

## Shortness of Breath, Fullness of Spirit

Parshat Va'era

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation

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In her book "the Particulars of Rapture", Dr. Aviva Zornberg points out a great irony within the Exodus story:

*"God's will, His message of redemption, is blocked by all three human protagonists in our story: by Moshe, by Pharaoh, and by the Israelites. Moshe' says, 'I am of uncircumcised lips.' Pharaoh of course won't listen and the Israelites suffer from something called 'kotzeir ruach,' literally meaning a shortness of breath or spirit.*

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֵר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה.

*"They would not listen to Moshe because of shortness of breath and the hard work".*

The phrase "kotzeir ruach" attracts an array of interpretations, ranging from the physical, the emotional and the spiritual. For Rashi, *kotzeir ruach* was a physical condition; the Jewish people were working hard; they literally didn't have time to stop and listen to Moshe!

Ramban sees it less literally and connects it with fear. The Jewish people feared potential reprisals from the Egyptians so they couldn't fully listen or focus on Moshe's words.

Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapira, the Chassidic Rebbe of Piacezna in pre-Holocaust Poland offers another interpretation as well. He has a collection of drashot in his book called the *Eish Kodesh*, which he delivered in the early years of the Warsaw Ghetto, and which were recorded in a little notebook which miraculously survived those fateful years.

Rabbi Shapira writes that under conditions of *avodah kashah*, of very difficult toil, one loses the "spirit of life." Rabbi Shapira knew all too well the meaning of difficult toil, enslaved as he and his "congregation" were in the ghetto. He saw how people still attempted to help each other, to maintain faith in God, and to perform whatever mitzvot they could.

He observed that at times however, many people could not muster the "spirit of life" necessary for religious action. *Kotzeir ruach* for him meant the absence of a "spirit of vitality."

As Rabbi Shapira suggests, we all have times that our "spirit of vitality" wanes. It's understandable that during a very stressful time at work for example, we might have less energy to come to shul, to go to a shiur or host an extra guest. We all have times when we feel depleted, when our batteries are low, and afterall, we only have one

battery within us. This was *kotzeir ruach* for Rabbi Shapira, albeit circumstances very different from our own privileged ones.

So what was the solution for *kotzeir ruach*, for the spiritual shortness of breath that plagued the Jewish people, even as the other plagues rained down on the Egyptians?

There is a midrash which suggests an astonishing answer: in the middle of the slavery in Egypt, the Israelites celebrated Shabbat. Commenting on a phrase in last week's parsha - וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם - Moshe goes out and sees their burdens:

ראה שאין להם מנוחה הלך ואמר לפרעה מי שיש לו עבד אם אינו נח יום אחד בשבוע הוא מת ואלו עבדיך אם אין אתה מניח להם יום אחד בשבוע הם מתים אמר לו לך ועשה להן כמו שתאמר הלך משה ותקן להם את יום השבת לנוח.

*He saw that they had no rest. He went and said to Pharaoh, "anyone who has a servant, if the servant doesn't rest at least one day a week, the servant will die. So too your slaves, if you don't give them one day of rest, they will die." Surprisingly, Pharaoh agreed and sent Moshe to enact it.*

It is based on this midrash that the Tur makes the comment at the beginning of Shemot that "because of their keeping Shabbat (and brit milah), the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt." שבשביל שבת ומילה ששמרו במצרים נגאלו.

Certainly, whether or not we think the Israelites actually kept Shabbat, we understand that Shabbat is the great answer to whatever depletion we experience in the course of a given week. The 16th century kabbalists in Sfat, led by Rabbi Isaac Luria said that on Shabbat, we receive an extra soul, a *neschama yeteirah*, or literally an additional breath.

So one response to *kotzeir ruach*, if and when it's possible, is Shabbat. Shabbat is the antidote to the *kotzer ruach* of our weeks and the midrash suggests that it helped sustain the Jewish people even in Egypt as well.

However, there is a second approach to the problem of *kotzeir ruach*, which comes from another midrash (1:27) on the same phrase.

וירא בסבלותם מהו? וירא שהיה רואה בסבלות ובוכה ואומר חבל לי עליכם... והיה נותן כתיפיו ומסייע לכל אחד ואחד.

*"He saw their suffering" – what did he see? He saw their suffering, he cried and said "It troubles me over you" and he lent his shoulder to help each and every one.*

According to this second midrash, Moshe saw the suffering of B'nai Yisrael and cried for them. Their trouble, their suffering became Moshe's suffering. This midrash is the source for the concept of *nosei b'ol im chaveiro*, the idea of helping to carry the burdens of our fellow Jews.

The second solution when someone is experiencing *kotzeir ruach* is more ruach,

physical and spiritual support from everyone else.

