

## Thoughts on Deuteronomy

Years ago when in college I volunteered at Perkins school, named for the blind, but in fact also had many deaf students. At recreation hours it was clear which students were blind and which were deaf.

The blind students played together in ways indistinguishable from those of sighted students. The deaf kids were often at each other, fighting, pushing, throwing things.

Why?

The deaf at that time were not permitted to use sign language.

As they could not hear, they could not express themselves comfortably nor comprehensively in spoken English.

The blind children had no verbal issues.

An argument need not have been physical to make a point.

Years later I worked with deaf actors who signed fluently.

My work with those artists differed in no noticeable ways,

save signed instead of spoken language, than my work with hearing actors.

those deaf actors expressed themselves in functional, beautiful, signed language..

Moses, whose speech was impaired - by 'uncircumcised lips', a term which I leave to your imagination and research,

had to have his brother, aaron, speak for him.

At least twice Moses, limited in speech, resorted to violence.

Once, killing a man who himself was engaged in violence,

and once breaking the tablets.. ..tablets given to him by God no less, as Moses witnessed Hebrews seeming to worship a golden calf.

Moses makes no attempt to argue either case first.

It looks as though those deaf kids' frustration, their hands,

their natural language, tied by school rules...

is analogous to Moses's uncircumcised lips.

Perhaps.

Or, perhaps, as some rabbis have suggested, Moses's speech was constrained so that he, a formidable palace figure, would not become

a snake oil salesman, encouraging those Hebrew slaves to swallow

what ever placebo nostrum as cure for their miseries.

Perhaps.

But perhaps something else is going on here

Try to communicate what one has never experienced.

Try to understand independence, community, home, let alone freedom,

Loss, if one has never known them.

Hard enough even if one has... but, surely,

Until experienced, these states of being do not have definition.

their existence is irrelevant, inexpressible, uncommunicable.

And then, exodus.

Those Hebrew slaves make it through the narrow place.

Opportunity is open.

Freedom is apparent, freedom has substance.

No longer slaves, they will lose all they have known,

and experience a new world: a new context.

The free Hebrews will build a new home, they will create a new community.

One in which they will be responsible for themselves. And each other.

And so today we begin reading the second telling

of the story of the monumental event, the exodus,

which has already happened.

Deuteronomy.

And how does deuteronomy begin:

These are the words which MOSES spoke

to all the Israelites across the Jordan in the wilderness

Having experienced the exodus, sensing freedom, Moses can now speak, eloquently, in verse and sermon, personally and publicly.

Perhaps this is one profound reason why we must see ourselves as though we were with those Israelites daring through the Nile bed, and standing at Sinai.

Only through experience can we truly relate, and relate to,

the moral and social significance of this existential story.

In fact, aviva zornberg, one of my favourite jewish interpreters, says that the exodus happened in order for us to tell its story..

As Moses does.

Among its most powerful lessons, The exodus is:  
Freedom of speech: a gift and an obligation

Welcome to Deuteronomy: To the freedom also To listen.

note:

the word SHEMA / Listen is repeated 92 times in the book of Deuteronomy  
Let us Listen to those words which Moses speaks NOW, even, also, to us.