

*Va'era*

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָיו יְהוָה לֵאמֹר: הֲאֵן בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא-שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעֵנִי פֶרְעָה, וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׂפָתַיִם.

Exodus 6:12 *And Moses spoke before Adonai, saying: 'Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who is of uncircumcised lips?'*



**We Welcome People Of All  
Abilities!**

In the second portion of Exodus, Moses continues to be portrayed as the reluctant leader. Last week Moses asked G-d, “Who am I to lead the people?” G-d assured Moses that he would serve as an agent for the Divine and that the task would not rest on his shoulders alone.

In Exodus 4:10 Moses explains his reticence; he has never been a man of words and he is slow of speech and tongue. Then, in this week’s portion, Moses again pleads for G-d to let him off the hook as leader, this time identifying the source as his speech difficulties. The words in the text are עֶרְל שְׂפָתַיִם and the most common translation is “uncircumcised lips,” interpreted to mean “impeded speech.” Commentators over the centuries have concluded that the most celebrated and elevated individual in the Torah is someone with a disability.

Looking to the leaders of modern Israel, there has been no shortage of individuals with physical challenges who rose to great prominence as leaders. Moshe Dayan, who lost his left eye in a skirmish in Syria in 1941, overcame his challenges to become a notable military leader and politician. Ilan Gilon, paralysed in his legs due to polio in his infancy, has represented the Meretz party in the Knesset since 1999. Moshe Matalon was injured in 1972 as a paratrooper in the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. Wheelchair-bound, he has competed in the Paralympics (leading the Israeli delegation in 2004 and 2008) and served as head of the IDF Disabled Veterans Organization. Matalon served in the Knesset from 2009-2013. Zion Pinyan was exempt from service in the IDF due to the effects of polio. He held a Knesset seat from 2009-2013 and worked on a committee to help bolster communities in the Galilee and Tiberias.

To understand Israeli culture and legislation concerning the treatment of persons with physical disabilities, one need only look to the Equal Rights of Persons with Disability Law introduced in 1998 and signed into law on January 1, 1999. This [sixty-one-page document](#) establishes a statutory framework to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. It includes protections such as equality of opportunity in education and employment, minimum wages and pay equity for equal work, and appropriate provisions for parking at the workplace. The list of NGOs that support persons with disabilities is also lengthy. A few examples accredited by the United Nations include [Wheelchairs of Hope](#), [Access Israel](#), and [Bizchut](#), the Israel Human Rights Centre for People with Disabilities.

Though statutory law and Israeli courts officially recognized Disability Rights in 1999, certain laws were in effect long before. The Amendment of Election Law, introduced in 1990, required that local authorities provide at least one disability-accessible polling station in populated areas.

Recent statistics indicate that approximately one million Israelis live with a disability, defined as a health challenge that interferes with their daily activities. This broad definition includes a wide range of disabilities, including physical limitations, mental illnesses, and behavioral disorders.

Mr. Ahiya Kamara serves as the Commissioner for Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities for the Israeli Ministry of Justice. He takes pride in the way that Israel continues to craft a more just society through advocacy for those with disabilities by providing better accessibility, legal support, and by ensuring community inclusion. Hearing impaired since childhood, Kamara has worked for many years as an advocate for those with disabilities.

Widening the scope of advocacy, Kamara has helped introduce laws that ensure that Israelis who work in any public sector, such as bank tellers, bus drivers, government clerks, Israel Defense Forces soldiers, teachers, restaurant owners, museum guides, and and so on are trained to relate with sensitivity, understanding, and respect when they encounter people with disabilities. Furthermore, businesses or organizations with more than 25 employees are obliged to work with an “accessibility consultant” to develop a strategy for adaptive disability services.

In the Torah, Moses serves as a biblical example of how people with disabilities can thrive and should not be held back from achievements of the highest order. The modern State of Israel upholds this value by enacting and continuing to revise laws and systems that protect and advocate for every segment of society, irrespective of an individual’s special needs or challenges. We learn from the Torah and Israeli political experience that disabilities are not an impediment to leadership.

### **Discussion Question:**

In 1990 the US Federal Government passed into law the first Americans with Disabilities Act. [Title 1](#) outlines the laws that protect persons with disabilities in the workforce. Compare the details of each country’s laws. Do both Acts seem drawn from biblical principles?

### **Additional Resources:**

"Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)Disability Rights." Association for Civil Rights in Israel ACRI. Accessed January 12, 2017. <http://www.acri.org.il/en/category/the-right-to-equality/disability-rights/>.

### **Bibliography:**

“Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law, 5758-1998.” *Sefer Hachukkim 2388 of November 19th, 2012* Accessed January 12, 2017. [http://www.aisrael.org/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/law\(1\).pdf](http://www.aisrael.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/law(1).pdf)

“Home.” 2017. Accessed January 12, 2017. <http://www.wheelchairsofhope.org/index.php/en/>.

"אתר נגישות ישראל - homepage." English. Accessed January 12, 2017. <http://www.aisrael.org/?CategoryID=1304>.

"Bizchut." Bizchut. Accessed January 12, 2017. <http://bizchut.org.il/en/>.

"Search ADA.gov." *U.S. Department of Justice, Employment (Title I)*. Accessed January 12, 2017. [https://www.ada.gov/ada\\_title\\_I.htm](https://www.ada.gov/ada_title_I.htm)