

Kotzer Ruach; Definitions and Implications

Source Sheet by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

1. **Exodus 6:9** .א. שמות ו'ט'
 (9) But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.
 (ט) וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֵּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה: {פ}
2. **Rashi on Exodus 6:9** .ב. רש"י על שמות ו'ט'
 (1) BUT THEY HEARKENED NOT TO MOSES — they did not accept his words of comfort.
 (2) THROUGH ANGUISH (lit. shortness) OF SPIRIT — If one is in anguish his breath comes in short gasps and he cannot draw long breaths.
 (א) ולא שמעו אל משה. לא קבלו תנחומין: (ב) מקצר רוח. כל מי שְׁהוּא מצר, רוחו ונְשִׁימָתוֹ קְצָרָה, וְאֵינּוּ יָכוֹל לְהֶאָרִיד בְּנְשִׁימָתוֹ:
3. **Sforno on Exodus 6:9:2** .ג. ספורנו על שמות ו'ט:ב'
 מקצר רוח, for it did not appear believable to their present state of mind, so that their heart could not assimilate such a promise.
 מקצר רוח. כי לא נאמנה את אל רוחם, ולא נתנו לב להתבונן:
4. **Ibn Ezra on Exodus 6:9:1** .ד. אבן עזרא על שמות ו'ט:א'
 AND MOSES SPOKE. Israel did not hearken nor pay attention to the words of Moses, as their spirit was impatient because of the length of their exile and the hard labor which was recently put upon them.
 וידבר. ולא שמעו. ולא הטו אוזן לדבריו כי קצרה רוחם באורך הגלות ובעבודה קשה שהתחדשה עליהם:

5. **Ramban on Exodus 6:9:1** ה.
 BUT THEY HEARKENED NOT UNTO MOSES FOR IMPATIENCE OF SPIRIT, AND FOR CRUEL BONDAGE. It was not because they did not believe in G-d and in His prophet [that they hearkened not]. Rather, they paid no attention to his words because of impatience of spirit, as a person whose soul is grieved on account of his misery and who does not want to live another moment in his suffering even though he knows that he will be relieved later. The “impatience of spirit” was their fear that Pharaoh would put them to death, as their officers said to Moses, and the “cruel bondage” was the pressure, for the taskmasters pressed upon them and hurried them [in their daily task], which gave them no chance to hear anything and consider it.
- רמב"ן על שמות ו'ט"א'
 מקוצר רוח ומעבודה קשה לא
 בעבור שלא יאמינו בה' ובנביאו, רק
 שלא הטו אוזן לדבריו מקוצר רוח,
 כאדם שתקצר נפשו בעמלו, ולא ירצה
 לחיות רגע בצערו, מדעתו שירוח לו
 אחרי כן וקוצר הרוח הוא פחדם שלא
 יהרגם פרעה בחרב כאשר אמרו
 שוטריהם אל משה, ועבודה קשה,
 הוא הדוחק שהיו הנוגשים אצים בהם
 ולא יתנום לשמוע דבר ולהשוב בו:

6. **Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler** (from Sefat Emet on the Parsha; IJS Torah commentary) ו.

On the verse, “[But Moses appealed to the LORD, saying,] “The Israelites would not listen to me; [how then should Pharaoh hear me,] a man of impeded speech!” (Exodus 6:12), we have already explained that because the Israelites couldn’t hear, therefore Moses was “of impeded speech.”

Moses is to bring a message of salvation to a downtrodden people, promising them that God will—finally—deliver them. After hundreds of years of slavery, generations of oppression and trauma, redemption is nigh. But the people could not hear it. It seems that the Israelites were too deeply mired in their pain of the moment to take in future-oriented promises. They could not fathom a reality other than the one they (and their grandparents and their grandparents) inhabited, and so they blocked out even mention of an alternative. They simply could not metabolize what seemed so flagrantly false.

“Speech was in exile so long people were not prepared to listen to the word of God... Because listening requires total openness, as is written, “Hear, lass, and note, incline your ear: forget your people and your father’s house” (Psalms 47:11). This is the essence of exile (galut) even now: to not be able to open oneself and forget the vanities of the world so that the heart might be open to hear the word of God without foreign thought... (Sefat Emet, Va’era 1899)”

In contrast to the plain meaning of the text, which indicates that people would not listen to Moses because he could not speak, the Sefat Emet suggests that Moses could not speak because the people could not hear. That is, he could not communicate with a people so very shut down and unavailable to his messaging. With no a priori buy-in, no openness to taking in new things, Moses, the harbinger of hope, was effectively silenced.

