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### Waist Deep in the Big Muddy

In September of 1967 Pete Seeger appeared on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour to sing a song he had just written called Waist Deep in the Big Muddy. The song tells of an army platoon fording a stream while carrying heavy equipment. The sergeant is convinced that the stream can't be crossed at that location, the water is just too deep, but the captain rejects his fears:

“All we need is a little determination;  
 Men, follow me, I'll lead on.”  
 We were, neck deep in the Big Muddy  
 And the big fool said to push on.

I'm reluctant to spoil the ending, but I don't think it will ruin the song if I tell you that the captain drowns in quicksand and the sergeant is then able to turn around and rescue the remaining soldiers. Everyone listening to the song understood it was an allegory. Indeed, the final stanza of the song makes this explicit:

Well, I'm not going to point any moral,  
 I'll leave that for yourself  
 Maybe you're still walking, you're still talking  
 You'd like to keep your health.  
 But every time I read the papers  
 That old feeling comes on;  
 We're, waist deep in the Big Muddy  
 And the big fool says to push on.

The Big Muddy represented the Vietnam War, and the Big Fool was none other than President Johnson. Corporate executives kept the song from being aired in September 1967 and it was only after a public outcry that Pete Seeger was invited back on the Smothers Brothers show in February 1968 where he sang the song again and this time it was heard.

Wisdom and folly, strength and weakness, perseverance and self-destructive stubbornness are all opposites. But calling them opposites belies a way in which the very same behavior can be a mark of either foolishness or wisdom with no easy way for an observer to determine one way or the other. Just one month from today we will celebrate Purim and read about King Ahashverosh. Rav and Shmuel, the Talmudic sages, could not figure out who Ahashverosh was. One said he was a foolish king. One said he was a competent king - clever like a fox. They had the same evidence that we have, Megillat Esther, one read the story and saw a foolish king, easily manipulated by those around him. One read the story and saw a clever king, securing his reign as those around him struggled for power and influence.

In truth, a leader can be uncertain if she is wise, displaying strength through perseverance, or if she is being foolish stubborn and weak. The clearest example of this sort of uncertainty is Pharaoh.<sup>1</sup> He pursued his fleeing slaves into the middle of the sea. In a display of strength and will and fortitude he sent his army to its destruction. The *Yam Suf* was the original “big muddy” and Pharaoh was the original “big fool,” pushing on, all the while thinking that he was being strong and wise.

וַיֹּאסֶר אֶת־רֶכֶבּוֹ וְאֶת־עַמּוֹ לָקַח עִמּוֹ:  
וַיִּקַּח שֵׁשׁ־מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב בָּחוּר וְכָל רֶכֶב מִצְרַיִם וְשָׁלֹשׁם עַל־כָּלֹ:

And he harnessed up his chariot and called his people to join him. And he took six hundred charioteers - the best from his cavalry and each chariot had an officer riding as well.

Think of the sense of agency that Pharaoh felt. Think of the sense of power that Pharaoh felt. Think of the sense of relief at finally doing something to avert a national crisis. When Pharaoh’s courtiers had asked:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִה־זֹּאת עָשִׂינוּ כִּי־שָׁלַחְנוּ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַבְדָּנוּ:

What have we done to send away the Israelites from serving us?

Pharaoh had a response.

וַיַּחֲזֶק ה' אֶת־לֵב פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּרְדֹּף אַחֲרַי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו'

“God strengthened Pharaoh’s heart and he pursued after the Children of Israel etc.”

According to Maimonides, as we have discussed before, God strengthened Pharaoh’s heart by doing nothing whatsoever to prevent the natural psychological impact of Pharaoh’s own decisions and actions from their inevitable consequences. Pharaoh experienced his final calamitous pursuit into the *Yam Suf* as an act of bravery, as the actions of a leader with a strong heart, not as the foolish stubbornness of someone up to his neck in the “Big Muddy.”

This happens every day. Men and women make decisions without the self knowledge to know the difference between strength and weakness, or between wisdom and folly. And, more importantly, it happens to each one of us, in the spheres of our lives where each of us has the capacity to exercise leadership. And, most importantly of all, this dynamic unfolds in the narrowest and most particular sphere, in the hidden and quiet corners of our soul, as we seek to improve ourselves and refine our character. Once we overcome the initial inertia necessary to undertake the brave process of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, self examination, the greatest risk is self-deception wherein the stagnation of the soul and the erosion of our character is masked by the sensation of bold advance and productive change.

