards healed. The reason given for this in the midrash is that it will not give the wicked an opportunity to claim that God healed them.

This might possibly refer to the interim between the time that they died and the time of the messianic redemption, but it doesn't make much sense. A better case might be made for this midrash as an argument against sorcery. This case is strengthened by the mention of Saul's visit to the witch of Endor. If the dead arise already healed, how can one be sure who healed them; whether it was God or some other power? However, if God heals all the resurrected in full public sight, there can be no doubt. This fits in directly with the verse following the phrase "Why is this so?" "That you may know that before me there was no God, and neither shall there be any after Me." The final point, that the serpent alone will not be healed, is expounded upon more fully in the next example.

Isaiah 35:5-6

Example D - Tanhuma Metzora 2

This midrash appears at the end of a long passage about the punishment for *lashon hara*:

And there is no more, but in the time-to-come, all those who are disabled will be healed, but the serpent will not be healed, as it is written: "cursed are you of all the beasts" (Gen. 3:14). From this [we learn] that all will be healed, but he will not be healed. Of humans, it is written, "The lame will skip like a hart and the tongue of the mute shall sing" (Is. 35:6), and also of the animals and beasts, "the wolf and the lamb shall feed as one, and the lion and the ox will eat straw" (Is. 65:25). But the serpent, dust is his food. He will never be healed, he will be brought down, of all the beasts, to the dust. And what is the cause of this? That he spoke *lashon hara*.

This point of this midrash has less to do with deafness and muteness than it does with the punishment for *lashon hara*, but it reiterates the point made in the midrash above, namely that all will be healed in the world-to-come except for the serpent. The traditional midrashic punishment for *lashon hara* is leprosy, derived from the biblical account of Miriam, (Num. 12) who was stricken with leprosy for speaking against the

wife of Moses. A connection might also be made between leprosy, a disease in which skin degenerates, and the serpent, which sheds its skin.

Isaiah 35:5-6

Example E - Aggadat Bereshit, Chapter 70

This passage is a part of a long midrash on the verse, "And Jacob saw that there was food in Egypt" The intersecting verse is Proverbs 20:12, "The ear that hears, the eye that sees--the Lord made them both":

Another interpretation: "The ear that hears, the eye that sees--the Lord made them both" (Prov. 20:12) Said R. Ishan in the name of R. Hilkaiah: In this world we caused transgressions, and Israel became deaf to the Torah and blind to seeing the Shechina, as it is written, "Their ears are blocked and they cannot listen" (Jer. 6:10). Therefore, they were deafened to the learning of Torah and blinded to the seeing of the Shechina. And so Isaiah commanded, "Listen, you who are deaf; you blind ones, look up and see!" (Is. 42:18) And they said to him, we do not see, as it is written, "We grope like blind men along a wall" (Is. 59:10). And we do not hear, as it is written, "But I am like one who is deaf, who cannot hear" (Ps. 38:14). And what does the Holy Blessed One do? In the time-to-come, He will resurrect them, as from the beginning, and afterwards He will open their eyes and their ears, as it is written, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be opened." (Is. 35:5) And they will hear the words of the Holy Blessed One, as it is written, "And your ears will hear the word" (Is. 30:21) and they will see it as it is taught, as it is written, "and your Teacher shall no longer be concealed from you" (Is. 30:20). And at this time, this verse will be established, "The ear that hears, the eye that sees". Neither an angel nor a seraph will do this, but, "the Lord made them both".

This midrash combines a message that disability is a metaphor for moral failings, with a message that God will restore what was lost in this world in the world-to-come. It makes its point that, in the world-to-come, all will be obedient to God's will.

Isaiah 35:5-6Example F. - Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 146

The following passage focuses more on the blind rather than it does on the deaf or mute.

It is included here as an excellent example of midrash which combines literal and figurative disability:

The Lord opens the eyes of the blind (Ps. 146:8). No privation is greater, no affliction is greater or more cruel than blindness. What parable fits here? That of a man who carried freight on camels and on donkeys. Once they were loaded, they would set out on their route. He loaded one of the animals with a burden as great as all the others together carried, and he also loaded it with fodder for all the others. Then he commanded concerning this animal, "Take special care of this one, for it is not merely straw that is loaded on him. I know well what a load I put upon him." When they came into the city and were about to unload the animals, the man said, "Unload this one first, for I put a greater burden upon him than upon all the others." Even so, the Holy Blessed One gave special commandments concerning the blind, for no affliction is greater than theirs. As Scripture says, "Cursed be he that make the blind to go astray in the way (Deut. 27:18)." Indeed, when God comes to heal the world, He will certainly first heal the blind, as it is said, "The Lord opens the eyes of the blind" (Ps. 146:8).

Another comment: Who are the blind? Men of the present generation who go groping like blind men in the Torah, saying, "We wait for light, but behold obscurity, for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind" (Is. 59:9-10). All of them read, but do not know what they read. All of them study, but do not know what they study. In the time-to-come, however "The eyes of the blind shall be opened".²⁹

In the first paragraph, the midrash focuses on the plight of literal blindness, and uses a *marshal* of a heavily burdened animal to compare the burden of the blind person to that of other people. Nevertheless, they will be rewarded, for when God heals all ills,

²⁹Braude, trans., Midrash on Psalms, p. 367.

they will be healed first. The "other interpretation" takes blindness in a figurative sense: those who do not understand Torah are blind. Unlike other midrashim, this one does not refer to those who are ignorant of Torah, but rather to those who know it, but "do not know what they read". Depending on the time and place in which this midrash developed, the reference may be to Christians, Moslems, Karaites, or to any others who regard to the Hebrew Scriptures as holy writ, but do not understand them in the same way the rabbis do.

Isaiah 35:5-6

Example G. - Tanhuma D'varim 2

In this midrash, the verse "These are the words which Moses spoke" (Deut. 1:1) is explained:

"These are the words which Moses spoke": Israel said, yesterday you said "I am not a man of words," and now you speak to us?" R. Yitzchak said, if you have good sense, study the Torah, and heal yourself. And Moses had already learned the whole Torah in the wilderness, in the desert, before the reeds. So it is written, "the tongue of the mute shall sing" (Is. 35:6). Come and see, when the Holy Blessed One said to Moses, "Go and I will send you to Pharaoh" (Ex. 3:10), Moses said to him, "You cause me to pass on this road; I am not a man of words". He said to God, seventy languages are spoken at the palace of Pharaoh, if a man comes from another place, they speak to him in his language. And I go as your messenger, and they will check my speech, and it will be revealed before them that I don't know how to converse with them. Will they not laugh at me, saying, look at the messenger from the One who created the earth and all the languages! He doesn't know how to listen and answer! I am not a man of words, my lips are uncircumcised. The Holy Blessed One said to him, behold, regarding the first human, how do we know that he knew seventy languages? It is written, "And he called them their names" (Gen. 2:20). Not 'the name of all the beasts' is written, rather 'the names of all the beasts'. And you say, "I am not a man of words". At the end of forty years, when Israel has gone out from Egypt, it will begin to explain the Torah in seventy languages, as it is

written, "make this Torah clear". The mouth that said, "I am not a man of words" will say, "These are the words" (Deut. 1:1). And the prophet commanded and said, "And the lame shall skip like a hart". Why? "For in the wilderness waters shall break out, and streams in the desert". As it is said, "these are the words."

This midrash compares Moses' words at the beginning and end of his tenure as the leader of the Israelites, focused on the word "*d'varim*". Moses has gone from "I am not a man of words" to "these are the words". And how did he do it? As R. Yitzchak said, his defect, his lack of speech, was healed, and he became eloquent, because he learned the Torah. The prooftext from Isaiah is to apply to Moses, "and the tongue of the mute shall sing", and is supported by the use of the words "*midbar*" and "*aravah*" in the prooftext, which is the place where, the midrash tells us, Moses learned the Torah. In this instance, Torah itself is the cure for disabilities.

Isaiah 35:5-6

Example H. - Midrash Shir Ha-Shirim, 4:7

"All of you is fair, my beloved" (Song, 4:7). As it is written, "then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be opened" (Is. 35:5). And it is written, "Then the lame shall skip like a hart, and the tongue of the mute shall sing" (Is. 35:6). When will it be that "all of you is fair, my beloved"? The Holy Blessed One said, at the time that I redeem you from the [earthly] rule, as it is written "Behold I will bring them..." (Jer. 31:7). At that same time, the Holy Blessed One decrees and heals the deaf and the mute and the lame, so that there will be no defect in Israel, therefore it is said, "All of you is fair, my beloved."

Following the rabbinic dictum that Song of Songs depicts the love between God and Israel, this midrash explains the line "all of you is fair, my beloved", and the unspoken second half of the verse "and there is no defect in you". When will there be no defect in Israel? When God redeems the people, all their defects will be removed from them, as is proven by Isaiah 35:5-6.

Isaiah 42:18-19 - Biblical context

You deaf ones, listen and you blind ones look to see. Who is blind but My servants, and deaf as My messenger whom I will send? Who is blind like the one who received payment and blind like the servant of God?

These verses comes from Second Isaiah, contemplating the return to Jerusalem. It follows upon a prophecy of comfort, Israel's impending rescue from its enemies by the hand of God. Rashi explains that in verse 18, the deaf ones and blind ones referred to are Israel. Upon the next verse, however, the commentators differ in their interpretations. Ibn Ezra and Radak understand it as the retort of the people to the prophet. The prophet calls them blind and deaf (v. 18) and the people respond by insulting God's messenger, the Messiah, by calling him blind and deaf. Thus, Ibn Ezra and Radak understand the use of the words "blind" and "deaf" in verse 19 as epithets. Rashi instead understands the speaker of verse 19 as God, saying that the Messiah has been through suffering and emerged cleansed. Rashi may well have taken this understanding from some of the midrash on this verse, which regards blindness and deafness as figurative traits which are positive.

Isaiah 42:18-19 - Midrash

Example A - Pesikta Rabbati 33:13

This is a midrash which offers the message that God heals with the same thing with which God smites. A large section of this very long midrash, which is not included here, describes the places and things with which Israel sinned, and with which it will be comforted, and an accompanying prooftext for each. The midrash then moves on to parts of the body with which Israel sinned, and with which it will be comforted:

Another comment: I, even I, am the One that comforts you (Is. 51:12). The Holy Blessed One said, "Such is my skill

that I heal with the very thing I smite with." A mortal wounds with a knife and heals with a poultice. But God's skill is not of this order. For the very thing He wounds with is the very thing He heals with, as is said, "For I will restore health unto you out of your wounds—I will heal you, says the Lord" (Jer. 30:17). Heal wounds with wounds? Come, look in Scripture! ...They sinned with the eye, as is written, "The daughters of Zion...walk...with wanton eyes" (Is.3:16) and they were smitten in the eyes, as is written, "For the Lord...has closed your eyes" (Is. 29:10); yet they will be comforted by the eye, as is written, "For they shall see, eye to eye, the Lord returning to Zion" (Is. 52:8) They sinned with the ears, as is written, "They stopped their ears, that they might not hear" (Zech. 7:11); they were smitten in the ears, as is written, "Hear ye deaf" (Is. 42:18); yet they will be comforted by the ear, as is written, "The children of your bereavement shall yet say in your ears" (Is. 49:20)...They sinned with the lips, as is written, "your lips have spoken lies" (Is.59:3) and they were smitten on the lips, "The Lord will cut off all flattering lips" (Ps.12:4); yet they will be comforted with praise of the lips, "Your lips are like a thread of scarlet" (Song 4:3)...they sinned against the one known as "He", for it is written, "They have belied the Lord, and said it is not He" (Jer. 5:12); and they were smitten by the one known as "He", "But they rebelled, and grieved His holy spirit; therefore He was turned to be their enemy" (Is. 63:10); yet they will be comforted by the one known as "He", "I, even I, am He that comforts you". It was thus that R. Tanhuma expounded these verses. Amen, and amen! Selah. And may it be God's will to comfort us!³⁰

This midrash manipulates a great many verses in order to prove its point; that God uses the same means to heal and to wound. The major point of this midrash is to prove God's superiority to earthly healers, perhaps particularly to prove that God's healing is superior to the miracles of healing attributed by the Christians to Jesus. But the secondary theme in this midrash is a comfort, that the world-to-come will be a place not

³⁰Braude, trans. *Pesikta Rabbati*, pp. 655-661.

too different from this world, except for the way we treat one another, and the reverence in which God will be held.

Isaiah 42:18-19

Example B - Eliyahu Rabbah Chapter 14

This rather long midrash takes a number of figurative views, using the various disabilities to represent character traits:

There is, indeed, no other people or kingdom from one end to the other end of the world that the Holy One brought into being but the seed of Jacob whom He intended to be inheritors of life in the world-to-come. Of them He said, "I will bring them from the north country—" [that is, from places in this world where they have been exiled]—"and with them the blind and the lame" (Jer. 31:7) [that is, those who are blind to temptation and those who do not run after what is forbidden.] In other words, the blind and the lame are the unlettered in Torah who conduct themselves uprightly in obedience to the precepts of ethical conduct as well as to all other precepts and who, it goes without saying, keep far away from [sexual] transgression, larceny, and any other kind of offensive behavior. Of such people, R. Simeon said, one who desists from transgressing is granted a reward like one who performs a precept.

