

Listening Beyond Words

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

"Dear God open my lips and my mouth will offer your praises."

This is one of many prayers that asks for God's help in expression. Words are often inadequate to the fullness of our feeling. In a famous passage, Flaubert writes of Madame Bovary, whose speech is pedestrian but whose feelings overflow: "Human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars."

When we talk to each other we must listen to the currents that run underneath the words. Moses stumbled in speech, but not because his feelings were slight; Bilaam was fluent but not because his heart was great.

In infancy a cry is our only means of expression. As we grow, despite our deepening capacities we may still feel as though there are no words more stirring and pointed than that cry, holding in it the full sweep of need. We pray to God to open our lips because we are jammed and jumbled inside and there is so very much to say.