While I was in Yerushalayim last week I was able to pick up a copy of a short Sefer called *Tzav Ve'Zeruz*, written by Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Hassidic rebbe of Piasezna. Rabbi Shapira is perhaps most remembered for his book *Eish Kodesh* which was written in the Warsaw Ghetto, buried in a milk can as the ghetto was liquidated, and discovered after the war and published. But Rav Shapira was an accomplished author, famous before the war for a series of books that he wrote about religious education, child development, and pedagogy. Some of these books have subsequently been translated into English and there are a small but devoted group of posthumous students of Rabbi Shapira who study his teachings and keep his books in print.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi David Ebner first brought this connection to my attention during a *sichab* at Yeshivat Hamivtar in 5758.

*Tzav VeZeruz* is a detailed guide for those who choose to embark on the courageous path of self-improvement. “If only,” Rabbi Shapiro opens, “we could live two lifetimes. One full lifetime to complete our spiritual growth and character development, and then a second lifetime to experience the world as mature and moral adults.” Of course this cannot be, and so we have no choice but to do the best that we can. In order to set realistic goals for self improvement, Rabbi Shapira recommends writing down a description of the person you wish to become in a month or in a year and holding yourself accountable to that vision of yourself. The goal should be ambitious but attainable.

The risk, inherent in this exercise, or any other method of self-improvement and personal growth that you undertake, is self-deception. Rabbi Shapira writes:

“When it comes to examining if one has grown and progressed, or if one has declined and regressed during the year, one should examine one’s will - *ratzon*.” That is to say, scrutinize and evaluate your decisions and commitments. However, Rabbi Shapira warns, “be certain to distinguish between one’s commitments and the blessings that one gives to oneself.”

There is nothing wrong, indeed it is quite a good thing, to bestow our blessings on others, to wish and pray for the good of others. But we must not confuse our good wishes for ourselves with an actual determined commitment. Rabbi Shapira explains that *ratzon*, determined commitment, requires effort and struggle and action. “A Jew may go to bed at night,” Rabbi Shapira writes, “and bless himself or herself that in the morning they will be righteous.” That is so very different from an actual commitment to become righteous.

Pharaoh blessed himself. He felt strong in his heart and confident in his decisions. But his strength was truly weakness. His considered strategy was truly folly. What he perceived as determination was really his stubbornness and profound weakness. He lacked the power to change from a course of action that was so very self-destructive and so very destructive to so many others.

We should resist that tendency and commit to discrete actions so that our values will be expressed in the real world and so that those values will actually characterize who we are and who we wish to grow into becoming. We need to take the time to think through our actions instead of just persisting in whatever course we have set for ourselves.

In contrast to Pharaoh, think of Avraham, who doubts even God’s own promised blessing out of a fear that he might not deserve that blessing in the future. His was a life lived in constant growth and constant productive self-scrutiny. Think of Devorah, celebrated in today’s Haftarah. She had a secure identity as a Jew loyal to the Torah and its mitzvot that she had cultivated through years of serving as a judge. That experience, providing halakhic guidance, rendering decisions on how to apply the Torah to new and unfamiliar circumstances, and making peace between an individual and his neighbor, prevented her from being content to affirm her values in a vague and passive way. When Jews and Judaism was threatened, she took concrete action and inspired others to do the same. Think ahead one month to Purim, where we will read of how Mordechai confronts Esther by reminding her that silent passivity in a moment that needs action will doom her and her family to irrelevance forever.

Healthy self-confidence should lead us to think positively about who we are and what we might achieve. Unhealthy deception, bestowing empty blessing on ourselves, as Pharaoh did when he marched to the Sea, will prevent us from ever achieving any of our goals. We will never struggle if we believe that wishful thinking will be sufficient. We will never grow without the agitation and dissonance that can come from knowing we are not yet the people we wish to become.

Each of us are waist deep in the Big Muddy. There is some quagmire into which each one of us is sinking. It could be a destructive relationship dynamic. It could be a toxic complacency that is preventing us from making positive breakthroughs in our devotion to mitzvot. And, Rabbi Shapira teaches, it could even be the wishful thinking that leads us to confuse mere blessings we give ourselves with determined commitments that shape the world.