

Bolstering One's Spirits by Studying and Thereby Being Able to Hear

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The final total demoralization of the Jewish people during their enslavement in Egypt is reflected in Shemot 6:9. “And Moshe spoke in just this way (he related all that HaShem had Instructed him to say [1]) to the children of Israel, and they did not listen to Moshe because of ‘Kotzer Ruach’ (shortness of breath/spirit) and ‘Avoda Kasha’ (difficult work).” The people’s disinterest or perhaps even inability to take heart from Moshe’s relaying HaShem’s message this second time appears to be in stark contrast to their original reception of God’s Word, as conveyed by Moshe and Aharon in 4:31. “And the people believed, and they heard that HaShem had Remembered the children of Israel, and that He had Seen their affliction, and they bowed down and prostrated themselves.” It would appear that Moshe’s assumption that the people would ultimately believe neither in him nor in the Word of God—see 4:1—if not immediately borne out in Parshat Shemot, is eventually confirmed in Parshat VaEira.

Yet, the Tora does supply mitigating circumstances—“Kotzer Ruach” and “Avoda Kasha”—that account for this relatively quick reversal on the part of the people, when they go from viewing their immediate futures in optimistic terms to despairing of all remedies for their dire plight. Reading the Tora in a straightforward manner, however intensely the Jews may have been laboring prior to Moshe’s arrival, the “hard, breaking work” (2) becomes even more acute as a result of Pharaoh’s negative response to the request to allow the Jews to travel for three days in order to worship HaShem in the desert. Shemot 5:7-9 describes the new demands that will be made of the Jewish slaves in order to combat their apparent “laziness” (5:8, 17), i.e., while their production quotas will remain unchanged, they will from this point on have to also obtain the raw materials by which to fabricate the bricks that they are commanded to make. Consequently, if they had little spare time for themselves prior to Moshe’s arrival, their lives now become even more desperate. They not only figuratively, but even literally have no time to listen to anything that will cause them to lose focus from their onerous tasks at hand. They tell Moshe and Aharon (5:21) that as a result of the ill-fated negotiation with Pharaoh, the Egyptians, by means of the intensified work requirement, now have a better pretext than ever to beat Jewish slaves to death for failure to meet production expectations. Consequently, if all things had remained “equal” the people

would have continued to believe in HaShem's Promises of Redemption, contrary to Moshe's expressed cynicism; however, either because they were literally too exhausted to stop and listen to Moshe and Aharon's words a second time, or they realized that should additional attempts be made to try to convince Pharaoh to allow them to leave Egypt even for a short time, their situation might deteriorate even further, if they valued their own lives and the lives of their families, they simply couldn't afford to take these Divine Promises seriously. Consequently, rather than criticizing the Jews for displaying a lack of belief, the Jewish people could be viewed more charitably at this point as being under extreme duress, (3) with at least a figurative "gun being held to their respective heads" by the Egyptian ruler. Midrash HaGadol (4) applies to the verse describing the Jews' unwillingness to take seriously that God was Prepared to finally redeem them, the statement, "MiKan Ein Adam Nitfas Al Tza'aro" (from here it can be concluded that an individual should not be held accountable for what s/he does or says while experiencing severe trauma). (5)

A more psychologically subtle approach to the people's inability to listen to Moshe the second time that he comes to them, is offered by RaMBaN and Sephorno. RaMBaN writes that as a result of the constant pressure applied by the Egyptian taskmasters, "Lo Yitnum LiShmoa Davar VeLaCheshov Bo" (they would not permit them to hear a matter and think about it.) Sephorno feels that they would not only have paid attention to Moshe's message had the work not been as difficult, but they would have been able to reflect upon it, understand it and accept its implications. Consequently, what is at issue is not whether Moshe was perfunctorily "listened to" by the people, but rather was he "heard", i.e., was there opportunity, interest and even energy to take his words to heart, to analyze them, to ask questions in order to achieve clarity with regard to what was being proposed. Particularly concerning matters of belief and faith, as well as what lies in store for a people that has been long oppressed, hearts and minds will not be altered by a brief oral presentation in the midst of an intolerable workload and fear for one's life. Whereas they were ready the first time that Moshe came to take seriously and deeply believe the possibility that the time for Redemption has arrived, when the process not only failed to begin, but was perceived as retrogressing, with even worse conditions being imposed upon the Jews, they decided that there was no point in thinking about these promises any further. In order to have faith, the believer needs to have confidence in his leaders as well as in God Himself; when their hopes were raised, only to have them resoundingly shattered, the Jews were reluctant to trust and believe again, perhaps as a defense against being let down in the future.

