

Vaeira, 5781
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Arduous work devoid of meaning has a distinct way of making a person feel deflated and broken. When we find ourselves ensnared in what seems like a purposeless and hopeless situation, we may begin to feel drained of our רוח -- a Hebrew term that describes both our breath and our spirit -- in a state of physical and spiritual burnout, with drastic ramifications. Such was the condition of the Jewish people at the onset of Parashat Vaeira (6:9):

“ולא שמעו אל משה מקצר רוח ומעבדה קשה”

And they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of breath and difficult labor.

Rashi vividly depicts the Jewish people's distress from their enslavement, describing: כל מי שהוא מיצר רוחו ונשימתו קצרה ואינו יכול להאריך בנשימתו *breath become shortened, and he cannot breathe deeply.*

The Jewish people were overwhelmed, and their physical and spiritual shortness of breath, or קוצר רוח, prevented them from receiving words of truth. This situation is as true for us as it was for them. Proper Divine service requires that we be extremely protective of our emotional and cognitive faculties, as burnout can obstruct a person's capacity to connect with G-d and fulfill his or her purpose in this world. In the typical workload of many modern occupations, there can be unending demands from bosses, coworkers, and clients, and one must always remember this value. If one is not careful and deliberate about how he or she goes through each day, one can rapidly enter a state of קוצר רוח. Even if one does not presently work in an occupation, one is still susceptible to such breakdown, as nothing drains a person's spiritual battery more than futile ruminations and hopelessness -- whatever the cause.

The Tanya (ch 26) powerfully notes the effect that our mentality can have in the service of G-d by drawing an analogy to a wrestling match between two people. Even if one of the wrestlers is physically stronger, if this wrestler is mired in a state of burnout and emotional heaviness, he will fall to his physically weaker opponent who conversely feels inspired, invigorated, and motivated. In the same way, the Tanya writes, one can only succeed in the spiritual battles of life if he or she carefully maintains an alacrity that stems from joy and breadth of heart. This is much harder to do when people feel constricted and squeezed by their circumstances.

In light of the Jewish people's response to Moshe, it would seem that there is great spiritual value in learning to consciously and preemptively try to expand our own רוח, in both a physical and spiritual sense. On a literal level, catching our breath through deep and deliberate breathing has been known since ancient times to serve as a powerful tool to quiet the body and the mind, a necessary prerequisite for our Divine service. Indeed, a Jew is exhorted to live life with כוונה -- deep, focused, intention-- in all that he or she does, whether in the Shul, the kitchen, or the office. As modern man faces a world that is increasingly accelerated, connected, and

dismissive of the sanctity of private and quiet time, a devout Jew must find ways to remain grounded and clear of mind in order to cultivate a genuine relationship with G-d. Deep breathing offers one such tool. Many have likely experienced the benefit of taking a few minutes before each prayer service to sit quietly and breathe slowly, as opposed to jumping right into a rapid recitation. Modern neuroscience also supports the myriad of benefits that regular focused and slow breathing, through its activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, can offer on the well-being of both body and mind.

On a more spiritual level, focusing on our breath may also help prevent a state of קוצר רוח by awakening an acute awareness of G-d's constant presence and love in our lives. More than any other action that we perform, breathing is the most overt manifestation of our vulnerability and dependence on G-d's ceaseless support: from the very first moment we enter this world until the last moment when we leave, G-d ventilates us. Our breathing reminds us that there is not a minute, whether while awake or asleep, whether while performing Mitzvot or performing Aveirot, that G-d is not accompanying us and sustaining us: ומפרנס אותנו תמיד בכל יום: ובכל עת ובכל שעה. It is noteworthy that the air we breathe is the most necessary, imminent, and ever-present element of our survival, and yet we notice it less than almost anything -- just like G-d Himself. While secular meditation's emphasis on focused breathing as an end unto itself may sometimes feel cold and sterile, a Jew's breathing has the capacity to cultivate hope and strength, reminding him or her of G-d's constant love and attention. In this sense, G-d becomes the ultimate משיב הרוח -- Restorer of רוח-- in every sense of the word.