Exile is not a place. It is a condition of being in which we are closed down, shut off, unable to receive, unable to activate our faculties of imagination. It is the state of being stuck, folded into ourselves, unable to open to the presence of another. To exit exile, then, we must render ourselves vulnerable, capacious, receptive. Redemption and revelation demand radical openness, an inner quieting so that we might hear the sounds of the others who call to us. Such an emptying, the Sefat Emet assures us, will return us to deep breath (*neshima*) and to our expansive souls (*neshama*). In humbly listening for the whispers of revelation, we simultaneously attune ourselves to intimations of the Divine.

7. **Rabbi Yael Shy** (from *The Silent Center of Things*; IJS weekly Torah commentary)

In my experience, this is an apt description of despair. Despair is different from sadness, fear or even suffering. One can experience any of those difficult emotions or states of being and still have space in the mind and heart for the possibility of the unknown future – of things changing. In despair, one believes that there is only one answer you need, and it is no. Nothing will change. There is no hope and no possibility. Despair, even though it is desolate and hopeless and filled with pain, is actually an alluring resting place when you are suffering. There are no unknowns. There is no possibility of disappointment, and none of the hard work required to keep the aperture of the heart open to the possibility of transformation. Despair offers a false sense of protection against future pain by closing us down in advance, locking all the doors, and wallowing in our suffering...

How do we emerge out of this place of extreme narrowness? One clue comes from Ramban. He argues that *kotzer ruach* indicates the Israelites' impatience of spirit, "as a person whose soul is grieved on account of his misery and does not want to live another moment in his suffering even though he knows that he will be relieved later." If impatience leads to despair, practicing patience and trust is our path out of it. In the Torah, God backs off of the Israelites. God does not demand anything of them at that moment. They can't hear the declaration of commitment and love that God is promising, so God starts the process of offering signs and signals that slowly peel away the layers of doubt and closed-off-ness on the part of the Israelites. Trust slowly emerges in the place of doubt, melting the despair and hopelessness.

"Watch," God seems to be saying, "I'm going to take care of you. You will be delivered. You will get out of this. All you have to do is be patient, and trust." There will be more asked of the Israelites very soon. The Israelites will be told to pack up everything they have, and leave everything they know, for an unknown future on the other side of the sea. But for now, in the slow movement from slavery to freedom, the Israelites are just asked to show up, to witness God's love for them, and to slowly open up to the possibility of change.

8. **Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg** (from Va'eirah: Heart Problems; IJS weekly Torah commentary) .n

Their minds and hearts have become chronically constricted in response to the physical and spiritual suffering they have been bearing....

When we've been abused or hurt, a habitual response can be to take on the identity of victimhood. The Israelites take on the identity of slavery rather than seeing it as an impermanent condition. When we can't imagine that the suffering can change or end, we take it on as a part of us. To always see oneself as a powerless victim is a dangerous state of mind and heart. We close ourselves off from the places in our lives and in the world where we might seek hope and liberation. We resign ourselves to a chronic sleepiness that masks the truth that we do possess the energy to get up and change things. When we numb out as a way of coping with our own pain, we also find it harder to notice when we are hurting others. As permanent victims, we can find ourselves rationalizing our own persecution of others. When our hearts harden against our own pain, we no longer feel the world's pain

9. **Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt** ("Not the End of the Story") .n

Kotzer ruach means that we were short of breath in body and soul. Our breath and our spirits were in *tzuris*, suffering. Literally at this point in our story we are in *Mitzrayim* (hear that same *TzR* / תצר sound there?) But this isn't about geography, it's about an existential state of being so constricted that we couldn't even hear the hope that things could be better than this.

And... Our Torah story comes this week to remind us that kotzer ruach is not the end of the story. Being in dire straits -- unable to breathe, unable to focus, hearts and souls unable to hope -- is not the end of the story. On the contrary, it's the first step toward liberation.