R. Yaakov Kaminetsky (6) explains the deterioration of the Jews' situation and their inability or lack of interest in taking God's Promises seriously in Shemot 6 in terms that offer guidance for our contemporary experience of living as Jews in a society that does not always reinforce the values of our tradition. The commentator references several Midrashim with regard to the Jews' observance of Shabbat during their years in Egypt. (7) With respect to Shemot 2:11 (an aspect of which was discussed in the essay on Parshat Shemot 5765 <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Shemot.html>), Shemot Rabba 1:28 states that not only did Moshe empathize with the harsh labor imposed upon his brethren, as explained by RaShI, but that he also tried to do something about it.

“He saw/understood (8) their burdens”—He saw that they had no rest. He went and said to Pharaoh, “Whoever owns a slave, if the master does not allow him to rest one day per week, he will die. So too with your slaves, if you do not leave them alone one day per week, they will die.” (9) He said to him, “Go and institute for them in accordance with what you have said.” Moshe then went and instituted for them the day of Shabbat as a day of rest.

Once it is established that the Jews rested on Shabbat even during their years of slavery, the Rabbis imagined how they would spend their Shabbatot. Shemot Rabba 5:18 conjectures that following Pharaoh's rejection of Moshe and Aharon's first proposal and his order to increase the difficulty of the Jews' tasks, their ability to rest on Shabbat was revoked.

“Increase the work for the people”—this teaches that they (the Jews) had in their hands scrolls which they would delight in from one Shabbat to the next, and on the basis of their studies they believed that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will Redeem them. This was possible because they were resting on Shabbat. Pharaoh said to them, “Increase the work for the people so that they will work in it and will not rejoice in words of falsity.’ You shall neither delight nor rest on the day of Shabbat.”

Proceeding upon the premise that the people did have texts to study during their “days off”, it is intriguing to consider what those texts may have been. One possibility based upon an event taking place later at Sinai, is that these texts were the history of the Jewish people up until the Exodus. Shemot 24:7 recounts how a “Sefer HaBrit” (book of the covenant), which according to RaShI was the Tora text from Beraishit until the giving of the Tora at Sinai including the commandments given at Mara—see Shemot 15:28, RaShI—was read to the people prior to their declaring “Na’aseh VeNishma” (we will do and we will hear/understand). If this is the case, then the delight of the enslaved

Jews might have originated from passages such as Beraishit 15:14, where Avraham is told at the “Brit Bein HaBetarim” (the Covenant between the Pieces) that eventually the oppressors of the Jews would be judged and that the Jews would emerge from their servitude with great wealth, as well as Beraishit 50:25 in which Yosef evidences a high level of certainty that God would Redeem His People, the question not being “if”, but rather “when”.

R. Kaminetsky suggests a different hypothesis as to the identity of the scrolls that the Jews studied on Shabbat. He argues that Psalm 92, entitled “Mizmor Shir Le’Yom HaShabbat” (A Poem for the Day of Shabbat), seems to not contain any reference to Shabbat aside from its title. (10) Furthermore, RaShI on Bava Batra 14b, in which are listed the multiple authors of the book of Tehillim, including Moshe, offers the following comment: Moshe wrote Psalm 90, entitled “Tefilla LeMoshe”, as well as the next 11 Psalms in accordance with their order.” As soon as it is posited that Psalm 92 was authored by Moshe, that allows for the possibility of his having distributed it, along with the other Psalms attributed to him, to the Jews for their study during the period of their enslavement. (11) R. Kaminetsky contends that the rationale for calling this Psalm one designated for Shabbat was because it was a key element in the people’s Shabbat study while they remained in Egypt. He thinks that a verse that was particularly meaningful to Jewish slaves and that gave them the strength to continue on under such adverse conditions was the final verse: (92:16) “To declare that the Lord is Just; He is my Rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.” They would tell themselves from week to week that no matter what was happening, HaShem had a Reason for Bringing this about, and that only trust in God was what was needed under these circumstances. (12) By extension, the commentator continues, another of the scrolls that was studied carefully during the years in Egypt was the book of Iyov, whose authorship Bava Batra 14b also attributes to Moshe. The problem of theodicy certainly could have been on the minds of the Jews at that time, and the fact that God eventually heals Iyov and restores his life to normalcy may similarly have been of comfort to the Egyptian slaves.

