

Shortness of Breath and Hard Work by Rabbi Dror Brama

In a series of emotional verses at the beginning of this week's portion, Moshe brings news of the coming redemption to the downtrodden and oppressed Jewish nation. He promises an end to their sorrows and the fulfillment of the covenant with the patriarchs. This consolation ends with the following verses:

And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the Lord (Sh'mot 6:7-8).

This prophecy is given to the Jewish people after Moshe proves that God sent him with signs and wonders, i.e., the miracles with his staff and hand. Following these wonders the people believe in him and bow to God.

Imagine a nation of beleaguered and despised slaves. They are engaged in back-breaking labor, with the constant awareness of the crack of the whip. Their children are thrown into the Nile the moment they are born. Finally, the promised redemption arrives. They see the light at the end of the tunnel; God has answered their prayers.

We would expect expressions of happiness, sighs of relief, and maybe a few

tears as they stand on the threshold of new lives. To our great surprise, their reaction is totally different:

But when Moshe told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard labor (6:9).

The words of Moshe pass right over the heads of the miserable slaves. There are neither celebrations nor tears. Moshe speaks, but no one hears. Shortness of breath (kotzer ru'ach) and hard labor (avoda kasha) lead to the daily struggle for survival, to the lowering of eyes to the next bale of hay and mud that needs to be gathered, to the attempt to avoid the whistle of the whip as it cracks over them. The ear is not open to hear grand designs and distant hopes.

Yet our minds are still not at ease. Even the most wretched prisoner, when informed of his release, will lift his head a bit and try to remember the forgotten taste of freedom; he will allow his new status to percolate into his consciousness. Why, then, don't they listen to Moshe? Is it possible that among all the Jews, no trace of the ancestral promise remains? Has the nation reached a stage of such absolute despair that even when the redemption arrives they ignore it?

Our Sages raise this question in the Mechilta, and in light of it they suggest

a new interpretation of the phrase kotzer ru'ach.

Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira cites the verse, "They would not listen to Moshe because of shortness of breath, etc."

Does it really happen that a person gets good news and is not happy?! You give birth to a son, or your master frees you from slavery, and you are not happy?!

So why does it say they did not listen to Moshe? Because they find it difficult to separate themselves from idol worship, as it is written (Yechezkeil 20:7), "Cast away, every one of you, the detestable things that you are drawn to, and do not defile yourselves with the fetishes of Egypt", and it continues (v.8), "But they defied Me and refused to listen to Me" (Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishma'el, Bo, 5). Kotzer ru'ach does not mean shortness of breath, but rather deficiency of spirit. The Egyptians embitter the Jews' lives not only with mortar and bricks, but also with an extended exposure to Egyptian culture while in a position of inferiority and degradation. The Egyptians succeed in enslaving not only their bodies but their spirits as well. After this difficult exile, Moshe arrives with news of redemption, but this redemption includes a total abandonment of Egypt and its culture. It is emancipation from work (avoda), but also renunciation of idol worship (avoda zara).

"They would not listen to Moshe", according to this approach, is to be understood not as a lack of concentration and attention, but rather as a lack of desire to listen and internalize

the message. Our Sages use the verse in Yechezkeil to prove that the process of separating the Jews from the Egyptian culture is difficult and they do not undertake it willingly. It is not just Pharaoh who needs plagues in order to recognize the superiority of God and the necessity of obeying Him. The Ten Commandments, which attest to our direct encounter with the word of God, also begin with the words, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt."

The Egyptian redemption is the model and pattern for all future redemptions. We learn an important lesson from it. We need to be aware that exile has a spiritual impact. This is particularly important when the redemption is approaching and the footsteps of freedom can already be heard, yet sorrows are also gathering force. This is when deficiency of spirit makes its presence known. The following factors - the daily struggle for survival and for personal and national security, using mortar and bricks; the feeling of inferiority and self-abnegation towards the non-Jews among whom we are exiled; the fear of the transition to true independence; the small-mindedness and deficiency of spirit; the quest for instant peace and tranquility; the prevention of the next terror attack; the next election - all combine to lead people to cling to a life of misery among the mud puddles of Egyptian culture instead of rising to independence and responsibility.

The generation which refuses redemption continues to be trapped by this

pattern, as expressed in their desire to return to Egypt and in the sin of the spies. So they die on the way to the Land, in the desert.

May we merit to truly listen to this week's portion and take its lesson to heart. 🙏