In another comment, the blind are taken to mean the Sages and their disciples, who shut their eyes to every kind of temptation and devote themselves to Scripture to Mishnah and to Midrash of Halakot and Aggadot. Of these men the Psalmist says, "Blessed are they who see to it that their way be perfect in order that they may walk in the Lord's Torah" (Ps. 119:1), "For the way of God is most perfect, the word of the Lord most pure" (Ps. 18:31).

There are three kinds of men--all reasonably worthy--who are to be pitied: (1) men unlettered in Torah who put into practice precepts of right conduct and obey other precepts as well, who keep far from sexual transgression, larceny, and from any other kind of offensive behavior, but are to be pitied because they know no Torah (2) men who have come

to knowledge of Scripture and of Mishnah, but have no heart for either [and so are to be pitied]; and (3) Sages and their disciples who all but give their lives to Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash of Halakot and Aggadot and yet are to be pitied because they regret the sacrifices they have made for the sake of Torah. All three are meant by Isaiah in the words, "Hear, you who are deaf" (Is. 42:18)

This is like the parable of a king of flesh and blood who had many children and servants, many of them lame, many mute, many blind. Some had knowledge of Scripture. Some had knowledge of Mishnah. Some had experience in business negotiations. It goes without saying that the king had to have engagements and business with each of the three. Still, when he had to make an estimate he went for advice not to those who had Mishnah nor to those who had Scripture; instead he went to those who were sagacious. With regard to such men Isaiah says, "You who are deaf [to Torah] come and heed it" (ibid.). And with regard to the other two kinds of men mentioned earlier as reasonably worthy who are to be pitied, Isaiah says, "I will lead the blind by a road they knew not". (Is. 42:16).

Another interpretation: [of the blind and the lame] these are taken to be men who have come to possess knowledge of Scripture and Mishnah but are marred [blind and lame] by filthy ways. Yet it is difficult for the Father of mercy to cause even men like these to perish out of the world.

What differentiates between this midrashic interpretation and the others which see disabilities metaphorically rather than literally is that in this presentation, the disabilities represent types of people who are viewed sympathetically. We see that "the blind" need not only represent those who willfully keep themselves from seeing right, but may also be those who willfully keep themselves from seeing wrong. It shows a more multifaceted view than midrash usually does. This midrash says that not every scholar is meticulous in behavior, or happy with the way he has spent his life, that people who are righteous even though they are unlearned are praiseworthy, and that even though a learned person has fallen into bad moral character, God finds it difficult to cut him off,

because of his learning. Midrashic literature, for all its complexity and cleverness, is generally very single-minded in its message, and this midrash is an exception to the rule.

Isaiah 42:18-19

Example C - Midrash Tehillim Chapter 29

This midrash reflects upon an alternative meaning of the words *b'nei eilim*:

"A psalm of David: Ascribe to the Lord, *b'nei eilim*." Thus says Scripture, by the hand of Ezekiel, "Therefore will I save my flock and they shall no longer be a prey" (Ezek. 34:22). And what am I to do with them? David will shepherd them, as it is written, "And I will set up one shepherd over them and he will feed them, even my servant David" (ibid., 23) David said to Him, You are the deliverer and You are the shepherd, and thus he said, "Save Your people" (Ps. 28:9). The Holy Blessed One asked, do I keep them back from praying before me? "Ascribe unto the Lord, *b'nei eilim*!" Another interpretation: do not read *b'nei eilim*, but rather *b'nei eilem*, mute and deaf children. Children who are able to answer back to their God, but they do not answer back. And thus, Isaiah says, "Who is blind but My servants, and deaf as My messenger whom I will send? Who is blind like the one who received payment and blind like the servant of God?" (Is. 42:19) And also [the text] says, "And Abraham called the name of the place Adonai-yireh" (Gen. 22:14). He said, God, look, I had the right to answer back to you, and I did not; I made myself mute. God said, what did you have to answer back to? Abraham said, once you said to me, "Through Isaac your seed will be carried on", (Gen. 21:14) now you say to me "Take now your son". And just as I had the right to answer back but did not answer back, so, when my children return to the hands of sin, remember this time for them, and turn your face towards them, as it is written, "May the Lord's face be turned to you" (Num. 6:26), just as You turned Your face to me. And so it is written, "Ascribe unto the Lord, *b'nei eilim*".

Two aspects of answering back to God are juxtaposed in this midrash. The first is that the children of Israel have the opportunity to answer back to God, but do not avail themselves of it, and are chastised for it. The second is the story of Abraham holding his

tongue, and pretending to be deaf and mute rather than answer back to God when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac. The midrash begins by associating the word "flock" from Ezekiel with David the shepherd. God appoints David shepherd of this flock, but David puts the responsibility back on God. God says, "Is it I who keeps them from serving Me? Go ahead, blame it on me, "ascribe it unto the Lord". But David says that the *b'nei eilim* are really *b'nei eilem*, [or, *b'nei ilmim*, according to Braude's translation of the text] refusing to answer back to their God. Note that David himself has no such problem; he has as casual a badinage with the Almighty as if He were a neighbor and friend. The point of the first part is that the children of Israel are not using the opportunity they have. They are not the worshippers of a God who will strike them dead for talking back, but of a God who wants to hear them. Nonetheless, they make themselves as if deaf and mute to communication with God. That is Braude's interpretation, according to his English translation. However, it could be taken another way. In the second half of the midrash, as if in opposition to the first half, Abraham is found worthy for not talking back to God at a crucial time, when he is asked to sacrifice Isaac. Rather than state the obvious - God told him that Isaac would be his seed, therefore how can he sacrifice him - Abraham kept silent, a task so difficult that he had to "make himself deaf and mute" in order to accomplish it. And by virtue of that silence and obedience, Abraham can ask the Almighty to remember it when Abraham's descendants fall into sin, and save them by it. By doing so, Abraham is now answering back to God, but at a time that it is appropriate to do so. (See other versions of this midrash under Ps. 38:14, Examples A, B & C)

Thus, David's speech could be understood as a defense of the people - like Abraham, they could complain about their lot, but instead, they are like deaf and mute children, and do not complain. This would tie in thematically with the second part of the midrash. Or, if it is understood as Braude renders it, these children who do not avail themselves of the opportunity to talk back to God will be saved anyway, by virtue of their ancestor who

knew when it was appropriate to use his power of speech to talk back to God, and when it was necessary to make himself mute.

Isaiah 42:18-19

Example D - Bereshit Rabbati, Chaye Sarah, 33

"And Abraham weighed out to Ephron [the money he had named in the hearing of the children of Chet, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant]" (Gen. 24:16) As it is written, "I have said to the Lord, 'you are my Lord'" (Ps. 16:2). David said, Master of the Universe! I call to you, God, why don't you give me credit for good? The Holy Blessed One said to him, "The holy that are in the earth [they are the excellent in whom is all my delight]" (ibid. 3). To Abraham, who knew me first and kept the precepts of Torah, as it is said, "Because Abraham hearkened" (Gen. 26:5). And of him it is said, "Who is as blind as my servant?" (Is. 42:19). At the time that I said to him, "Get you from your land" (Gen. 12:1), Abraham said [to the Holy Blessed One] where should I go? And I said to him, "to a land that I will show you".(ibid.) "And who is deaf as the one I will send?" (Is. 42:19) this is Abraham. I sent him to Egypt and took his wife from him and he did not criticize afterwards. Who is blind like the one who received payment? (ibid.) I paid him with all the land, as it is written, "Arise, walk through the land [...for unto you I will give it]" (Gen. 13:17) and in the end, Sarah died and he did not have a place to bury her until he bought a burial place for four hundred pieces of silver and he did not complain afterwards, as it is written, "And Abraham weighed out" .

Once again, blindness and deafness are presented as positive traits, in this case representative of faith in God. Abraham goes 'blindly' into a land that God will show him, and does not complain of the trials he is forced to endure. As a side note, it is interesting that the surrender of his wife, which in the biblical context is Abraham's own idea as a means of protecting himself, is seen here as a submission to God's will. His willingness to pay for a burial site, rather than complain to God that he had been promised that all the land would be his, is a reflection, on a more mundane level, of the

same Abraham who did not answer back to God that Isaac could not be his seed if he was to follow God's instructions and slaughter him.

Isaiah 42:18-19

Example E - see Isaiah 35:5-6. Example E

Isaiah 43:8 - Biblical context

To bring out a blind people who have eyes and deaf ones who have ears.

This verse is very similar in context to the Isaiah 42:18-19, above.

Isaiah 43:8 - Midrash

Example A - Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter 16

This midrash is similar to Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter 14, (Isaiah 42:18-19,

Example B):

"Let there be brought forth people who are blind though they have eyes" (Is. 43:8)—that is, men unlettered in Torah who are obedient to the precepts of right conduct and to other precepts, and it goes without saying, stay far away from unchastity and any other kind of indecency. And let also be brought "They who are deaf, though they have ears" (ibid.): these may be even Sages and their disciples who give themselves utterly to Scripture, to Mishnah, to Midrash of Halakot and Aggadot [but still fail to comprehend them]. With regard to blind and deaf such as these, Isaiah quotes God as saying, "I have taken hold of your hand...to open the blind eyes, to bring out...them that sit in darkness out of the prison house" (Is. 42:7)

This midrash, like the one which precedes it, acknowledges that there may be deficient sages and righteous unlearned people. Their deficiencies—lack of knowledge and inability to correctly interpret the knowledge they have—are represented by the

qualities of deafness or blindness. The final verse from Isaiah gives hope that they will be cured of these figurative disabilities by being brought to Torah.

Isaiah 53:7 - Biblical context

He was oppressed though he humbled himself and opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb.

This verse is in the middle of Isaiah 53:1-12, the fourth "servant song". The sufferings of the one who Second Isaiah refers to as "the servant" are interpreted as "expiatory for the failings of all, and...the Exile is finally providential"³¹. Jewish interpretation of this section understands the suffering servant to be the people Israel. In Christian exegesis, this section is understood to apply to Jesus.

Isaiah 53:7 - Midrash

None found.

Isaiah 56:10 - Biblical Context

His lookouts are all blind, they do not know, dumb dogs who cannot bark; they lie slumbering, loving to slumber.

This verse from Third Isaiah is a condemnation of corrupt leadership. Rashi's commentary says that just as a blind lookout cannot warn the people of the approaching army, and a mute dog cannot bark at the approach of an enemy, a blind leader cannot see the fate that is about to befall the people, and a mute one cannot warn them. The prophet is using physical disabilities to represent deliberate moral failings. Mitchell Dahood, in the Anchor Bible commentary to Psalms, cites this verse as one where "*eilem*" should be understood in the sense of "bound", and renders the phrase "muzzled dogs who cannot bark".³²

³¹Carmody, Carmody and Cohn, p.184.

³²Dahood, Mitchell, Psalms I, 1-50, The Anchor Bible, p. 191.

Isaiah 56:10 - MidrashExample A - Yalkut Shimoni, Part 2, Number 465

His watchmen are all blind, they do not know, they are all mute dogs..." (Is. 56:10) And can there be a mute dog? Do our rabbis not teach that dogs are not mute? But it is a dog's pleasure to have a person throw to it a piece of bread that stops up its mouth [so that it cannot bark]. So were the watchmen of Israel. They were sighted, with vision like the prophets, but they "lay sprawling, they love to drowse". Another interpretation: They knew what would come to them in the future, at the end, and they made themselves mute and did not speak.

This interprets that "the watchmen", who, according to the commentators, are either the corrupt leaders of the people, or the false prophets, are not really disabled, either literally or figuratively. They are fully capable of doing the job that has been given them, but they make the choice not to do it out of laziness, and in order to pursue their own pleasure. The "other interpretation" would seem to indicate that, if they had the vision of prophets, they could see what would befall Israel (i.e., the destruction of the temple and the exile) and were either stricken mute by terror, or made themselves mute in order not to have to pass on the dreadful news.

Ezekiel 3:26, 24:27, 33:22 - Biblical Context

And I will make your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth that you shall be mute, and shall not be to them a reprover; for they are a rebellious house.

In that day shall your mouth be opened together with him that is escaped and you shall speak and be no more mute; so shall you be a sign unto them and they shall know that I am Adonai.

Now the hand of Adonai had been upon me in the evening, before he that was escaped came; and He had opened my

mouth against his coming to me in the morning; and my mouth was opened and I was no longer mute.

Interspersed throughout the book of Ezekiel, three passages—Ezek. 3:26, 24:27 and 33:22—make direct reference to the fact that Ezekiel is struck mute by God. These verses represent the beginning, reaffirmation and end of the muteness of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is the only named individual in the Hebrew Bible who is identified as mute. Ezekiel's muteness, however, is problematic. He is struck mute just after his call to prophecy, and, according to the chronology given in the book, he remains mute for seven and a half years, until the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel's muteness does not fit into the theme of examining rabbinic literature on the biblical verses which relate to deafness and muteness, as there is no rabbinic literature which deals with these three verses. Nonetheless, Ezekiel's muteness is a significant example of biblical usage of the word *ileim*, and there has been ample modern biblical research done in this area. An addendum to this thesis will examine the views of modern scholarship on the muteness of Ezekiel.