But when Pharoah increases their labor as a result of Moshe’s asking that they be allowed to worship in the desert, not only could they no longer rest on Shabbat; they also lost their opportunity to think about and study the scrolls that gave them hope and confidence in a better future. Once they lost even that glimmer of optimism that studying Psalms and Iyov supplied, concludes, R. Kaminetsky, they were unable to listen to Moshe’s words when he came a second time. Furthermore, in light of the Rabbinic tradition that the vast majority of Jews ended up not wishing to leave Egypt, but rather chose to remain, and died during the plague of darkness, would things have been different had they too participated in these studies and religious deliberations?

Would they have continued to dream of a better future, rather than choosing to throw in their lot with their non-Jewish neighbors?

What does emerge from ideas such as these is the importance of not only being able to take a break from one's work so that s/he does not become enslaved, however important that work might be, but also to spend time on Shabbat engaged in relevant, inspiring spiritual activities, not least of which is Tora study. If this is what helped Jews survive the major portion of the Egyptian exile, then the potency of such learning for assuring that our own lives will continue to have meaning wherever we live and whatever we do, is clear and should serve as a significant component of each of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.

(1) Shemot 6:2-8 “And God spoke to Moshe saying to him, ‘I am HaShem’. And I Appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov in the manifestation of ‘Keil Shakai’ and by My Name ‘Yud-Keh-Vav-Keh’ I was not known to them. And I have Fulfilled My Covenant with them to Give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned. And I have also Heard the cries of the children of Israel that result from the Egyptians enslaving them and I Remember My Covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel, ‘I am HaShem, and I will Take you out from under the burden of Egypt, and I will Save you from your work, and I will Redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will Take you to me to be a nation and I will Be to you for a God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who Takes you out from under the burden of Egypt. And I will Bring you to the land that I Raised My Hand to Give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I will Give it to you as an inheritance, I am HaShem.’”

(2) See 1:11, 13; 2:23.

(3) The operant Halachic principle would consequently be: “Ones Rachmana Patrei” (an individual under duress is pardoned by Heaven), e.g., Avoda Zara 54a.

(4) Quoted in Tora Shleima, vol. 10, ed. R. Menachem Kasher, Beit Tora Shleima, Jerusalem, 5752, p. 15.

(5) Bava Batra 16b draws the same conclusion from Iyov 34:35, where rather than categorizing his rants against the Divine as evil, he is described as simply devoid of knowledge, i.e., he is incapable of thinking straight under these circumstances.

(6) Emet Le'Yaakov, R. Jacob Joseph School Press, New York, 5751, pp. 262-3.

(7) Context of Jews not keeping Mitzvot altogether? Perhaps Shabbat as a day of rest, as opposed to a ritually meaningful day?

(8) In the same manner as the root “Sh-M-A” (to hear) is explained as connoting hearing cognitively, or understanding, so too is the root “R-A-H” (to see) interpreted as representing a level of cognitive “seeing” or understanding.

(9) The Midrash presumes that Pharaoh did not wish to exterminate the Jews. That is not clear from some of the policies that were instituted. If the male children were to be killed, as per Pharaoh's order that would certainly severely reduce the slave population.

Furthermore, Rabbinic sources claim that another hindrance to Jewish population growth or even replacement, was the taskmasters attempting to prevent husbands and wives from

spending any more time together than absolutely necessary. An approach that would reconcile such sources with the Midrash being presently considered is that rather than trying to wipe out the Jews, the Egyptian ruling class' intent was to keep them a small enslaved minority within greater Egypt so that menial tasks could be assigned to them, and therefore preserving those who were alive was in Egypt's best interests.

(10) RaShI interprets the Psalm as dealing with the World To Come, and since Shabbat is referred to as "MeiEin Olam HaBa" (the essence of the World To Come) there is a connection between Shabbat and the Psalm. However, this would appear to not necessarily be in consonance with the simple meaning of the Psalm, a case where the question may be better than the answer.

(11) If Moshe was writing and distributing Psalms prior to his murdering an Egyptian and running to Midian, this implies a high level of Jewish sophistication prior to his encounter at the Burning Bush in Shemot 3:2 ff. And if it is posited as we have in the essay for Shemot 5765 referenced above in the body of this essay that he may have been only 13 years old at the time of his flight, he became conversant in these matters at an extremely young age. Of course, it is not necessary to reconcile all Midrashim, and it will prove impossible to do so on occasion. Nevertheless such speculations are intriguing and interesting.

(12) In a footnote (fn. 46), the editor of Rabbi Kaminetsky's Chumash ideas notes that he once explained the reason for the citation of the Exodus from Egypt in the Shabbat Kiddush liturgy is because it was the observance of Shabbat that kept the Jews from despairing during their years of enslavement.