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Torah Portion: Numbers 13:1 - 15:41
Sh'lach (Send)

Struggle with the Power of Words
by Amy Brookman

Shabbat shalom. The poet Ocean Vuong said,

"I think, even consciously, when I read or give lectures or when I teach, I lower my voice. I want to make my words deliberate. I want to take off the shoes of my voice, so that I can enter a place with care, so that I can do the work that I need to do." 1

I'm interested in noticing how the power of words is used to promote kindness or violence. In this wilderness story the scouts make a false report, inciting the people to violence.

And G!d meets that violence with violent words. In the midst of the dangerous confrontation Moses refers back to words of compassion from G!d's declaration in a previous encounter, by resetting them in the form of a prayer for mercy.

Numbers 14:17-20

Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying, 'Ad!nai! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children, upon the third and fourth generations.'

Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt."

And Ad!nai said, "I pardon, as you have asked. 2

Where does the inspiration for this prayer come from? Recall an earlier crisis point in the story, when Moses shatters the Tablets of G!d's words, upon witnessing how the people idolize the Golden Calf. Then G!d tells Moses to carve two tablets of stone like the first, and come up alone to Mt. Sinai the next morning, where G!d will inscribe the second set of Tablets with the words that were on the first. Before Moses goes to get the second tablets of stone ready, he asks G!d for some clarification.

Exodus 33:12-13

Moses said to Ad!nai, "See, You say to me, 'Lead this people forward,' but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me.

Further, You have said, 'I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.'

Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor. Consider, too, that this nation is Your people." 3

The next morning Moses experiences G!d's Presence, as requested, but only after G!d sets protective boundaries.

Exodus 34:5-9

Ad!nai came down in a cloud -- and stood with him there, proclaiming the name Ad!nai. Ad!nai passed before him and proclaimed" "!Ad!nai !Ad!nai a G!d compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin -- yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."

Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, "If I have gained Your favor, O my lord, pray, let my lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!" 4

Torah teaches that G!d, or the Source of Life, created the world with words, yet in this week's portion, even G!d struggles with the power and consequences of words.

Can you think of a time that someone used words, gently and carefully, to single you out by name, and helped you transform your anger into compassion?

In closing, just as we began, I'd like to share a few of Ocean Vuong's words, by reading a short poem. This poem's narrative voice inspires me to imagine what it might be like for G!d, or the Source of Life, to wrest life from death, and build coherent language out of chaos, and establish boundaries for human partnership with G!d, to help bring about teshuvah and mending in our relationships.

Essay on Craft by Ocean Vuong

Because the butterfly's yellow wing
flickering in black mud
was a word
stranded by its language.
Because no one else
was coming -- & I ran
out of reasons.
So I gathered fistfuls
of ash, dark as ink,
hammered them
into marrow, into
a skull thick
enough to keep
the gentle curse
of dreams. Yes, I aimed
for mercy --
but came only close
as building a cage
around the heart. Shutters

over the eyes. Yes,
I gave it hands
despite knowing
that to stretch that clay slab
into five blades of light,
I would go
too far. Because I, too,
needed a place
to hold me. So I dipped
my fingers back
into the fire, pried open
the lower face
until the wound widened
into a throat,
until every leaf shook silver
with that god
-awful scream
& I was done.
& it was human. 5

Notes & Sources:

1. Ocean Vuong, interview with Krista Tippett, On Being, Hope Portal Episode 4, June 19, 2025.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/ocean-vuong-hope-portal-episode-4/>

2. Sefaria, Texts, Num. 14:17:20, Hebrew to English translation: The Contemporary Torah, JPS, 2006.

<https://www.sefaria.org/Numbers.14.17?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

3. Ibid. Ex. 33:12-13

<https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.33.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

4. Ibid, Sefaria, Texts, Ex. 34:5-9.

<https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.34.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

5. Poem: *Essay on Craft* by Ocean Vuong / Poetry Foundation

Source: Poetry (July/August 2017)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/142852/essay-on-craft>