Micah 7:16 - Biblical Context

The nations shall see and be put to shame for all their might; they shall lay their hand upon their mouth, their ears shall be deaf.

From the last few verses of Micah, deliverance is promised to the people Israel in the time to come. The nations are chided, and Israel is comforted. In this text, speech and hearing are equated with power. The word "*g'vuratam*" in the first half of the verse is paralleled by "*oznaim techerashna*" in the second.

Micah 7:16 - MidrashExample A - Pesikta Rabbati 16.11

This excerpt is from a long passage very similar in message to the one cited above from Pesikta Rabbati 33.13 (Isaiah 42:18, Example A) but the two use none of the same prooftexts in common:

[So that she may be comforted] "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and proclaim unto her" (Is. 40:2)...The children of Israel sinned with the ear, they were smitten in the ear, yet they will be comforted by the ear. They sinned with the ear, "They stopped their ears, that they might not hear" (Zech. 7:11); they were smitten in the ear, "Their ears shall be deaf" (Micah 7:16); yet they will be comforted by the ear, "Your ears shall hear a word, saying 'this is the way'" (Is. 30:21). Note that in the biblical context, "their ears" refers to "the nations", and it is here being taken out of context to refer to "the children of Israel". There are many other examples of this midrashic style, where parts of the body are catalogued and proved with texts. Please see the comments on Isaiah 42:18, Example A.

Habakkuk 2:18 - Biblical Context

What profit the graven image that the maker of it has
graven it, even the molten image, and the teacher of lies;
that the maker of his work trusts therein to make dumb
idols?

Habakkuk 2:18 - Midrash

None found.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERPRETATIONS OF VERSES FROM THE WRITINGS

In the Writings, there are six verse-units which use the word "*ileim*" without "*cheresh*", three which use the word "*cheresh*" without "*ileim*", and one which uses both. Of these ten instances, eight occur in the book of Psalms, one in Proverbs and one Daniel.

Psalms 28:1 - Biblical Context

(Of David) Unto You, O Lord do I call; My Rock be not deaf unto me.

This psalm consists of two distinct but related parts. Verses 1-5 are a personal lament for deliverance from imminent death from illness, and verses 6-9 are a thanksgiving for recovery³³. Although there are other biblical instances where God is perceived as silent, this is the only one that uses the word *cheresh* to describe that perception.

Psalms 28:1 - Midrash

None found.

³³Ibid., p. 172.

Psalms 31:19 - Biblical Context

Let the lying lips be mute which speak arrogantly against the righteous with pride and contempt.

This psalm is a cry for help from illness, anguish at abandonment, and thanksgiving for rescue from both death by illness and slander by enemies. Dahood translates "*t'almana*" as "muzzled" rather than the usual "mute", or "silenced", deriving it from the first definition of 'L.M., "to bind" (See also Isaiah 56:10 - Biblical Context).³⁴ The verse in question petitions God's help against enemies who wickedly plot against the people Israel. When used in midrash, this verse is often a chastisement against *lashon hara*. The midrashic creativity is brought to bear upon the meaning of *lashon hara* - what it is that constitutes evil speech.

Psalms 31:19 - Midrash

Example A & B - see Genesis 37:7. Example A & B

Psalms 31:19

Example C - Shemot Rabbah 52:2 (similarly Tanhuma Pekudei, 10.)

In this midrash, Ps. 31:19 is the intersecting verse, and Moses is "the righteous" who is being sinned against with by the "lying lips", rather than God. In the version quoted here, the midrash is preceded by a short introductory homily which will introduce the intersecting verse, and reflect upon the meaning of "lying lips":

Another explanation of "And they brought the tabernacle unto Moses". It is written, "Let the lying lips be mute, which speak arrogantly against the righteous" (Ps. 31:19). What does the verse mean? If a man confesses on the day of Atonement, and another Yom Kippur dawns and he again makes confession of the same sins, then God says to him, "Let the lying lips be mute". What does *atak* mean? Things which have long passed, as it says, "*Vay'ateik* - and he removed from there to the mountain on the east of Beth El" (Gen. 12:8). "With pride and contempt"; for God says

³⁴Ibid., pp. 190-1.

to him, have you committed no sins this year, that you must boast "with pride and contempt"?

"And they brought the tabernacle unto Moses" (Ex. 39:33). As it is written, "Let the lying lips be mute which speak arrogantly against the righteous". This refers to Moses, at the time that the Holy Blessed One told him to make the tabernacle, he immediately said to them [the Israelites], "Take from yourselves an offering for God" (Ex. 35:5). And Moses busied himself with the tabernacle. R. Hanina said, six months he busied himself with the tabernacle, for three months they made it, and for three months it was folded up. Nevertheless, there were those who complained about him and said, behold the tabernacle is already built; didn't he say he would bring the Shechina among us? But the Holy Blessed One intended that the tabernacle should be raised in the month that Isaac was born, [or, according to Tanhuma, "in the month that Abraham, our father, received the news of Isaac's impending birth"] and as soon as that month came, the Holy Blessed One said to him, "On the first day of the first month you shall raise up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting" (Ex. 40:2). At that same time, the Holy Blessed One said, "Let the lying lips be mute" (Ps. 31:19). Those who were scoffing [at Moses] about the tabernacle began to carry it to him, and one by one came before him with his piece of it, and so it is written, "they brought the tabernacle to Moses".

The midrash provides a literal meaning to "they brought the tabernacle to Moses". The scoffers who had complained that Moses was not doing his job are humbled, and, apparently of their own free will, carried the tabernacle to him, piece by piece. Here, the word "*t'almana*" is probably better translated "silenced" than "made mute". The scoffers are not punished by being struck mute by an act of God, which we might have expected by the use of this verse. Once they have received proof positive that Moses was right and they were wrong, they simply shut their own mouths and become humble. Perhaps this is a subtle reflection upon the *terumah* offering, which is the offering mentioned in the prooftext Ex. 35:5. The scoffers' free will offering is their humility and willingness to serve. The introductory homily, beginning with the verse from Exodus, is there to serve

as an introduction to the intersecting verse from Psalms. Its point is that anyone who is arrogant enough to reiterate last year's sins, as if they have committed none since, is wasting God's time, and ought to be silenced.

Psalms 31:19

Example D - Midrash Tehillim, 7

Another interpretation [of Shiggayon of David]: A parable of one who was walking along a road and another one pursued him. He escaped from his hand and rescued himself, but was caught by another, and rescued himself again. He had just escaped from this second one when a third caught him. He began to call out, and help came and rescued him at once. And so it was with David. Saul pursued him, and the Holy Blessed One made a miracle for him and he escaped from his hand, as it is written, "And David fled and escaped". (1 Sam. 19:18) But after he escaped, Doeg stood up against him and said to Saul, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech, ...and he gave him provisions" (1 Sam. 22:9-10). But the Holy Blessed One asked Saul, didn't Ahimelech give David of My showbread? Doeg said, "and the sword of Goliath the Philistine, and he inquired of the Lord for him" (ibid.). And the Holy Blessed One said, and did I not provide it? At once, the Holy Blessed One stopped his mouth. And of this it is said, "Let the lying lips be mute" (Ps. 31:19), and behold he was saved from Doeg. Ahitophel came and he [David] began to cry out, "God, please turn Ahitophel's counsel to foolishness" (2 Sam. 15:31). And when God had rescued him from all three, he began to sing, "Shiggayon of David" (Ps. 7:1).

This midrash bears some resemblance to Exodus 4:11, Example C, the story of Moses' miraculous escape from the hands of Pharaoh. Like Moses, David is escaping the monarchy, from King Saul. God stops Doeg's mouth, just as God stopped the mouths of the courtiers of Pharaoh in order to save Moses. However, in this case, before silencing Doeg, God argues each point that he made to Saul, as if Saul were the judge and Doeg and God the prosecutor and defender of David. Only after God has refuted the two arguments against David is Doeg's mouth silenced.

Psalms 31:19Example E - Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 39

On the importance of not speaking evil:

David asked: Who wishes to have life in the world-to-come? And they replied: No man can have it. David replied: But it can be had and at a low price: When Scripture asks, "Who is the man who desires life?" (Ps. 34:13), the question means, 'who is he who wants life in the world-to-come?' And they asked: But how can one have such life? David answered, "By keeping your tongue from evil" (Ps. 34:14)—that is, from slander, of which it is said, "Stilled be the lying lips which speak against the righteous" (Ps. 31:19), lips which prevent you from ever saying, "Oh how abundant is Your goodness, which you have laid up for them that fear You" (Ps. 31:20).

The two verses from Psalm 34 are expanded upon in two ways. The assumption is made that "life" refers not to life in this world, but rather in the world-to-come. And keeping your tongue from evil is understood to mean specifically slander, spreading lies about the righteous.

Psalms 31:19Example F - Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer (commentary on Vayikra Rabbah, Metzora)

This language 'kills' two, the speaker and the one who hears it. From where in Scripture do we know about the speaker? As it is written, "Let the lying lips be mute" (Ps. 31:19), because the dead are mute. And from where in Scripture do we know about the one who hears it? As it is written, "In the transgression of the lips is a snare to the evil" (Prov. 12:13). And "snare" can only mean death, as it is written, "the snares of death confronted me" (2 Sam. 22:16).

Psalms 31:19Example G - Psalms 31:19 - see Lev. 19:14, Example B

Psalms 38:14 - Biblical Context

But I am as a deaf person, I hear not; and I am as one who is mute, who does not open his mouth.

This psalm also is an individual lament and prayer to be healed from illness. The common belief that illness was punishment for sin was an "...unexcelled opportunity to the psalmist's enemies, ever eager to slander, to speculate on the nature of his guilt"³⁵. The verse that precedes this one is "They also that seek after my life lay snares for me/And they that seek my hurt speak crafty devices and utter deceits all day". In keeping with the biblical context, much of the midrash and commentary on this verse look upon deafness and muteness as positive traits; a stubborn refusal to yield to temptation. This verse is especially used to explain Abraham's silent acceptance of God's request to sacrifice Isaac. Like Lev. 19:14 and Prov. 31:8, this verse is often used in the Talmud as the proof-text for defining the words *ileim* and *cheresh*, as explained in the introductory section, above.

Psalms 38:14 - Midrash

Example A. Ps. 38:14 - Tanhuma Vayera 4.39, Buber ed.

This exegetical midrash focuses on Genesis 22:1, "And it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham":

"And it came to pass after these things" (Gen. 22:1). And it is written in Scripture, "Though he go on his way weeping, carrying his seed bag, he shall come home with joy, bearing his sheaves" (Ps. 126:6). Even though he was crying in his heart, with his mouth he said, "Hineni". When? When he was carrying his seed bag, as it is said: "In Isaac, seed will be called to you" (Gen. 21:12). He shall come home with joy, bearing his sheaves", "And Abraham returned to his young men (Gen. 22:19). What caused him to receive his reward? Because he was silent and made himself as if

³⁵Ibid., p. 234.

mute, as it is written, "For I am as a deaf person, I hear not; and I am as one who is mute, who does not open his mouth." (Ps. 38:14), he had an excuse to say to God, yesterday you said to me, "In Isaac, seed will be called to you" (Gen. 21:12) and now You say slaughter him, but he said nothing, and was silent. Therefore, "he shall come home with joy, bearing his sheaves".

The midrash answers the question of Abraham's silence during the Akedah by telling us his feelings - that he was weeping in his heart, but doing God's bidding with his mouth. It proposes that Abraham's silence is self-imposed; indeed it was so difficult for him to remain silent that he had to make himself "as if mute" in order to stay faithful and keep from giving God this response: How could God have told him that he would have descendants "as numerous as the stars" and that "his seed would be through Isaac" if God is then going to ask him to kill Isaac before he has any children? But rather than break faith he remains silent, and does what God asks of him. There is brilliant use of word play and sound play to make the connection between Abraham during the Akedah and the verse from Psalms 126. The man of the Psalm (Abraham) carries ("*noseh*", a sound play on "*nisah*") his "*zera*" (Isaac), and he is weeping, but he will return (as Abraham returns to his men,) "*noseh alumotav*", bearing his sheaves, or, with the insertion of our verse from Psalm 38, "carrying his silence", for Abraham will be rewarded for his silence, as we see in variations on this midrash.

Psalms 38:14

Example B - Tanhuma Vayera 4.10 Buber ed.

The same story recounted in Example A is used here to make a different point in relation to Abraham's defense of Sodom and Gomorrah:

It is written, "I will not keep silent about his boastings, bold talk and his fair array of words" (Job 41:4). The Holy Blessed One said [this], so that the children of Adam will not say, we speak with the Holy Blessed One as Abraham spoke to Him, and He is silent for us. The Holy Blessed One said, no, I will not keep silent. But for Abraham

alone, I keep silent. Why? Because he kept silent for me, so I keep silent for him. When was Abraham silent? When I said to him, "In Isaac, seed will be called to you" (Gen. 21:12) and afterwards I said to him "Take now your son" (Gen. 22:2), and he kept silent for me, as it is written, "For I am as a deaf person, I hear not; and I am as one who is mute, who does not open his mouth" (Ps. 38:14), so I will be silent for him, even though he said harsh words, as it is written, "bold talk", but his words were pleasing to me. And what was "bold talk"? Look at what is written, "Abraham approached and said, will you destroy? [the righteous with the wicked?]" (Gen. 18:23). Abraham said before the Holy One, "Master of the universe, far be it from You to do this" (ibid., 25)

Although the same story is used here, it proves a different point. Here it is told from God's point of view, and the intersecting verse is from God's response to Job's complaint. The average human, even the righteous human, cannot call God to account for divine deeds and expect that God will keep silent for it. Only Abraham has the privilege of bargaining with God for the lives of the righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah. And how did he earn that privilege? By keeping silent and obeying God when he had an answer that he could have used. In typical midrashic fashion, the biblical chronology of events is not regarded as important. Although the Akedah occurs several chapters after Sodom and Gomorra, it is because of his behavior during the Akedah that Abraham is accorded the privilege of chiding God. God is telling Job, and with him all humanity, that no one except Abraham will ever have the same privilege.

Psalms 38:14

Example C - Pesikta Rabbati 40:6 (and similarly, Vayikra Rabbah 29:9)

[In the seventh month] R. Jeremiah said, he [Abraham] said, "Master of the universe, it is revealed before You that I could have given You an answer when You commanded me to sacrifice Isaac. If I had given you this answer, You would not have had an answer for me. If I had said to You: yesterday you said to me, "In Isaac, seed will be called to you" (Gen. 21:12) and now You say slaughter him. But I did not answer You, rather made myself as if deaf and

mute: "And I am as a deaf person, I hear not; and I am as one who is mute, who does not open his mouth." (Ps. 38:14) When Isaac's children will be judged before you on this day even if there are a number of accusers that accuse them, just as I silenced myself and did not answer You, so will You do thus to them." "And Abraham called the name of the place Adonai-yireh, as it is said this day, etc." (Gen. 22:14). What is meant by 'this day'? The same day [of the year that Abraham took Isaac for a sacrifice]. It was Rosh Hashanah. And the Holy Blessed One said, I will do this thing. And Abraham said, swear it to me. At once, [God said] "By Myself I have sworn" (Gen. 22:16). R. Berechya understood "*ba-chodesh ha shevi'i*" as 'the month of God's oath [*shevuata*]'.

In this version of the midrash, Abraham gets the last word after all. Placed here to explain "the seventh month", the story of Abraham being rewarded for his silence becomes the basis for God's mercy upon Israel on Rosh Hashanah. Abraham takes the opportunity to bargain with God for mercy for his descendants in a way reminiscent of how, in the biblical account, he bargained for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Midrash on the subject of the Akedah often has some element of comparison with the New Testament account of Jesus' dying for the sins of the world, and this midrash is no exception. Just as Jesus is said to have died for the sins of the world, to have made the sacrifice of his life so that generations to come would not have to suffer for their sins, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, and, when he found that that was not what God wanted, he used his considerable influence to bargain for God's mercy upon his sinful descendants on the day that God judges them. R. Berechya is able to play on the shin.bet.ayin. root of the word "*nishbati*" to make "*chodesh ha-shevi'i*" to mean "the month of God's oath", in order to further prove the connection.

Psalms 39:3 - Biblical Context

I was mute with silence, I held my peace, had no comfort;
and my pain was held in check.

This psalm is a lament, a prayer for healing. At the outset, the psalmist tries to refrain from complaining, but is unable to do so, and freely laments his state and prays for deliverance from his affliction.

Psalms 39:3 - Midrash

Example A - Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5a

If one has the opportunity to study the Torah and does not study it, the Holy One, blessed be He, visits him with ugly and painful sufferings which stir him up. "For it is said: I was dumb with silence, I kept silence from the good thing, and my pain was stirred up" (Ps. 39:3). The 'good thing' refers only to the Torah, as it is said, "For I give you good doctrine, my Torah, do not forsake its teaching" (Prov. 4:2).

This short passage reflects a theme similar to Example E on Is 35:5-6, where disabilities are seen as distancing oneself from Torah.

Psalms 39:10 - Biblical Context

I am mute; I do not open my mouth; because You have done it.

Please see notes on Psalms 39:3 - Biblical Context. Also, as in Psalm 31:19, Dahood understands the word "*ne'elam*" in this verse in the sense of the word meaning "to bind", and translates this verse as: "I was muzzled, opened not my mouth, Oh that you would act!"³⁶

Psalms 39:10 - Midrash

Example A - Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 119

"Let your mercies come to me, Lord, Your salvation according to Your word" (Ps. 119:41). This refers to the mercies of which you spoke to our ancestors. As it is written: "You will show faithfulness to Jacob, etc." (Micah 7:20). And Moses said, "You in Your mercy have led forth

³⁶Tbid., p. 238

the people which You have redeemed" (Ex. 15:13). So David said, "Let your mercies come to me". And what is the mercy that You will do for us? You will save us. And if you save us, I will have a mouth to speak and to answer to those who taunt me, even though now I cannot answer them, as it is written, "I am mute; I do not open my mouth; because You have done it." (Ps. 39:10). But it is Your will that I answer them, "Remove Your stroke from off me; I am consumed by the blow of Your hand" (ibid., 11). Thus it is said, "That I may have an answer for the one that taunts me." (Ps. 119:42)

This is a midrash of comfort and encouragement. Its thrust is different from the other midrashim presented here which offer comfort. Rather than comfort in the world-to-come, in this passage God's mercy is embodied by evidence of speech. These are the words the midrashist puts in David's mouth: "Now, I do not have the power of speech to answer my enemies, for God has made me mute, but my speech will be restored, not in the world to come, but in this world, and then I will triumph".

Psalms 56:1 - Biblical Context

For the leader, on *Yonat-eilem-rechokim*, A psalm of David, *Michtam*, when the Philistines took him in Gath.

This is the introductory opening to the psalm. Both *Yonat-eilem-rechokim* and *Michtam* are difficult to define, which allows for midrashic speculation. Dahood translates *Yonat-eilem-rechokim* as "The Dove of the Distant Gods", re-vocalizing the word "*eilem*" to "*eilim*", calling it "a doubtful translation of what seems to be the title of a song to which the music of this psalm was set".³⁷ Similarly, the biblical commentator Meiri identifies the *Yonat-eilem-rechokim* as a musical instrument whose sound resembles the cooing of a dove and which, presumably, was used to accompany the

³⁷Dahood, Mitchell, Psalms II, 51-100, Anchor Bible, p. 41.

musical setting of this psalm³⁸. Rashi's explanation is a version of the midrashic explanation in Example A, below:

Psalms 56:1 - Midrash

Example A - Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 56

"For the One that triumphed upon *Jonath-elem, rehokim*, a Psalm of David; *Michtam*; when the Philistines took him in Gath" (Ps. 56:1). These words are to be read in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere, "What god is there in heaven or earth that can do according to Your works and according to Your mighty acts?" (Deut. 3:24). Daniel also said, "He delivers and rescues and He works signs and wonders in heaven and in earth" (Dan. 6:28). According to R. Phinehas, David said this: God did more for me than for all others. And His triumph was greater than all other triumphs. What did God do for David? When David was waiting upon Achish [the king of Gath, to whom David fled to escape Saul], Achish's bodyguard who was a brother of Goliath the Philistine, brought charges against David. But Achish said: Your brother stipulated with David: if he prevails against me and smites me, etc.. And the stipulation was met, so you have no case whatever against David. And Achish let David go and did not have him executed. Was that not a great triumph? Therefore David said, "For the One that triumphed: upon *Jonath-elem*." A speechless dove, David stood and could give no answer to the bodyguard until the Holy One, blessed be He, put into the mouth of Achish the argument by which David was delivered from the brother of Goliath the Philistine. What is meant by *rehokim*? It means that David's mighty men were at that time far from him. And *Michtam*? Because of this incident, David became humble (*mach*) and upright (*tam*).³⁹

Although the individual words "*yonat*" "*eilem*" and "*rechokim*" can be understood intelligibly, they make no coherent sense when put together. Therefore, this midrash

³⁸Feuer, Rabbi Avrohom Chaim, Sefer Tehillim: A New Translation with Commentary, p. 706.

³⁹Braude, trans., Midrash on Psalms, p. 496.

weaves a story framework that is appropriate to the stated setting of the psalm, "when the Philistines seized David in Gath", and explains the use of the words in a logical sense.

Psalms 56:1

Example B - Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 10b

The image of a "silent dove" to describe one who is trapped without an alibi in the face of enemies is also applied to Tamar when she is confronted by Judah.

"And Judah saw her and thought her a harlot because she covered her face" (Gen. 38:15). Because she covered her face he thought her a harlot? R. Elazar said, she covered her face in the house of her father-in-law. R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yohanan, any bride who is modest in her father-in-law's house is meritorious, and from her will issue prophets and kings. How do we know this? From Tamar. Prophets, as it is written, "The vision of Isaiah son of Amotz" (Is. 1:1). Kings, from David, and R. Levi said: we have the tradition of our ancestors that Amotz and Amatziah were brothers.

"When she was found". This should read: "When she was brought forth". R. Elazar said, after her proofs [Judah's staff, et al.] were found, Samael came and took them away, and Gabriel came and returned them. We have in Scripture, "For the leader, on *Yonat-eilem-rechokim*, A psalm of David, *Michtam*" (Ps. 56:1). R. Yohanan said, at the time that her proofs were removed she became like a silenced dove. "LDavid *Michtam*" - and David issued from her, and he was "*mach*" [humble] and "*tam*" [perfect] to all. Another interpretation: that "*makkato*" [his wound] "*tamma*" [was pure], because he was born circumcised. Another interpretation: As in his youth he diminished himself in the presence of those who were greater than he in the study of Torah, so he also did in the time of his greatness.

Again, the rabbis are trying to interpret the words in the verse that do not make plain sense, and again, they use the image of the silenced dove to describe the righteous one who is left speechless. Here, they are glorifying Tamar as the example of injured innocence. The line "from her will issue prophets and kings" refers to the fact that King

David is descended from the union of Judah and Tamar, and the midrash also traces her descendants to show that the prophet Isaiah came from her line. The passage makes an association between the two unexplained phrases by using *Yonat-eilem-rechokim* to describe Tamar and *Michtam* to describe King David.

Psalms 58:2 - Biblical Context

Do you indeed speak as a righteous company? [or: Do you indeed decree dumb justice?] Do you judge with equity the sons of men?

The psalmist lashes out at his slanderers. The leaders of the people are corrupt, and he prays to God to punish them for their wickedness. The psalm ends with a plea that all on earth will recognize God's sovereignty.

The first half of verse 2 is very difficult to translate and interpret. The word "*eilem*" is understood in the JPS translation to mean "company". This translation is presumably derived from the biblical commentary of Ibn Ezra, Radak and Meiri, who relate it to "*alumim*", "sheaves", in this case, an assembly of the magistrates of the land. Rashi's commentary differs, and explains that David is demanding of his antagonists: "when you sought to convince Saul of my guilt, you spoke loudly and lengthily. Why have you suddenly fallen silent now that you can establish my innocence?"⁴⁰ Gesenius concurs with Rashi, also understanding the word in its meaning of "dumb" or "mute", and explains the verse as follows: "...do you really at length decree justice, which so long has seemed dumb?" However, he believes that the word might have been placed in error: "...it may be worth inquiry, whether "*eilem*" should not be dropped, having arisen perhaps from a careless repetition of "*umnam*"⁴¹. Both Dahood and Kraus understand the word "*eilem*" as a corruption of "*eilim*". Dahood translates this word: "literally rams, but

⁴⁰Feuer, p. 724

⁴¹Gesenius, p. 58.

metaphorically leaders, lieutenants" a reference to the leaders of the people⁴². Kraus understands "eilim" to mean "heavenly beings" and assumes it to be an indictment of those heavenly beings who have brought God's administration of justice to confusion and come under 'demonic influence'⁴³.

Psalms 58:2 - Midrash

Example A - Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 58 (First Paragraph)

The midrash interprets the word "*eilem*" in its meaning of "mute":

R. Isaac said: What is good policy for a man in this world? To make himself out as dumb in a time of conflict. Lest it be thought that a man should also remain dumb in debate on Torah, the Psalm goes on to say, "Speak you righteousness" (ibid.). Lest it be thought that he may then become arrogant towards others, the Psalm goes on to say, "Debate with kindness the children of men (ibid.)"⁴⁴.

In its first paragraph, the midrash makes a moral lesson of the verse by dividing the words differently, and interpreting it as three statements rather than as two questions. The verses are divided into three parts: "*Ha-umnam eilem*", "*Tzedek t'dabeirun*", "*Tishp'tu b'nei adam*". The phrases are arranged to set up parameters for correct behavior. In worldly disputes, it is best to act as if mute. But then you might assume that you should not take part in discussion of Torah, so the second part of the verse allows that you may "speak righteousness". And how do you temper righteousness with mercy? You "debate with kindness the children of men".

Example B - Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 58 (Third Paragraph)

"And David took the spear and the cruse of water from Saul's head" (1 Sam. 26:12). "And David called to the people and to Abner the son of Ner saying, will you not

⁴²Dahood, Mitchell, Psalms II, 51-100, p.56.

⁴³Kraus, Hans-Joachim, Psalms 1-59, A Commentary, p. 534.

⁴⁴Braude, trans., Midrash on Psalms, p. 503.

answer, Abner?" (1 Sam 26:14). He said to him, what do you have to answer? Behold, you said [to Saul] of the happening in the cave [David had entered and stolen Saul's spear and cruse of water], if he [David] had done anything to you we would have entered there and destroyed him. Here are the spear and the cruse of water. What do you have to answer? Will you not answer, Abner? He had nothing to answer, he became mute. Therefore he said to them, "Shall you be dumb towards righteousness?"

This paragraph rephrases the verse to make the point of David's righteousness and Abner's unwillingness or inability to acknowledge failure. Here, as in previous midrashim, power is represented by speech - the one who is prevented from speaking or unable to speak is in the position of lesser power.

Psalms 58:5 - Biblical Context

Their venom is like the venom of a serpent; they are like the deaf asp that stops her ear.

See notes about the psalm itself under Psalms 58:2 - Biblical Context. About this verse, Dahood says, "The point the psalmist wants to make is that the depravity of the congenitally wicked resembles the poison of a deaf adder, which cannot be charmed to permit the enchanter to remove its venom. The rulers and judges are so corrupt that no amount of pleading, however just and right, can dissuade them from the iniquitous behavior."⁴⁵

Psalms 58:5 - Midrash

None found.

Proverbs 31:8 - Biblical Context

Open your mouth for the mute; in the cause of all who are appointed for destruction.

⁴⁵Dahood, Mitchell, Psalms II, 51-100, p.60.

This verse occurs at the end of the book of Proverbs, just before the well-known "Woman of Valor" passage. It is part of a nine-verse section which begins "The words of King Lemuel; the burden with which his mother corrected him". There is no known historic King Lemuel; tradition identifies him as King Solomon, to whom the book of Proverbs is attributed, and these nine verses are attributed to his mother, Bathsheba. Although the verse is not used in aggadic midrash, it is understood in halachic midrash and in the Talmud as a proof-text for the legal principle that the court must act on behalf of one who is not capable of acting on one's own behalf. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides sums up the circumstances in which this precept may be used:

In the event the judge sees a point in favor of a litigant and finds that the latter is trying to bring out the point but is unable to formulate it, or the judge finds that the litigant is at pains to defend himself by a sound argument but that, agitated by fierce anger, the argument escapes him or finds that as a result of an inferior mentality the litigant is confused, he is permitted to assist him somewhat by giving him a lead, in compliance with the exhortation "Open thy mouth for the dumb" (Prov. 31:8). But this matter requires due deliberation, for the judge must not appear as one who "plays the part of an advocate".⁴⁶

Proverbs 31:8 - Midrash

Example A - Bamidbar Rabbah, 10:4

"Open your mouth for the mute" (Prov. 31:8). From this it can be inferred that if an heir or a purchaser has no advocate the court must act as his advocate. Another exposition: "Open your mouth for the mute" is said in reference to orphans who are unable to conduct their case and who, moreover, have no knowledge of their father's affairs. In such a case the court pleads their case for them.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Klein, Isaac, trans., The Code of Maimonides, "The Book of Judges", *Sanhedrin*, p. 64.

⁴⁷Freedman, Rabbi Dr. H., and Maurice Simon, eds., Midrash Rabbah Numbers, p. 354.

Example B - Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 3:8

R. Huna understood this verse in the same manner:

R. Huna, when he knew reason to acquit someone in court, and the litigant could not properly present his argument, he [R. Huna] would argue for the litigant on the basis of "Open your mouth for the mute; for the rights of all who are left desolate; open your mouth, judge righteously" (Prov. 31:8).⁴⁸

Daniel 10:15 - Biblical Context

And when he had spoken to me according to these words, I set my face towards the ground and I was mute.

This verse comes at the end of the Daniel's second vision of the angel. The rabbinic commentaries note that this is muteness out of fear of the angel, and Rav Saadia Gaon draws a distinction between the description of Daniel's first vision of the angel and this one. In the first, he fell on his face, and this time only 'bowed to the ground and was silent until the angel strengthened him'. The modern Hebrew commentary by Mossad Rav Kook agrees with the commentators that, "The muteness of Daniel is caused by the terrifying vision that silences him against his will, and just as his strength failed and he was unable to stand on his feet, so too was he unable to open his mouth and speak" until the angel touched his lips.⁴⁹

Daniel 10:15 - Midrash

None found.

⁴⁸Neusner, Jacob, trans., The Talmud of the Land of Israel, Sanhedrin, p. 116-7.

⁴⁹Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, Sefer Daniel, Jerusalem, 1994, p. 247.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMPARISON OF THEMES

There are several prevailing themes which recur throughout the midrashim on deafness and muteness that have been presented in the three previous chapters. The aggadic midrashim can be broken down into two broad categories--muteness and deafness, caused or healed by God; and muteness and deafness, caused by humans. The halachic midrashim express legal precepts based on a figurative understanding of the verse.

God-caused or God-healed Disabilities

Of the thirty-eight examples of midrash presented in the preceding three chapters, twenty-one of them involve God making people deaf or mute, or healing them of deafness and/or muteness.

God Heals Disabilities

There are nine midrashim in which it is promised that God will heal deafness and muteness, and with them, all the rest of the world's defects, in the messianic age. Eight of them are based on Isaiah 35:5-6, and one on Exodus 4:11. All of the midrashim based on Isaiah 35:5-6 that have been studied in this paper fall into this category, in keeping

with the eschatological theme of the biblical verse. Pesikta de Rab Kahana 5:16 (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. A) focuses more on proving that there were no *baalei mum* at Sinai, rather than the manner of their healing, and Pesikta de Rab Kahana 12:19 (Ex. B) focuses more on the healing itself. Both midrashim look back in time to Sinai as the pinnacle of the Jewish experience in this world, and forward to the world-to-come, in which the glory that was upon the people at Sinai will be restored. A world which has had its physical disabilities removed from it is one of the miracles of those times, but that is not the full extent of the message. The disabilities stand for the imperfections of the people Israel: the sins and the disobedience to God's law which are apparent throughout Israel's history, even in the moments after Sinai, but fell away at the time of the giving of the Torah. These imperfections will be removed again in the world-to-come. This metaphor is made clearer still in Midrash Shir ha-Shirim 4:7, (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. H) which refers only to the time-to-come. God speaks to Israel and says, "all of you is fair, my beloved, and there is no defect in you". That is the promise of the time-to-come; the whole people Israel will be cured of its defects, and stand in perfect obedience to God. Bereshit Rabbah 95:1 (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. C) brings in the element that faculties—presumably of a physical nature—will be restored to those who are resurrected, but only after they have been resurrected with their disabilities, as if to disavow any supernatural powers other than God's. This midrash and the one that follows it, Ex. D, emphasize that the serpent alone, of all that lives on earth, will not be healed in the time to come, as a punishment for *lashon hara*. Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 146 (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. F) takes a different tack completely, beginning by describing the physical affliction of blindness as a burden given by God, and changing to a criticism of those who are blind because they have knowledge but not faith. However, these, too, will be brought to the light of Torah in the time-to-come. Torah also plays an important part in Tanhuma D'varim 2, (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. G) where a very well-constructed midrash points out that Moses begins by being "not a man of words" and, in the end, says "these are the words", the opening sentence of the book of Deuteronomy.

His speech defect, the midrash tells us, is healed because he studied the Torah. Here we have the only example among the midrashim studied in this paper where it is stated that God gives healing directly through study of the Torah.

The theme is expressed slightly differently in Aggadat Bereshit, Chapter 70, (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. E) in which a transgressing Israel is described as "deaf to the Torah and blind to seeing the Shechina", but the promise is made that in the time-to-come, God will open the eyes and ears of this morally blind and deaf people and they will be able to hear and see. This midrash bridges from the theme of people deliberately making themselves deaf and blind for the purpose of evil (see below), to the theme of God correcting their transgressions, and thus healing the morally deaf and blind.

These eight midrashim are the only examples in this paper where the biblical context of the verse and the theme of the midrashim based on that verse are so consistent with one another. The midrash on the theme of God healing the mute and deaf that is based on Exodus 4:11 (Ex. 4:11, Ex. F) is just a short passage affirming that it is God, not Moses or any other human, who metes out all things, wisdom and knowledge along with deprivations, for God's own reasons, in God's own time.

God Heals Via the Same Means God Smites

Two midrashim, both from Pesikta Rabbati, (16.11 and 33:13), using two different prooftexts (respectively, Micah 7:15, Ex. A and Is. 42:18-19, Ex. A) go through a catalogue of many different items, including parts of the body, with which Israel sinned, and with which she will be comforted. The form used is "they sinned with...they were smitten in...they will be comforted with...", followed by a prooftext for each example. The goal of these midrashim is to comfort; that all that has happened to Israel for ill will also happen for good, that God will turn that which has given them sorrow into that which will give them joy. The form is somewhat similar to Otioth d'Rabbi Akiva, letter Pei, (Ex. 4:11, Ex. D) which also includes a catalogue of parts of the body, but

differs in theme. Bereshit Rabbah 95:1 (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. C) uses the phrase, "Come and see how all that the Holy Blessed One uses to smite in this world will be used to heal in the world-to-come", but does not go on to the catalogue, instead moving onto the single theme of God's healing.

God Deafens and/or Mutes the Enemies of the Righteous

The ubiquitous midrash of Moses fleeing from before Pharaoh, in which God renders Pharaoh's subjects deaf, dumb and blind so that they either fail to see Moses escape, or cannot respond to questioning about the event, is found in at least a dozen places in rabbinic literature. In many of its appearances, it follows other miraculous events, such as an angel taking Moses' place so that he can escape, or Moses about to be beheaded when his neck is turned to ivory (using the proof-text "Your neck is as a tower of ivory", Song 7:5) and the sword bounces off. Perhaps one reason for the popularity of this midrash is its element of ridicule. The picture conjured up by Pharaoh's minions stumbling around, unable to find their prisoner or communicate their knowledge of his whereabouts is a comic one. It provides a safe way to ridicule the enemies of Israel, and provides comfort at the same time. In a similar vein is Midrash Tehillim 7, (Ps. 31:19, Ex. D) in which David is escaping from Saul. Doeg, Saul's chief herdsman, speaks ill of David to Saul, and is taken on in argument by God. After God has refuted all of Doeg's arguments, God silences him, presumably before Doeg can reveal David's present whereabouts.

Bereshit Rabbah 1:5 and Yerushalmi Hagigah 2:1 (Gen. 37:7, Ex. A and B) present an entirely different picture of God silencing the enemies of the righteous. In these examples, the issue under discussion is *ma'asei bereshit*, that which might have come before God's creation of the world. Such matters are not to be discussed, and therefore anyone who does so is arrogant and must be silenced. Example B uses the second half of Psalms 31:19 to prove that anyone who discusses such matters becomes an

enemy, not only of the righteous, but of the Righteous One, of God. If God has withheld the knowledge of *ma'asei bereshit* from God's creatures, states the midrash, then it is not a topic to be thought about or discussed. Example A, unlike Example B, does not forbid thinking about such things, only discussing them publicly.

God Grants or Removes Speech as a Symbol of Power

The theme of speech as a symbol of power, and muteness, the involuntary loss of speech, as a loss of power, returns again and again as we examine muteness in biblical and rabbinic literature. Otioi d'Rabbi Akiva, letter Pei (Ex. 4:11, Ex. D) catalogues each part of the body and its function, along with a proof-text for each, to show that each is created for no reason other than to show God's glory. The catalogue ends with the faculty of speech. The word "*adam*" in the phrase "*mi sam peh l'adam*" is understood to mean Adam, the first human, the one to whom God gave the power to name all the animals. Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 119 (Ps. 39:10, Ex. A) is David's plea to God for the power of speech as a means to answer those who taunt him. "You will save us. And if you save us, I will have a mouth to speak and to answer to those who taunt me, even though now I cannot answer them". Speech here is a metaphor for the power and glory that is Israel. When God saves us, when Israel regains its glory, its muteness will end. This theme of the righteous but powerless being speechless carries into both midrashim on Psalms 56:1 (Examples A and B). In example A, from Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 56, David is "a speechless dove" in the hands of his enemies, until God gives Achish, king of Gath, the argument by which he saves David's life. In example B, from Sotah 10b, Tamar, about to be killed by Judah for harlotry, produces her proofs, Judah's staff and seal, only to have them stolen away by Samael, agent of Satan, and returned by the angel Gabriel. And in the moment when her proofs were removed, while she stood righteous, but without the proof of her righteousness, she is called "*yonah ilemet*", a silenced dove.

In a sort of reversal of the three midrashim above, Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 58 (Ps. 58:2, Ex. B) examines the enforced silence of one who is an opponent of the righteous, Abner, Saul's commander, is confronted by David with evidence that David had entered their camp and could have killed them all. David taunts him, saying, "What do you have to answer? Will you not answer?", but Abner "had nothing to answer; he became mute". The power role is now reversed, David is the one in power, and it is he who has the words; it is Abner who is speechless.

Shemot Rabbah 3:20 (Ex. 4:11, Ex. F) takes a different approach to the issue of speech as power. As Moses pleads with God that he is not the one who should speak with Pharaoh since he is "not a man of words", God lets him know that the words--the power--will come not from Moses, but from God. If Moses were eloquent, it might be thought that his power came from himself, but with his speech defect, his persuasive power can only come from God.

Human-caused Disabilities

Fourteen of the examples in the previous chapters can be classified as cases of figurative muteness and deafness that human beings bring upon themselves, or which are metaphors for characteristics of their nature. When the midrash speaks of human-caused muteness or deafness, it nearly always refers to a moral failing or virtue rather than a literal physical disability.

People Make Themselves Deaf and/or Mute for Evil

If, as we have seen above, the Torah is a means of healing defects, then conversely, one who chooses to live a life without obedience to the Torah brings defects upon oneself, as in the short passage from Berachot 5a, (Ps. 39:3, Ex. A) where the phrase, "I kept silence from the good thing" is interpreted to mean distancing oneself from Torah. Similarly, Aggadat Bereshit, Chapter 70, (Is. 35:5-6, Ex. E) begins with the

image of a transgressing Israel, "deaf to the Torah and blind to the sight of the Shechina" and ends by making a transition to the image of God resurrecting this morally disabled people and healing them (see God Heals Disabilities, above).

Yalkut Shimoni part 2, number 465, (Is. 56:10, Ex. A) compares the leaders (watchmen) of the people Israel to the "mute dogs" described in Isaiah 56:10. Unlike the biblical image, in which these watchmen are useless and helpless to save their people, the midrash regards them as lazy, as willfully ignoring the needs of the people. They have the same vision as the prophets, but choose to not use it, in order to make their lives easier.

People Make Themselves Deaf and/or Mute for Good

Perhaps surprisingly, there are many more midrashim in this study which show disability as a positive metaphor than there are those which see it as a negative. The first two paragraphs of Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter 14 (Is. 42:18-19, Ex. B) understand "the blind" to be those who don't follow temptation and "the lame" those who don't run after the forbidden. Unlike those in the previous category, they willfully shut off their senses not to the Torah, but rather to temptation and to that which has been forbidden.

There are four midrashim which depict or advise muteness as a means of avoiding *lashon hara*. Three of them are based on the verse, "Let the lying lips be mute..." (Ps. 31:19). Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 39 (Ps. 31:19, Ex. E) puts the words in the mouth of David, the alleged author of the Psalms, that life in the world-to-come can be had simply by avoiding evil speech. Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer (Ps. 31:19, Ex. F) claims that, "this language (*lashon hara*) kills two, the speaker and the receiver". Shemot Rabbah 52:2 (Ps. 31:19, Ex. C) shows an act of *teshuvah*, that those who spoke evil against Moses while waiting impatiently for the raising of the tabernacle just cease their evil speech, take up the tabernacle, and silently bring it before Moses.

Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 58 (Ps. 58:2, Ex. A) sets the parameters of correct speech. A person should act as if mute during a time of conflict, but this refers only to worldly matters. In matters of Torah, though, this advice does not apply.

Three midrashim—Tanhuma (Buber) Vayera 4:10 and 4:39, and Pesikta Rabbati 40:6 (Ps. 38:14, Exs. A,B and C)—tell the story of Abraham, confronted with God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham has in his power an answer, a refutation that would even have silenced God, but out of his great faith, he does not use it, but rather offers his son as a sacrifice. This act is so difficult for him that he has to make himself "as if mute and deaf" in order to accomplish it. This also ties in with the theme of speech being equivalent to power. Had he spoken, Abraham would have had the power to leave God speechless, but instead, he voluntarily makes himself powerless before God.

Two other midrashim praise voluntary silence in a similar manner. Bereshit Rabbati, Chaye Sarah 33 (Is. 42:18-19) also lauds Abraham above all others for his silence and restraint, but in a different matter. It begins with a dialogue between David and God, similar to the one between Job and God in Psalms 38:14, Ex. B. Like Job, David complains that God is not giving him enough credit for the good that he does, and God responds by saying that only Abraham deserves such treatment. In this case, Abraham deserves credit in the matter of the purchase the cave of Machpelah. God had promised Abraham the entire land, and yet, when he needs a burial site for his wife Sarah, he is forced to buy one from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels. Still, Abraham does not complain, but restrains himself out of faith. In this midrash, he is also commended for going 'blindly' from his homeland to a place that he only knows is "the land that I will show you", and being 'deaf' to criticism in the matter of having to go to Egypt and surrender his wife. In Bereshit Rabbah 84:1, R. Aha, reflecting on the meaning of the words "*m'almim alumim*", states that when Joseph was at the mercy of his brothers, his mother Rachel's silence stood up for him. Rachel had it within her power to reveal Laban's deception in giving Leah to Jacob for his first wife, but set her self-

interest aside and did not reveal it, and thus made it possible for the twelve sons of Jacob to be the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. This reminder to the brothers that without Rachel's silence they themselves would not have existed is what causes them to refrain from killing Joseph.

Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 29, (Is. 42:18-19, Ex. C) takes the expression *b'nei eilim* from Psalm 29, and changes it to refer to the children of Israel as "*b'nei ilmim*, mute and deaf children." The midrash can be interpreted either as criticism or praise for the children of Israel. Braude's English translation⁵⁰ interprets it as criticism; that the children of Israel, chosen of God, who have the opportunity to speak to the God that loves them, do not take the opportunity offered them, and make themselves deaf and mute. However, the midrash ends in the story of Abraham's making himself mute in order to obey God's will, and his wish that the merit he deserves for his silence be passed on to his descendants. This would seem to be a confirmation that the children of Israel are acting in the model of their ancestor Abraham, and are therefore to be praised for their silence and restraint, rather than criticized.

Disability as a Metaphor for Deficiencies of Character

Two of the midrashim in this study take a halfway position that is unusual in midrash. For all the complexity of its construction, midrashic literature usually takes a very clear position in its message. However, in these two midrashim we enter into a depth of personal analysis that is usually not found in midrash—people who are good in some aspects and evil in others. Here, in Eliyahu Rabbah, Ch. 14 (Is. 42:18-19, Ex. B), three kinds of people are represented as deaf: those who are morally good, but unlearned; those who are learned, but have no love for learning; and those who regret that they have given their lives for the sake of study. Deafness is not used as a consistent

⁵⁰Braude, Midrash on Psalms, p. 380-81.

metaphor for any one aspect; in the first instance it represents lack of learning; in the second, lack of heart; and in the third, regret for sacrifices made. In the last paragraph of this midrash, those who are learned but have bad morals are characterized as blind and lame, but, we are told, because of their learning, it is difficult for God to punish them.

Another midrash, also from Eliyahu Rabbah, Ch. 16, but in reference to another verse (Is. 43:8, Ex. A), characterizes "those who are blind though they have eyes" as the morally good who are unlearned; and "those who are deaf though they have ears" as those who study, but do not understand. These, too, are examples of people who are basically good, but flawed in some way. This view of a character flaw as a metaphor for a physical flaw is as close to a literal understanding of disability as midrash gets.

Legal Precepts Based on a Figurative Understanding of the Verse

All four of the halachic midrashim which have been studied in this paper establish legal precepts which are based upon a figurative understanding of the disability.

Bamidbar Rabbah 10:4 (Prov. 31:8, Ex. A) and Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 3:8 both interpret the verse "Open your mouth for the mute" to mean that if a person with a legal claim is not able to state his claim, whether because of ignorance of the law, excessive emotion, or inferior intelligence, it is the court's responsibility to argue on his behalf. This interpretation is closely tied to the aggadic interpretation that power is with the one who can speak, and the one who cannot speak is powerless.

In Sifra, Parashat Kedoshim, Parashah 2, (Lev. 19:14, Ex. A) the two halves of Leviticus 19:14 are interpreted with separate meanings. The first half of the verse, "You shall not curse the deaf", establishes the parameter that no one who is alive, even if deaf, is to be cursed. The dead, presumably, are not entitled to the same privilege. The second half of the verse, "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind", appears in many places in the Talmud and midrashic literature, and is interpreted to mean that one with knowledge of the law is not permitted to cause another, who is not aware of the law,

to lead another to sin. This interpretation is similar to the aggadic theme wherein ignorance of the law is seen as a disability.

CHAPTER SIX

INTERPRETATIONS OF MUTENESS AND DEAFNESS IN MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

Rabbi Moses Maimonides is one of the greatest voices in Jewish history. No one who was not as great and learned in Jewish law as he could have dared present that same law against a background of classical Greek philosophy. In his Guide of the Perplexed, Part III, chapter 10, he presents and refutes the arguments of the *mutakallimun*, the Muslim philosophers of his day, who believed that a property and its absence (in his translator's terms, "habitus" and "privation") were opposite entities, and that both negative and positive properties require an agent of creation. They believed, for example, that blindness and sight, death and life, were merely opposite properties. Therefore, according to their belief, it is God who makes blind, makes deaf and causes things which move to come to rest. Maimonides' reasoning is that only positive properties need an agent of creation, and that every negative property is only the absence of some positive property. Thus, according to him, blindness is caused by the absence of sight, not by a creative act of its own. He uses as an example a piece of wood propped up by a pillar. If a person comes and removes the pillar, the wood will fall to the ground because of the law of gravity. However, even though the person did not touch the piece of wood, one could say that he caused it to move. In the same way, we would say that

one who puts out a lamp at night caused it to be dark. This might make one believe that darkness is an existent thing, which, Maimonides argues, it is not. It is the absence of light. This is the relationship between non-being, or privation, and the act of an agent. If so, how is one to understand the verse Exodus 4:11, where God says to Moses, "Who has made man's mouth? and who has made man mute or deaf or seeing or blind?" The verse would appear to be in contradiction to what Maimonides has just stated, and in agreement with the *mutakallimun*. Rather, Maimonides says, the verse should be understood as follows, "who has created man as a being endowed with speech, or who creates him as a being lacking speech?" What is meant by "a being lacking speech" is one that is not able to contain the property of speech, that is, something is lacking in the body so that the property of speech cannot work in that particular body. Just as the person who turned out the light "created darkness", so if God creates a person with defective vocal cords, it could be said that God created a mute person, although, according to the author's argument, that is not the case at all. He summarizes this first part of the argument as follows, "according to every opinion, the act of an agent can in no way be connected with a privation; the agent can only be said to have produced the privation by accident, as we have explained. On the other hand, that which is produced by an essential act of the agent is necessarily a thing that exists whoever the agent may be, for his act can only be connected with an existent thing".

The next step is to understand that every evil is a privation and exists only as the absence of an existent thing. Thus, there is no entity such as "evil", but only individual evils which exist only in relation to the positive property of which they represent the absence. Accordingly, death is the privation of life, poverty the privation of riches and illness the privation of health. Secondly, evil is not created, but rather caused by the privation of the corresponding positive property.

Once this is understood, one can understand Maimonides' contention that God creates nothing that is evil in an essential act. All that is created by God is good, in that it is a positive property, a habitus. Evil is only connected with God through the fact that God brought matter into existence with the nature it has, and the nature of that nature is that matter is subject to privation. To summarize: God creates matter, which is existent. Because of the nature of that matter, it is sometimes not capable of carrying a particular positive property. The absence of that particular property is an evil, which only can exist as a negative of the positive property, and has no positive reality of its own. Thus, blindness is the absence of sight, muteness the absence of speech, deafness the absence of hearing, and death the absence of life. These evils are not intentionally created by God's hand, and, without the presence of the positive property of which they are the absence, they would not exist at all.⁵¹

Rabbi Moses Ben Nachman, the Ramban, born some sixty years after Maimonides, held him in high esteem, but did not always agree with his reasoning. In his commentary on the Torah, he comments upon the phrase "or who makes a man mute?" in the verse Exodus 4:11, and find the same problem Maimonides did; namely, if the absence of a property is negative and muteness is the absence of speech, how can the Torah speak of God "making" a person mute? Ramban finds his answer in the nature of the human soul. Elsewhere in his commentary to the Torah, commenting upon Genesis 2:7, Ramban explains that some philosophers say that the human has three souls, the "soul of growth, the soul of movement and the rational soul". This would seem to be similar to the division of the three parts of the human soul that was attributed by Maimonides to Galen the physician in the Eight Chapters; the natural, the vital and the

⁵¹Pines, Shlomo, ed., Moses Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed, vol. 2, pp. 438-440

psychic⁵². Ramban understands that this verse, referring to the creation of the human being, as having three parts, "The Lord God formed *adam* from the dust of the earth" - this is the soul of growth, "and breathed into him the breath of life" - this is the soul of movement, and *adam* became a living being - this refers to the rational soul. He notes that Onkelos translates the third part of the verse *v'havath b'adam l'ruach m'mal'la*, "and it became a speaking soul in man", and interprets this to mean that Onkelos recognizes the rational soul.

In his interpretation of Exodus 4:11, Ramban refers back to this concept of the "speaking soul". If the human soul was created as a speaking soul, then for those who lack the capacity of speech, their speaking soul must be blocked in some way. In this way it is indeed possible for God to "make muteness", by placing an "obstruction in the veins of the tongue". The creation of that obstruction in the path of the "speaking soul" would involve a creative act and, so, Ramban solves his difficulty with the verse.

⁵²Weiss, Raymond L., Ethical Writings of Maimonides, p. 61

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout all the literature studied in this paper—aggadic, halachic and philosophical—runs the thread that deafness and muteness, along with other disabilities, are to be understood metaphorically. Even in the biblical verses themselves, particularly in Isaiah and the Psalms, the meaning in its plain sense is often more figurative than literal. Deafness and muteness can mean ignorance or incompetence, they can mean restraint and self-control, submission to God or distance from Torah. Almost never do they mean deafness and muteness in the literal sense.

According to the legal literature overviewed in the first chapter, people who are deaf but not mute or mute but not deaf were considered to be fully competent. It is stated most clearly in Gittin 71a, "One who can speak but not hear is called *cheresh* and one who can hear but not speak is called *ileim*, and both are considered to be in possession of their faculties for all purposes." Only the deaf/mute is classified with the imbecile and minor, for the reason that there can be no understanding or communication with such a person. There are aggadic passages from the Talmud which show the competence of deaf-only and mute-only persons, although even these are told with the purpose of sealing a talmudic argument rather than as a personal testimonial to the competence of disabled persons.

The legal precepts based on the biblical verses under examinations, those which use the words *ileim* and *cheresh*, interpret the disabilities mentioned in the verses in a figurative manner, as symbols of powerlessness or ignorance of the law. The only exception among the cases studied is the instance in Gittin 71a, where Psalms 38:14 is cited as a proof-text for the definitions of *ileim* and *cheresh*.

The aggadic texts fall into a variety of categories, as outlined in Chapter Five, but again, none of them deal with literal disability, with the exception of the first paragraph of Midrash Tehillim, Ch. 146, (Is. 35:5-6, Example F), where the midrash plaintively describes the burden of those who are literally blind. However, even in this example, the focus of the second paragraph shifts to blindness as a metaphor.

The medieval philosophers Maimonides and Nachmanides view Exodus 4:11 as a philosophical problem as to the nature of negative and positive properties, and how it is possible for God to create a negative property. It is true that the philosophical material does treat the disabilities literally, but it does so in the sense of universal properties, rather than of personal afflictions.

The original question of determining the attitudes of rabbinic literature towards people who are deaf and mute cannot be answered, as there is not enough material which makes reference either to actual, rather than figurative, deafness and muteness, or to deaf and mute persons, rather than the qualities of deafness and muteness. In none of the literature studied here is disability taken in a literal or personal sense. Nevertheless, there are some conclusions that can be drawn.

The biblical context has some effect on the direction that the midrashic literature takes. All eight of the midrash found on Isaiah 35:5-6 relate to God healing the deaf and mute, and comprise eight of the nine midrashim found on that subject. Nearly all of the midrash on Psalms 38:14 is associated with Abraham's 'making himself mute' when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac. On the other hand, the midrash based on Exodus 4:11 runs through a wide range of themes. As a general rule, when the biblical verse indicates a

positive or negative attitude towards a disability, the midrash takes the same attitude. When the verse indicates a neutral attitude, a much wider range of midrashic interpretation is found.

Deafness and muteness, as well as blindness and lameness, are sometimes used as metaphors for moral shortcomings, such as disobedience to the Torah, but surprisingly, many of the midrashim studied saw disabilities as representative of positive attributes--self control, faith in God, restraint. Once again, whether the midrash saw the attribute as positive or negative had a great deal to do with whether there was a positive, negative, or neutral message in the biblical verse upon which the midrash is based.

The legal material emphasizes that one who can speak but not hear or hear but not speak are not exempt from the performance of *mitzvot*. The common assumption that deaf persons are not obligated under Jewish law probably arises from the difference between the meaning of the word *cheresh* in its halachic sense, meaning deaf-mute, and its general sense, meaning deaf-only.

It was originally posited that deafness and muteness were always given by God for God's own reasons. While this holds true for more than half of the examples cited here, deafness and muteness are often represented as attributes that humans bring upon themselves. In the case of God-caused disabilities, as cited in Chapter Five, God either gives or removes deafness and muteness. In the case of human-caused disabilities, they can only be given, never removed.

In many of the midrashim, speech is equated with power, and speechlessness with powerlessness. The one who is defenseless, at the mercy of others, is the one with no voice. Even in the midrashim which show muteness as the trait of self-control, such as those of Abraham making himself mute so as not to answer back to God, he is giving over his power to God.

Some further studies which might shed more light on the issue of muteness and deafness in rabbinic literature might include looking at literature about muteness and

deafness which is not necessarily connected to a biblical verse, and that which makes reference to mute and deaf persons, rather than muteness and deafness as qualities.

Another focus might be to look at legal material in chronological focus, including modern day responsa, to determine if there changes in attitude towards disabled people in the law grew in accordance with the understanding and acceptance of disabilities .

ADDENDUM

THE MUTENESS OF EZEKIEL

Introduction

The only named individual in the Hebrew Bible who is identified as being mute is Ezekiel. Unlike the biblical and rabbinic images of deafness and muteness studied in this paper, Ezekiel's muteness is neither metaphoric nor impersonal. Quite clearly, just after Ezekiel receives his call to prophecy, God tells him, in verse 3:26:

And I will make your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth that you shall be mute, and shall not be to them a reprover; for they are a rebellious house.

Once again, in Ezekiel 24:27, we are reminded of his muteness, and he is told that he will be freed of it when he receives the news that Jerusalem has fallen:

In that day shall your mouth be opened together with him that is escaped and you shall speak and be no more mute; so shall you be a sign unto them and they shall know that I am Adonai.

And when he does receive that news, in Ezekiel 33:22, his muteness is taken from him:

Now the hand of Adonai had been upon me in the evening, before he that was escaped came; and He had opened my mouth against his coming to me in the morning; and my mouth was opened and I was no longer mute.

The Problem of Ezekiel's Muteness

If taken literally, the muteness of Ezekiel causes numerous contradictions and textual problems. Ezekiel 3:26, the first passage which makes reference to Ezekiel's muteness, follows seven days after his first vision at the river Chebar, and directly after his call to prophecy. If he was literally mute from that time until the time that he received the news from the refugee that Jerusalem had been taken, then he was unable to speak for seven and one half years. However, if we follow the dates given in the oracles that Ezekiel delivers, ten out of the fourteen dated oracles occur during the time that Ezekiel was supposed to be mute. Moreover, in verses 3:16-21, Ezekiel is plainly told that he is responsible for relaying God's warnings to the people, and if he does not do so, he is as guilty of their sins as they are. Why would God charge a prophet with a solemn task and then remove his means of fulfilling it?

There are also problems with the verses themselves and their relationship to one another. Does 3:27 explain the two verses that precede it, or does it contradict them? If Ezekiel is to remain in his house and be mute, when is the "when I speak with you, I will open your mouth" that God is referring to?

The correlation of 24:25-27 and 33:21-22 is also problematic. The opening words of 24:27, "on that day", indicate that the refugee will come to Ezekiel on the very day that Jerusalem falls. It would have been physically impossible for anyone to get from Jerusalem to Babylonia in one day. However, despite verse 24:27, it took a year and a half from the fall of Jerusalem until Ezekiel receives the messenger. According to Jeremiah 39:2 and 2 Kings 25:2-12, Jerusalem fell in the fourth month of Zedekiah's

eleventh year. In 33:21, the news of the fall reaches Ezekiel in the tenth month of the twelfth year of the exile. The delay is not explained in the text.

There are basically three routes that can be taken to explain Ezekiel's muteness. It may be taken literally, or symbolically, or it may be explained as a literary borrowing from some other text. If one is to take it literally, the muteness must be seen as either conditional or intermittent, or its duration must be shortened by rearranging the placement of the verses.

Why Does Rabbinic Literature Omit Ezekiel's Muteness?

Ezekiel's muteness is not discussed at all in rabbinic literature. This is highly unusual, given the proliferation of midrashic thought on other verses from Prophets which deal with muteness. Even the medieval biblical commentators, who are characteristically intrigued by apparent contradictions in biblical text, and develop some of their most brilliant thoughts while explaining them through close textual reading, do not go into great detail trying to explain the contradictions in the text of Ezekiel. This rabbinic reticence towards the book of Ezekiel is explained by Elie Wiesel in his essay "Ezekiel" in the book Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible:

His [Ezekiel's] book is the only one of the Prophets that almost fell victim to censorship...some Talmudic sages maintain that there are passages in Ezekiel that are in conflict with the Torah. Others reproach him for dealing with forbidden mystical themes...Some critics are harsher, but more subtle. They would have preferred him to indulge in some sort of cover-up. About the sins of Jerusalem? No. About the heavenly secrets.⁵³

For several chapters at the end of his book, Ezekiel describes his vision of the Temple in Jerusalem. This vision conflicts with the description of the Temple given in the Torah. The Torah states that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons, but Ezekiel stresses

⁵³Wiesel, Elie, "Ezekiel" in Congregation, David Rosenberg, ed., p. 177

the responsibility of each individual, saying that "only the soul that sins will die". His visions are strange, disturbing and vivid, and there is nothing to compare to them in the books of his contemporaries. Wiesel's contention is that Ezekiel's charge as a prophet is to tell the people what he hears from God; not what he sees. His detailed descriptions of his visions make people uncomfortable, both among his contemporaries and among those who read him in later centuries.

The Rabbinic Commentaries

The general tone of the commentators towards Ezekiel's muteness is expressed in Rabbi David Kimchi's comment on Ezekiel 3:26:

"And your tongue" - It is as if your tongue cleaves to the roof of your mouth and you will be as if mute, as if to say that you will not speak to them or among them.

He then explains the phrase "I will open your mouth" in the next verse, 3:27:

"I will open your mouth" - As if to say, I will give you permission to speak to them.⁵⁴

Kimchi regards Ezekiel's muteness as symbolic rather than literal. For all the attention that the people pay to his warnings, he might as well be mute. The "*Metzoret David*" interprets the verse in nearly the same manner as Kimchi, and Rashi does not even choose to comment on that verse. However, the "*Metsudat Tzion*" of Jehiel Altschuler defines the terms in question, which Stephen Garfinkel interprets as an indication that Altschuler "seems to stress the physical likelihood of Ezekiel's descriptions".⁵⁵

Eliezer of Beaugency, a twelfth century exegete, is quoted and translated by Moshe Greenberg in his article, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness". This interpretation uses the

⁵⁴Mikra'ot G'dolot

⁵⁵Garfinkel, Stephen, "Another Model for Ezekiel's Abnormalities", p. 40n.

juxtaposition of verses 26 and 27 to explain how Ezekiel, who has been charged with transmitting the prophecy he hears from God, or being responsible for the sins of the people, can prophesy even though he is said to be mute:

*You shall be dumb so as not to go out and reprove them on your own initiative, but only if the elders of the people come before you...But when I speak to you, then you shall say to them: Thus said the Lord God; by doing this you shall have discharged your duty as a prophet.*⁵⁶

Eliezer understands the two verses to mean that Ezekiel may not take the step of going out to prophesy (Greenberg expands upon this theory with his explanation of the "reprover in the gate", explained below) but when the elders seek him out and ask him, he may tell them the prophecy that he has heard. It is not clear from this small section of commentary whether Eliezer believed that Ezekiel's muteness was literal or symbolic.

Chronological Theories

The book of Ezekiel is filled with very specific temporal references to historical events. Therefore, it is inevitable that scholars should try to assign a chronological order to all of Ezekiel's activities, and try to solve the problem of his muteness and his prophesying by reconciling the time frame.

