



The Parsha in Practice

Quarantime

It's day 19, and my family is finally completing quarantine. My first stop is a haircut, and at some point, I'm going to need a new pair of sweatpants. This was a very different experience than the lockdown of March-May as in those months, everyone was on a standstill, not just us. Things weren't quite as busy, and there was simply nothing going on to "miss." This time though, it was a personal and private pause, and when you are home so long, you notice how many people are still moving while you are not.



This week we read how Moshe delivers the message to the Jews that - you would imagine - they had all been waiting for. G-d's promise for a miraculous salvation, the four expressions of redemption, future nationhood, the security of being G-d's chosen people, and the guarantee of the land of Israel are all predicted. The Jews react strangely:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֵּן אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה

But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses...

Why didn't they listen? As the pasuk explains, **מִקְצֵר רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה** - "because of shortness of breath and hard work."

One would think that the hard work would be exactly the reason they should pay close attention. Wasn't this the message of freedom they dreamed of throughout their travails? How could they not be listening?

The Seforno writes:

ומעבודה קשה. כי לולא העבודה הקשה היו נותנים לב - מקצר רוח. כי לא נאמנה את אל רוחם, ולא נתנו לב להתבונן לדברי משה, והיו מבינים מטענותיו שראוי לבטוח

For their spirit prevented them from having faith in G-d, and they could not use their mind to contemplate the words of Moshe and to hear his arguments that they should trust in G-d...for if not for the hard labor, they would be able to concentrate on the words of Moshe...

The Seforno explains that they were suffering from a bad case of overwork and despair. The work hardened their heart, it broke their will. They were so despondent that they could not think past the darkness of that day towards a brighter tomorrow. They suffered from a depression so dark, that they couldn't see, let alone imagine a light at the end. This might have been the deepest moment of their exile.

What can we learn from their experience? Of course, by no means are we suffering from servitude like our ancestors, but קצֶר רוּחַ, shortness of breath, is still a concern. Normal life - if we can remember it - is so busy!

We're busy with good things of course (I hope). Work, family responsibilities, household tasks, community volunteering, simchas to attend, social commitments, individual chesed, and hopefully some personal time, but when all our calendar is fully scheduled and all our time is booked, what messages might we be too busy to hear and have too little breath to contemplate?

Potentially, the past ten months should have enabled us a little more space with which to listen "louder." We have had fewer social commitments, limited simchas, longer Shabbat afternoons (and mornings), even - most unfortunately - less time with extended family. As there has been so much anxiety and shortness of breath, it is completely understandable how we haven't yet finished writing that book we always dreamed of or completed Shas in our spare time. I wonder if, with the vaccine appointments being made and the light at the end of the tunnel glowing brighter by the day, we can now begin to listen to the message that we may have been ignoring for some time because until now, we just... couldn't be bothered.

Contrast this with Pharaoh. After begging for the suffering caused by the plague of the frogs to end, the pasuk tells us: וירא פרעה כי היתה הרוחה והכבד את לב *"And Pharaoh saw that there was relief... and he hardened his heart."* The Midrash comments: כן דרך הרשעים: כשהם בצרה הם צועקים *"So is the method of the wicked - when they are in a crisis, they cry out, but when there is relief, they return to their old ways."* When they are overwhelmed and can barely breathe, and when they have a moment to pause, they do not take advantage and instead revert to exactly where, and who, they were.

What are the messages we have been ignoring? What are the projects and tasks we have put aside for a time that has not yet arrived? In what areas would we do better if only we were focused enough to try? The next few months might be an excellent time to listen closely to what we were too breathless to hear. It will be some time yet before things normalize, yet we have the experience of the past ten months to psychologically manage our new reality. Isn't this the time to find the time to make the changes that take time?

Pharaoh leaves a plague (or a pandemic) and is the same person he was. Just as stubborn and unchanged. When we leave ours, will we be any different?

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach