

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Shmot
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Shmot – don't get distracted!

In this week's Parsha of Shmot, we read about the beginning of Moshe's task of leading the redemption of Bnei Yisrael from Mitzrayim. Together with his brother Aaron, Moshe confronts Pharaoh with the famous phrase “Let My people go!” Actually, the full phrase is “Let My people go *so that they may serve Me.*” This reminds us that the whole purpose of freedom is in order to be able to serve Hashem. (People like to quote these words to demonstrate the importance of freedom, but they often ‘conveniently’ forget the second half of the phrase.)

Initially, Moshe's attempts to convince Pharaoh to let Bnei Yisrael go free were unsuccessful and in fact back-fired. Moshe first requested only a three-day break for Bnei Yisrael to serve Hashem in the wilderness, followed by a return to Mitzrayim. However, Pharaoh was not interested.¹

“He [Pharaoh] said, “You are lazy, lazy! That is why you say, ‘Let us go and bring offerings to Hashem.’ Now go to work. You will not be given straw but you must still provide the same quota of bricks.” (Our Parasha, Shmot 5:17-18)

Pharaoh dramatically increased Bnei Yisrael's workload. The Egyptians would no longer provide them with straw – one of the key raw materials that was needed to make bricks. Bnei Yisrael would now need to locate their own straw. However, their daily quota of bricks was not reduced. Pharaoh's response to Moshe's request sounds similar to a parent telling a whinging child “if you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to really cry about!”

Pharaoh reasoned that Bnei Yisrael had too much time on their hands and that is why they were able to entertain fancy notions such as religious freedom and serving Hashem. His response was to work them harder. That way they would have no time to think.

In Chapter 2 of Mesilat Yesharim², the Ramchal³ explains that Pharaoh intended for Bnei Yisrael to be so busy and distracted that they would not have time to contemplate their direction in life and to think about what is really important (such as serving Hashem). The Ramchal explains that Pharaoh was adopting one of the Yetzer Hara's classic strategies. The Yetzer Hara tries to keep us constantly busy and distracted so that we have little time to focus on what is important in life. This is one of the Yetzer Hara's most effective strategies. Unfortunately, many of us are affected by it.

Pharaoh's approach seems to have worked. At the beginning of next week's Parasha, we will see that Bnei Yisrael were so frantically busy that they could not even respond to Moshe:

“Moshe spoke thus to Bnei Yisrael, but they did not heed Moshe because of [their] shortness of breath and because of [their] hard labour” (Parashat Vaera, Shmot 6:9)

¹ The following idea was inspired by an article written by Rabbi Yehoshua Berman:
<http://www.aish.com/tp/i/reflections/287450691.html>

² Mesillat Yesharim was recommended by the Vilna Gaon and Rav Yisrael Salanter as the perfect textbook of mussar.

³ Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, 1707-1746, a prominent Italian Rabbi, kabbalist and philosopher. In his short life he wrote an astounding number of works including the Mussar classic Mesilat Yesharim (The Path of the Just) and Derech Hashem (The Way of G-d).

Let's consider some contemporary, everyday scenarios.

Shimon was proud of his new smartphone, it was the latest model with all of the cool gadgets. He was looking forward to downloading some Torah apps so that he could use his time wisely to learn Torah while on the go. He spent a few hours searching the web for the newest Torah apps and he even managed to stay focused on his task for a fair chunk of the time. He spent an hour and a half downloading the various apps and setting them up on his phone. He then spent half a day trying to source a larger memory chip for his phone to make room for all of these great new apps (as he couldn't bear to delete any of his old apps which were just so useful, even though he wasn't really using them very much lately). He then spent some time setting up each of the new apps, adjusting the settings, and talking to his friends about how great the apps were and how much Torah he was going to learn. He would be able to carry the entire Torah in his pocket! Let's see how he fared at the end of the first month. Time spent setting up the apps and talking about them: 12 hours 48 minutes. Time spent actually learning Torah: 1 minute 25 seconds!

The year 12 student was sitting at his desk trying to study for his impending exams. However, he was finding it hard to focus. He noticed that his bedroom window was rather dirty. "This won't do" he thought to himself. He sourced some cleaning equipment and did a very thorough job of cleaning his window. Given that he had already gone to the trouble of getting the cleaning equipment, he thought it would be a good time to clean some other windows. He then proceeded to clean every window in the house. When he finished, the house looked great but he was too exhausted to do any more study that day.⁴

Reuven liked to follow the news. He felt that it was important to keep up to date with what was happening in the world and he liked being able to have intelligent conversations with others about the latest events. In his spare time, he would often check out the different news sites and try to read about important events from different angles. It was interesting to see how the same event was reported differently based on the bias of the particular reporter. Reuven didn't even contemplate how much time he spent on this 'harmless pastime'.

A businessman once famously told Rav Yisrael Salanter that he only had half an hour each day to devote to learning. What should he do? Learn Gemara or learn mussar? Rav Salanter advised him to learn mussar. Then he would discover that he actually had much more than half an hour each day to dedicate to learning!

Though we are no longer slaves to Pharaoh, our daily distractions often enslave us. We may feel that there are so many crucial tasks to complete - paying the bills, regular dental check-ups,⁵ preparing our tax returns etc. However, many of us are much busier than we really need to be. Just being aware of the wily ways of the Yetzer Hara may help to save us from falling into his clutches so often. Setting aside some regular time each day (even just a few minutes) to contemplate is critical. We also need self-discipline to put out ideals into practice – to find more time to learn Torah, perform mitzvot, help each other and work on our middot. In short, to become better Jews. If we make the effort, we should easily be able to find some more time each day to get the important things done.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to cut back on wasted time – time spent doing things that really don't need to be done.
2. Try to dedicate a few minutes each day to work out what Hashem would like us to do to serve Him today. This might be easier if we constantly remind ourselves that everything we have – including our time, energy and resources all come from Him and are meant to be dedicated back to Him.
3. Notice when we find ourselves breathless from the busyness of life and try to identify whether the Yetzer Hara is trying to distract us from doing what is truly important.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

⁴ I can personally testify that this is a true story!

⁵ Is once every five years OK?