



Divine Communication

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Our *parashah* describes one aspect of the unique relationship between the Holy Blessed One, and Moshe. The final verse of the *parashah* describes how the Holy One and Moshe would communicate in the *mishkan* (tabernacle):

במדבר ז:פט

וּבָבָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֱהִל מוֹעֵד לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת הַקּוֹל מִדַּבֵּר אֵלָיו מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל אֲרֹן הָעֵדֻת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִּים וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו:

Numbers 7:89

When Moshe went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with God, he would hear the voice speaking (*middabber*) to him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Covenant, from between the two cherubim; and God (*lit. he*) spoke to him.

Professor Benjamin Sommer¹ offers four interpretations of the verb based on its unique grammatical form: *middabber*. These interpretations point toward four unique dimensions of

¹ I am basing myself on his article, "Tradition and Change in Priestly Law On the Internal Coherence of the Priestly Worldview," in Jeffrey Stackert and Joel S. Baden (eds.), *The Pentateuch and Its Readers: Essays in Honor of Baruch J. Schwartz* (2023), pp. 269-284, and especially pp. 271-274.



communication: reflexive, continuous, bidirectional, and beyond words. What tools for communication do the unique characteristics of the bond between God and Moshe—through the lens of Sommer—offer us for our own relationships?

1. Reflexivity

Rashi, in his commentary on the word *middabber*, explains:

רש"י שם

כמו מתדבֵּר, כבודו של מעלה לומר כן, מדבֵּר בִּינוּ לְבִין עִצְמוֹ, וּמַלְּאָה שׁוֹמֵעַ מֵאֵלָיו:

Rashi on Numbers 7:89

It is like *mitdabber* [the reflexive form], and it is said this way out of respect for the One Above. God was speaking to Godself, and Moshe heard it on his own.

Rashi offers a daring interpretation. He suggests that the verb form indicates a reflexive action—an action that turns back on the subject, something the speaker performs upon themselves. The implication is that the verb *middabber* reveals a remarkable phenomenon: the Holy One, as it were, is speaking to Godself, engaged in an internal dialogue, and Moshe is privy to this internal conversation. Moshe hears God beyond what God tells him directly. Their closeness is so profound that they become witness to the inner stirrings of one another's hearts.

2. Continuity

A close reading of the verse teaches us about an additional dimension of the conversation between Moshe and the Holy One: “When Moshe went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with



God, he would hear the voice speaking (*middabber*) to him.” It seems that the moment Moshe approaches the Tent of Meeting, he is exposed to a striking reality: the Holy One is **already** speaking with him. In other words, the discourse between God and Moshe is ongoing, constant, and uninterrupted; the event described in the verse is simply the moment when Moshe approaches—open and present—to take part in it.

We are used to thinking of God as distant and only rarely close, but the picture before us is of a continuous—not fragmented—conversation, an ongoing conversation which becomes a dialogue as Moshe approaches. What a moving description of a continuous flow that transforms into a dialogue the moment Moshe draws near. As though God is constantly talking to Moshe, who is a constant partner God shares with all the time—whether present or not.

3. Bidirectionality

The verse provides a comprehensive description of the encounters between the Holy One and Moshe: “When Moshe went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he would hear the voice speaking (*middabber*) to him ... and he spoke to him.” While the words describe a process—a sequence of events—the end of the verse is ambiguous: “and he spoke to him” (*vayedabber elav*)—who spoke: Moshe or the Holy One? Are these words a summary, meaning that Moshe heard the voice speaking to him as soon as he arrived at the Tent of Meeting in order to speak with the Holy One himself? Or do these words continue to refer to Moshe—the subject of the verse from its beginning—implying that Moshe would arrive in order to speak to the Holy One, hear the voice speaking to him, and then respond himself—“and he spoke”? Every interpretation of the verse points to the movement within it: a back-and-forth motion—one speaks, the other speaks; a desire for dialogue is met with the recognition of



dialogue. In this way, a two-sided, mutual, and shared conversation takes place between them.

The Ramban deepens this description of conversational mutuality, stating that the moment there was a desire for dialogue from either side, the other side responded:

רמב"ן במדבר כד:א

מֹשֶׁה לֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ מִתִּי מִדְּבַר עֲמוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "מִדְּבַר אֱלֹהִים" ... וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ מִתִּי יְדִבֵּר עֲמוֹ, כִּי לֹא הָיָה אֵלָיו עֵת קְבוּעָה לְדִבּוּר, אֲבָל בְּכָל עֵת שִׁיחָפֵץ מֹשֶׁה וַיְכַן לִבּוֹ לְדִבּוּר הָיָה מִדְּבַר עֲמוֹ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁאֵמַר: "עַמְדוּ וְאִשְׁמְעָה מִה יִצְוֶה ה' (במדבר ט:ח). וְכֵן בְּכָל עֵת שִׁיחָהּ לִפְנֵי יְתַעֲלֶה הָרָצוֹן ... וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת הַקּוֹל מִדְּבַר אֱלֹהִים.

Ramban to Numbers 24:1

Moshe did not know when [God] would speak with him, as it says, “speaking (*middabber*) to him” ... for there was no fixed time for speech; rather, at any time Moshe desired and directed his heart toward speech, [God] would speak with him, as he said: “Stand by, and let me hear what God will command” (Numbers 9:8). Likewise, whenever the Exalted One willed... “he would hear the voice speaking (*middabber*) to him.”

This was, in effect, a bidirectional conversation that took place whenever either party desired it—constant, immediate, and ongoing.

4. Beyond Words

A final suggestion for the meaning of the verb *middabber* is that this form indicates something that is “as if” or “similar to.” That is to say, there is no actual speech here, but rather “quasi-speech.” Thus, Moshe and the Holy One communicate in a manner that is **like** speech, but not actual speech.

The unusual form *middabber* in this reading serves as a metaphorical verb, teaching us that between the Holy One and Moshe, a form of communication exists that is outside of language and beyond speech. Perhaps the limitations of human language or human imagination leave us only with the word *middabber*—but what is actually occurring is a communication of an entirely different kind.

The Torah teaches us to “walk in God’s ways” (Deuteronomy 28:9). As we learn about the ways God and Moshe communicated they can cause us to reflect on our own modes of communication, and become an inspiration to our own human relationships.

May our lives be filled with relationships in which there is an opportunity for reflexivity—for our own internal conversation with ourselves; moments in which the stirrings of our hearts are revealed safely and openly to another; opportunities for connections in which a constant voice is heard whenever either side desires it, creating a continuous and unfolding conversation at all times; relationships in which we find ourselves in true dialogue, in mutual and bidirectional communication; and finally, relationships in which communication occurs beyond what is said in words, transcending that which can be expressed through human speech.

