

Parshat Va'eira
Our Heavenly Body
Nomi Kaltmann - Class of 2023

Classic Jewish thought implores us to care for our bodies in order to be able to undertake God's mitzvot. The human body is incredibly fragile. Our bodies act as hosts to carry our souls and Godly essence. However, illnesses and disabilities have the ability to significantly impair our ability to follow God's commandments and perform Mitzvot.

There is a saying that when you are healthy you often don't consider how incredible it is to have a body that works, and only when something is taken away from you do you realize how thankful you should have been for the basic effective functioning of your physical self.

The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 82a) records that Rav Huna implored his son Rabba to study with Rav Hisda, but his son was reluctant to do so noting that Rav Hisda only focused on 'anatomy and hygiene', which he considered to be trivial and unspiritual. However, Rav Huna immediately rebukes his son, proclaiming, "Rav Hisda speaks of health matters, and that is what you call non-spiritual?!" Taking care of our physical selves is a spiritual duty.

Instead of appreciating our bodies, they are often a source of shame. Many people make new year's resolutions and set personal goals focusing on weight loss, fitness or body adjustments. You only have to flip through any magazine in any country or language to see the many thousands of ads dedicated to helping us shape our views on our bodies and what we need to change about them.

While being thankful for the bodies we have been given seems to be something that many people forget to do until they face problems, the Parsha this week provides an important paradigm for how to relate to disabilities. In Parshat Va'eira, Moshe is very reluctant to speak to Pharaoh because he suffers from a speech disability. As the Parsha notes Moshe implores God, 'The Israelite's would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!'

The commentators are largely in agreement that Moshe suffered from some sort of speech delay or disability with Rashi noting Moshe suffering from a stutter and other commentators such as Abraham Ibn Ezra suggesting that Moshe was unable to form certain sounds. In response to Moshe's fear of facing Pharaoh alone with his speech disability, God appoints his brother Aaron to accompany him so that he would have the adequate support when required.

From my perspective, Moshe modelled a behavior that we can all implement into our daily lives. While our bodies may be fragile and having a disability may be seen as a potential impediment, Moshe demonstrates an ability to work around his physical limitations.

By reframing our thinking, we can use our bodies to the best of our abilities. We can look to Moshe as our guide and as an example of someone who was disabled, overcame his challenges, and achieved greatness. Moshe recognized that he needed assistance and was not ashamed to ask for it. By emulating Moshe, we can learn to appreciate our bodies, care for them, and use them to do God's will.



Nomi Kaltmann lives in Melbourne, Australia and comes to Maharat after earning her Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Politics and Jewish Civilizations from Monash University. She also holds a Masters degree in Legal Practice from the Australian National University. Nomi has worked for the Shadow Attorney General of Australia and as an advisor to the former Minister for Small Business in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Specialising in charities and not-for-profit law, Nomi has worked for the Australian Charities Commission. Nomi was one of the founding members of the Women's Orthodox Tefillah Group in Victoria. She has previously studied at Midreshet HaRova and completed a Masters research unit that looked at the current state of Australian family law and issues relating to Agunot and Gett.