Today marks 99 days that more than 100 people have been hostages in Gaza. Hersh-Goldberg Polin is among them and his parents, Rachel Goldberg and Jon Polin made a specific request that this Shabbat, that we say Hersh's name.

Rachel and Jon are from Chicago, Bernard Zell and Ida Crown alumni, and incredible people. As some of you know, my family has a personal connection with the Goldberg-Polins, as it seems everyone does. They lived in Berkeley for many years and Hersh was born there. I remember Hersh as a wild, rambunctious two year old, and also as the awkward teenager with glasses we saw when we would visit them in Israel.

Rachel and Jon recently met with a group of Ida Crown seniors and I wanted to share some excerpts of this conversation, which Rabbi Matanky described in one of his emails to the Ida Crown community. He writes:

"Jon began by telling us that we were a group they felt very comfortable speaking to - because of our common backgrounds, values, beliefs, and language. He then gave the background to Hersh's capture, the heroic efforts of his friend, Aner Shapira, ד"ר, who saved so many lives tossing hand grenades out of the bomb shelter they were in, only to lose his life when one exploded.

Then it was Rachel's turn, and because our meeting took place before a massive tefilla gathering at the Kotel - but more about that in a moment, Rachel shared with us her faith in G-d and her belief in the power of tefillah.

She said, "Every morning, I wake up and say *modeh ani* and thank G-d for giving me another day to save my son and another day to be a human being." Being a human being is a theme that the Goldberg-Polins continue to hammer home as they frame the hostage situation not as a battle for land or rights but as a fight for the soul of humanity.

And then, Rachel told our students that when we finish, we would be going down to the Kotel to "storm the gates of heaven with our prayers, for while we are speaking with everyone we can, to the Pope, the President, the Prime Minister, and his war cabinet, everyone, I know" she said, "that it is Hashem who is going to figure it out. What I don't know, however, is who He will choose to be the 'kli' [vessel] to save the hostages - who that person will be, and so Jon is going to the United States next week, and I'll be going to Europe, and we continue speaking to everyone who might be the 'kli' to save our son."

Let me pause and just say that we are witnessing incredible spiritual heroism in this moment, in regular people. Rachel says *Modeh Ani* every single day! She is calling on us - all of us to add our own ruach, our own breath and action and spiritual might to this situation because as she said, who knows who will be the "kli" the vessel to save Hersh and the other hostages. We don't know what will be the key that opens the door to freedom, but we pray there is a key and we must try every one.

This coming Sunday will be 100 days since the massacre of October 7th, and the Goldberg-Polins are spearheading an international effort to have everyone take a piece of masking tape, write the number 100 on it, and then affix it to their shirts. It's something Jon and Rachel have done every day since Hersh was kidnapped, and for the 100th day, they even asked the Pope to do so, hoping to have 1,000,000 people wear the number. There are other things we can do as well, including joining a rally tomorrow and reaching out to our elected officials. (A more complete list is at the back of the shul.)

This is a Moshe-like opportunity for all of us, to be *Noseh B'avon im chaveiro*. Let us shoulder the burden with Jon and Rachel and the rest of the families of the hostages.

There is a Gemara I've been thinking a lot about recently, which imagines someone traveling through a desert (Bavli Shabbat 69b):

הָיָה מְהֵלֵךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְאִינוּ יוֹדְעֵי אֵימָתִי שִׁבְתָּ אָמַר רַב הוּנָא... מוֹנֶה שָׁשָׁה יָמִים  
וּמְשִׁימָה יוֹם אֶחָד. חִיָּיא בַּר רַב אָמַר: מְשִׁימָה יוֹם אֶחָד, וּמוֹנֶה שָׁשָׁה.

*"One who was walking along the way or in the desert, and they do not know when Shabbat occurs..."* What should this person, stranded in the desert, do? *Rav Huna said: the person should count six days from the day that they realized that they lost track of Shabbat and then observe one day as Shabbat. Hiyya bar Rav says: He first observes one day as Shabbat and then he counts six weekdays.*

I have always thought about this Gemara as the rabbis being a bit cute, exploring a hypothetical thought experiment as they often do.

Yet this week, it dawned on me that this Gemara is happening in real time, right now: as we sit here in shul, more than 130 of our brothers and sisters are hostages in Gaza. Maybe they have wondered what day it is, or if it is Shabbat?! Is there Shabbat in Gaza? Could such a thing exist?

Let us pray that it does.

Shabbat is the time when we pause and re-soul. In the Midrash's imagination, it was Shabbat that helped Bnei Yisrael survive the slavery in Egypt. We pray and we hope the hostages receive whatever they need, a tiny taste of Shabbat to carry them out of Egypt.

For all of us, may Shabbat bring renewed spirit and a fullness of breath, so that we each are able to take action, to demand and to speak out the words which Moshe says again, and again, and again: שלח את עמי!

Let our people go!