Walter Zimmerli, the author of the two-volume work Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, regards Ezekiel's muteness in two ways. It is both symbolic of the sense of hostility towards the prophet by those around him, and also an actual inability to speak, a muteness imposed upon him by God. Nonetheless, this inability to speak could not have lasted from his call until the fall of Jerusalem, since the text clearly states that Ezekiel spoke during this time. Zimmerli contends that 3:25-27 is "a piece of late interpretation in the framework of the tradition of the prophetic word in

⁵⁶Greenberg, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness", p. 102

the circle of Ezekiel's disciples."⁵⁷ He regards verse 24:27 also as a secondary source. Of the three verses which refer to Ezekiel's muteness, only 33:22 is original, and in its correct chronological place. Thus, the actual muteness of Ezekiel falls upon him on the evening before the arrival of the messenger. In Zimmerli's words: "This statement...is best understood as follows. The state of rigidity and lost of speech "fell" upon the prophet in the evening, and in the morning, with the exciting event of the arrival of an eyewitness with his message, it left him. At any rate it is not necessary to conclude that the silence lay on the prophet for any longer."⁵⁸

Georg Fohrer (as translated and explained by Ellen F. Davis) believes that verse 3:26 was transferred to the beginning of the book from its original placement in chapter 24 in order to give it greater prominence. The reason he gives for the eighteen month gap from the known time of the fall of Jerusalem to the stated time that Ezekiel received the news is that the refugee had remained in hiding, and only returned to Babylon when living conditions became unbearable. Fohrer, like Zimmerli, accepts Ezekiel's muteness as a literal disability, but also sees a symbolic meaning to it, saying that, "God has temporarily ceased to address the refractory exiles with warnings and calls to repentance".⁵⁹

Philological Theories

Robert R. Wilson does not entirely disagree with those who believe that the text of the three verses which mention Ezekiel's muteness has been rearranged from the original. However, he points out that the redactor of the text, either Ezekiel himself or a prophetic school working after his time, placed the text in its present order for a reason. The section comprised by verses 22-27 is placed directly after verses 16-21 so that they

⁵⁷Zimmerli, vol 1, p. 161

⁵⁸Ibid., vol 2, p. 193

⁵⁹Davis, Swallowing the Scroll, p. 48

modify the call narrative. Wilson notes that in the call narrative Ezekiel is charged with being the "watchman" of the people, but he is not a watchman in the military sense. His warning is not one of danger from an enemy, but of a legal sentence that God has placed upon the people, one which is already decided and cannot be reversed. Keeping this in mind, he analyzes the section, especially verse 26, using parallel structure to understand the meaning of the phrase "*ish mochiach*". The first half of the verse parallels the second, so that, by his analysis, "you shall be mute" means the same as "you shall not be an *ish mochiach*". Given the legal sense of "watchman" as used in the call narrative, Wilson translates "*ish mochiach*" as a legal term, to mean not "reprover", but "intercessor". Ezekiel's muteness, according to Wilson, was that he could not reply to God on behalf of the people. Ezekiel was a one-way channel for God's word. He could only speak the words that God put in his mouth and pass the message on to the people; he could not plead with God on the people's behalf. The fate of Israel, that Jerusalem would fall, was already decreed. In this manner, Wilson solves the problem of why the prophet is not punished for the behavior of the wicked. If the destruction has been divinely pre-ordained, then Ezekiel is not neglecting his call, but is prevented from fulfilling it.

Moshe Greenberg disagrees with Wilson's translation of the word "*mochiach*", as "intercessor", claiming that "the term never carried that sense...but only 'reprover, arbitrator, or judge'⁶⁰. However, Greenberg also finds his answer to the paradox by the interpretation of a word. He interprets the word "*u'v'dabri*" in verse 27 not as "when I speak to you", but "whenever I speak to you", i.e., not referring to 33:22, when he will hear the news of the fall of Jerusalem, but whenever God calls upon him to prophesy. Thus, according to Greenberg, Ezekiel is mute for the seven and a half year time period except for the oracles he delivers in God's name. He cannot speak any words of his own, or add to what has been told him. In Greenberg's words: "He felt struck dumb by God for

⁶⁰Greenberg, Moshe, *Ezekiel 1-20*, The Anchor Bible, p. 102.

any purpose but to recite the laments and moaning and woe that he was charged to announce."⁶¹ Further, Greenberg draws a distinction between the action of other prophets and the actions of Ezekiel. The restrictions which are placed upon Ezekiel in verses 24 and 25 confine him to his house in a state of bondage. According to Isaiah 29:1, the *mochiach* stands in the gate. Ezekiel, on the other hand, as Eliezer of Beaugency stated, must stay at home and wait for the elders to come to him, and only then can he utter prophecy. In his 1958 article, Greenberg sees Ezekiel's muteness as a literal disability, intermittently removed by God for the sole purpose of allowing him to speak God's word to the people, but in his Anchor Bible commentary, written years later, he allows for a symbolic view as well. He says:

"the prophet's extreme despondency estranged him from and opposed him to his neighbors. He lost the capacity for normal human contact and felt particularly powerless to express himself to them concerning their misdeeds—to act as a reprover. Agreeably, God commands him to withdraw to his home and be silent—except for speaking forth divine oracles, the indispensable core of his calling."⁶²

Historical Theories

Ellen F. Davis has created a theory which regards Ezekiel's swallowing of the scroll at the beginning of Chapter 3, and his subsequent muteness some twenty six verses later, as a metaphor for the beginning of the dominance of written scripture over the oral tradition in Israelite culture. She bases her argument upon Wilson's proposal that the muteness functions within the call narrative "...as a figure for divine curtailment of the prophetic office"⁶³ and goes on to define that curtailment as the historical progress towards textualization of the divine word. Historically, the exilic and post-exilic era was the time when text was beginning to replace the spoken word. Davis goes on to

⁶¹Greenberg, Moshe, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness", p. 103.

⁶²Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20, p. 120.

⁶³Davis, Ellen F., "Swallowing Hard: Reflections on Ezekiel's Dumbness", p. 217.

elucidate the differences between the spoken and the written word. The immediacy of the spoken word and the potential for dialogue between the speaker and the listener is lost. With the written word, only the text speaks, and the communication is one-way. Although Davis does not say so explicitly, this seems to agree with Wilson's use of "*ish mochiach*" as "mediator" rather than "reprover", in which he describes Ezekiel as the one-way mouthpiece of God rather than an intercessor between God and the people.

Davis critiques Wilson by saying that his theory doesn't "uphold a primary connection between the prophet's call and his dumbness"⁶⁴, but the same can be said of her own work. Her premise is very innovative, and reflects a real need to study the effect of the process of changing from oral transmission to written text, but she does not make a sufficient correlation between Ezekiel's muteness and the written word. If written text is replacing oration, one would expect it to be a permanent change, but Ezekiel's muteness is lifted after the fall of Jerusalem. Davis accounts for this by saying that Ezekiel is "no longer constrained by the scroll he swallowed", that now new speech is possible. She alleges that the nature of his speech changes after the fall, but offers no evidence to prove the differences, and none is apparent in the text.

Theories of Literary Parallels

At the end of his article, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness", Moshe Greenberg cites an account by the historian Josephus in his work War, of an individual named Jesus son of Ananias who, for seven years and five months before the fall of city, went about the streets saying, "Woe to Jerusalem!", and would speak no other words. There are many differences between Jesus son of Ananias and Ezekiel, and certainly no evidence to connect the two of them, but Greenberg suggests that either Josephus heard the story from apocalyptic circles which had been influenced by the story of Ezekiel and adapted

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 219.

the time frame to fit, or it is a most remarkable historical coincidence. It is, as Greenberg calls it, a striking parallel to the state of mind imputed to the prophet Ezekiel.

Just as Greenberg points out the possible literary borrowing between Josephus' account of Jesus son of Ananias and Ezekiel, Stephen Garfinkel points out aspects of Ezekiel's muteness which indicate literary borrowing between Ezekiel and certain Akkadian texts. Garfinkel finds parallels between both Ezekiel's muteness and other of his 'abnormalities'—his paralysis by limb-binding, the image of a house as a prison—in three texts: "An Incantation of the Maqlu Type", a Mesopotamian incantation; the Šamaš Hymn; and the Akkadian poem, "Ludlul". He points out that the beginning of the section which is comprised of verses 3:22-27 begins with the invocation of "*yad-Adonai*", parallel to the "hand of a goddess, hand of a god" in the "Maqlu" incantation, which is followed by a reference to "seizure of the mouth" or "paralysis of the mouth", and references to both permanent and temporary muteness. Garfinkel goes on to speculate upon whether references to "binding the mouth" in the Šamaš Hymn suggest that the bonds placed on Ezekiel in verse 25 might be fetters for his mouth, teeth or tongue, making verse 25 a cause of verse 26. Given the that the root 'L.M. may mean either "mute" or "bound", this may in fact be what verse 25 suggests.

Garfinkel does not look for any evidence that Ezekiel's muteness and other restrictions might be literal, but rather wonders why the prophet would choose the genre of incantation texts to represent what he refers to as the prophet's "period of restricted activity."⁶⁵ He points out two possibilities. The relationship between the prophet and those to whom he prophesies is so filled with resentment and hatred that he wishes to evoke the adversarial relationship between the speaker and the demon in the Maqlu incantation text. Or, Garfinkel suggests, perhaps the following line from "Ludlul"

⁶⁵Garfinkel, p. 49.

expresses Ezekiel's loneliness and frustration in trying to obey his call: "My city looks at me evilly like an enemy; my people rage against me as if they were my foes."⁶⁶

Psychological Theories

The hallucinatory nature of Ezekiel's visions and the bizarre character of the restrictions placed on him invite consideration that Ezekiel might have been afflicted with some form of what we understand today as mental illness. Psychological diagnosis is a chancy business at best when it is being performed by a trained professional working with a living, physically present patient in an appropriate setting. When it is attempted by a biblical scholar upon a patient who has been dead for more than 2500 years on the basis of writings which are attributed to that person, we must be extremely cautious of drawing conclusions from that analysis. Nevertheless, scholars have attempted to explain Ezekiel's muteness as a function of an abnormal personality.

The German biblicist August Klostermann, in the late nineteenth century, wrote that Ezekiel's "dumbness was an intermittent physical condition associated with psychological disturbance."⁶⁷ Edwin C. Broome, in his 1946 article "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality" also made passing reference to his muteness as a characteristic of a psychotic experience.⁶⁸

A very extensive psychological explanation is given by David Halperin in his book Seeking Ezekiel. The entire work is an examination of Ezekiel's sexual pathology, and a chapter is devoted to Ezekiel's muteness. In dealing with the contradictions in the text, Halperin is searching for a solution to the which neither negates the reality of the muteness nor denies its symbolism. He describes Ezekiel's muteness as typical of conversion reaction - a physical symptom which occurs without discoverable

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Davis, Swallowing the Scroll, p. 48.

⁶⁸Halperin, David, Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology, p. 186

physiological cause. Halperin assembles an impressive array of medical evidence to show that intermittent muteness is a fairly common conversion reaction, and describes it as one which is brought on by stress and anxiety, and has symbolic significance. The intermittent nature of conversion voice disorders would allow for a literal understanding of Ezekiel's ability to prophesy during the period of his stated muteness between 3:26 and 33:22 without changing the time frame. The symbolic nature of the cause of conversion reaction allows for the lifting of the muteness at the time of the fall of Jerusalem.

Conclusions

If the book of Ezekiel contained only the imagery of grotesque restrictions and inexplicable visions, we would accept it as a work of literature. If it was simply a chronicle of the most traumatic time that ancient Israel knew, told from the perspective of a prophet in the community of the exiles, it would be a valuable historical and prophetic document. The fact that it contains both elements makes it more difficult to define. The specific dating invites historical comparison with other books of the Bible and with extra-biblical literature. The surrealistic visions and the strange and harsh chastisements make it nearly impossible to take at face value.

All of the scholars quoted here allow for the difficulty of interpreting Ezekiel's muteness, and nearly all of them allow for more than one possible interpretation. Zimmerli, Fohrer, Greenberg and Garfinkel, while giving their own theories as to how the muteness is to be interpreted also allow for a symbolic meaning which is similar in nature to that expressed by the rabbinic commentators. The muteness represents his emotional distance from the exiles to whom he brings the word of God, and their antipathy towards him and his prophecy. Wilson adds that the sentence has already been passed on them, the destruction of Jerusalem is preordained, and Ezekiel can only watch his words come true; they have no power to change. As we have seen in the earlier parts

of this paper, the ability to speak is often equated with power, and Ezekiel has no power here to change the fate that is about to befall the people.

Several of the writers pose the question of why God would call Ezekiel to prophecy in verses 16-21, and then remove, or severely limit, his means of fulfilling it almost immediately, but few of them answer it in a satisfactory manner. There is an echo here of Moses in Exodus 4:10 asking God why it is he, heavy of tongue and heavy of speech, who God appoints to be the spokesman who will save Israel. Moses is told that God is the One who decides who will be deaf, mute, lame or blind, implying that every choice God makes has reason behind it. Moses at least receives an implicit answer; Ezekiel does not ask why he is struck mute, and he is not told. Halperin does answer the question, but does so by removing God from the equation. If Ezekiel has a psychological illness, his muteness comes from within himself, not from God. Why would God give a person a prophetic charge and then almost immediately remove his means of fulfilling it? Elie Wiesel, who has written extensively about silence in other contexts, speaks of silence in Ezekiel. Although Wiesel does not mention Ezekiel's muteness, an inference can be drawn from what Wiesel has to say about Ezekiel's nature. At the conclusion of his essay, he returns to the issue of rabbinic reticence towards Ezekiel, saying:

A prophet is God's spokesman. The words he hears are those that he is duty-bound to communicate to his listeners. He repeats what God says, nothing else...Ezekiel echoed God's words. But he did something else: he used his own. To be more specific, he added his own to those he had heard from God. To put it bluntly, he said things that he should have kept to himself: things that had to do with his visions, things that are part of the *Merkabah* experience...God was kind enough to show him the chariot and its mystical creatures. But nowhere is it mentioned that God told him to tell others what he had seen. And yet Ezekiel did not hesitate to reveal *everything* he had seen. *That* was his mistake.

He did not understand that there are experiences that cannot be communicated by words. He did not understand the importance of silence--the occasional necessity for silence.⁶⁹

Ezekiel went too far. He exceeded his charge as prophet. And so, God restricted his speech, muzzled him, bound his tongue. Because Ezekiel didn't know when to keep his mouth shut, God shut it for him, opening it only to allow him to reveal that which God intended him to reveal.

⁶⁹Wiesel, Elie, "Ezekiel", p. 184-5.

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