In our Torah story, our *kotzer ruach* causes us to cry out. That's where this week's Torah portion begins: with God saying hearing our cries and promising to help us out of narrow straits.

I don't actually believe that God "needs" us to cry out before God takes notice of us. I think it goes the other way. *We* need to cry out, because that's the first step in opening our hearts to God -- to hope -- to the possibility that things can get better.

Karpas is the spring green we dip in salt water during the seder. The salt water represents the tears of our enslavement, the tears of feeling stuck in *kotzer ruach*...Our tears can water new growth of heart and soul. Our heart's cry now is the first step toward the changes that will lead to liberation. Then we will fulfill the words of the psalmist: "Those who sow in tears will reap in joy." *Kein yehi ratzon*.

10. **Rabbi Barbara Thiede** (from "Kotzer Ruach – Finding Breath (and Life) in Torah") .1

In last week's portion, Vaera, we read that children of Israel could not hear what Moses had to say. They suffered, the Torah tells us, from a *kotzer ruach*. Sometimes our translations read: "their spirits were stunted." *Ruach* can mean spirit of course. But it can also mean "breath." The root for *kotzer*, *kuf-tzaddi-reish* can suggest "shortening." In Psalm 102:24 we read that YHVH *kitzar yamai* – YHVH "shortened my days." The Israelites were short of breath, the very essence of life.

The root for *kotzer* also evokes powerlessness, decline, distress, anxiety of spirit.

Combine *kotzer* with the Hebrew word *ruach* and you might translate the words as a "depression of soul."

YHVH, who is breath – life itself – sees, hears, understands that the people are short of breath, short of life. No wonder YHVH asks Moses to make sure that these people learn God's name – it is the name of that which sustains them, that which seems lost to them. How else can they return to life and regain their freedom?

But when our spirits have been crushed, when we are short of breath and life, it is hard to speak, to find the words that will free us.

We are living in such times. There is no need to point out the obvious barrage of speech and the onslaught of action that appears to be sucking the very life out of the world.

we are, right now, living in *mitzrayim*, the narrow space where spirits are crushed, where the burden of pain makes it impossible to catch our breath and speak.

Our task, as we read, is to make liberation real. For us and all who depend on us.

Name them. Find them. Offer them the breath of life through your own speech and action.

How else can we cross the water and reach Sinai?

11. **Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild** (the occasional thoughts of a working woman rabbi in England) .8"

Literally the words "kotzer ruach" mean shortness of breath or limited spirit and could mean, as Rashi understands it, that they were physically finding breathing hard, presumably because of the severity of the work they had to do. But I find Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's translation as "impatience" more satisfactory. They did not listen to what Moses was saying because they were operating in a different emotional environment, they were focussed only on the here and now, they could not see

beyond the next task to be achieved. Short termism was all they could manage. The Jews were slaves – and had been for some generations – in a land named Mitzraim, “the doubly narrow place”. They had become habituated to their surroundings and their lives, they had learned how to survive, and that skill was all about having narrow horizons themselves. They could not possibly imagine a future, let alone a future in a different world where they would be quite different themselves. The generation of the exodus were emotionally and intellectually locked down, they suffered failure of imagination as well as failure of faith, their one imperative was to keep their heads down and keep doing what they had always done. They would allow themselves no awareness outside this behaviour. They just wanted to survive but it seems they no longer knew why it was important to survive or what they were surviving in order to become.

12. **Joshua Rabin** (from Times of Israel; “Kotzer Ruach and the Pedagogy of Hope”) .2’

Hope is the value that teaches us to move forward and aim higher simultaneously and in equal measure. Turning back to this week’s parasha, Moshe was at a crossroads with the Israelites because they could not imagine a God interested in saving them, and thus all they wanted was for their enslavement not to get worse. When Moshe comes onto the scene, the latter gets worse, and the former seems too far away to imagine...

God is Moshe’s agent of hope; when things do not work out the first time, God gives Moshe new strategies to ensure that the second and third times are different than the first. In education, Vicki Zakrzewski of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California at Berkeley argues that teenagers can be taught how to hope by constantly encouraging learners to set clear goals, develop multiple strategies, and stay motivated. We must do these things because, as Zakrzewski notes, “Success... requires creative ways to overcome these obstacles, not avoiding them altogether.”

