

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Shmot
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Shmot – One of the Yetzer Hara’s most successful tactics

In this week’s Parasha, we read about the slavery of the Jewish people in Mitzrayim and the beginning of Moshe’s role as the leader of the Jewish people. Moshe’s first task is to ask Pharaoh to “Let My People Go”. The initial outcome of this first request is that Pharaoh forces Bnei Yisrael to work even harder. Let’s examine Pharaoh’s response to this initial request to allow the slaves to go free.

Pharaoh decides that Bnei Yisrael will no longer be provided with straw, the raw material for the bricks that they have to make. But the quota of bricks that they have to make will remain the same. After this decree was made, the officers of Bnei Yisrael came to Pharaoh to complain about the new work conditions. He responded:

“You are lazy, just lazy. Therefore you say, “Let us go and sacrifice to Hashem”. And now, go and work. You will not be given straw, but you must still provide the same number of bricks [each day].”¹

Pharaoh decided that Bnei Yisrael had too much time on their hands. Consequently, they had time to think of such fanciful notions as going free and serving their Creator! He therefore works them harder so that they will have less time to think. And his tactic seems to work. When Moshe next spoke to Bnei Yisrael, they didn’t even have time to listen to him due to “shortness of breath and hard labour”.²

The Mesillat Yesharim³ explains that Pharaoh was employing one of the Yetzer Hara’s most successful tactics. The Yetzer Hara tries to keep us so busy that we don’t even have time to think, to contemplate the direction our life is taking, to analyse our deeds and decide what areas need improvement. Though the Yetzer Hara distracts us in many ways, he is especially successful with this tactic in the area of earning our livelihood. People often spend far too much time focused on earning a living. And even when they are not at work, they are often distracted and thinking about work.

There are some people who are legitimately busy with earning a livelihood and they do not have a choice in the matter. They need to support their families. But there are others who get too caught up in their work and spend more time involved in work than is really necessary. There are also people who like to keep constantly busy just for the sake of keeping busy. This is all a devious strategy of the Yetzer Hara. Though there is nothing wrong with being busy and productive, it should not be at the expense of having some quiet time to actively contemplate our direction and deeds.

Consider the following true story.⁴ When I was at school, our class had a big cross country race in a local park. It was an important event. The winner of the race would represent the school in a regional event. I was always a decent runner, but I was never the fastest in the class. In this particular race I was feeling very good, and everything was going right. Before I knew it, I was in front, and well ahead of the pack. I gave it everything and I moved further and further ahead of the others. Unfortunately, I hadn’t paid enough attention to the instructions, and I took a wrong turn. I was lost amongst the trees. By the time I realised my mistake and retraced my steps, I had lost my position at the front. Though I ended up finishing a respectable third, my moment of glory had been snatched from under my feet.

Now imagine that someone had come up to me while I was determinedly running cluelessly between the trees and tried to tell me that I had made a wrong turn. Imagine that I was so focused on getting ahead that I didn’t have time to stop and listen to their message. What a pity that would be! But this is exactly how we often act in

¹ Breishit 5:17-18

² Breishit 6:9.

³ Written by the Ramchal. See chapter 2.

⁴ Published here for the first time.

our lives. We are so busy running ahead blindly, that we often don't have time to stop and consider whether or not we are heading in the right direction.

The words of the Ramchal in Derech Hashem are very enlightening. He explains⁵ that two periods of time were established for mankind: one, a time for service (i.e. a time for serving Hashem by choosing good and refraining from evil) and the other, a time for receiving reward (in the World to Come). The time of service (in this world) has a fixed, limited time frame. But the period for receiving the reward is infinite. For all eternity, one will continue to delight in the perfection that he has acquired for himself in this world. What a pity it would be if we are too 'busy' to make proper use of our limited time in this world to prepare ourselves for the eternal World to Come.

The following story is told of Rav Elyashiv.⁶ Someone approached him with a request to issue a psak on a very complex issue. The issue was critically important, but it was not urgent⁷. Rav Elyashiv asked how long he would need to set aside to discuss the issue. The person said that it would take about half an hour to explain the pertinent facts. In that case, said Rav Elyashiv, let's meet in two weeks' time. When asked why, Rav Elyashiv explained that almost every minute of his day was accounted for. He was happy to help this person, but he would lose 30 minutes of learning Torah and that time would need to be made up. He estimated that it would take him two full weeks to find an additional 30 minutes of free time to catch up on this missed Torah.

Most of us are not even close to Rav Elyashiv's level.⁸ But many of us are very busy doing good things – learning Torah, acts of kindness, volunteering, and even earning a living. But even such positive work should not be at the expense of contemplation and reflection. We need to set aside time to just think.

This idea of quiet contemplation comes up a number of times in Jewish thought, such as cheshbon hanefesh (accounting of the soul) or hitbodedut (self-secluded meditation)⁹. How much time do we need to set aside to just think? There are many techniques and different approaches. Some would suggest at least 15 minutes a day, others recommend much more. But that is probably unrealistic for many of us. Let's start with something that is manageable. Just set aside a few minutes (or even 30 seconds) per day free of distractions to think about one or two things:

- (i) Looking back: How did I behave today? Did I make any mistakes? Do I need to do teshuva? How can I do better next time?
- (ii) Looking forward: What are my goals? What do I want to achieve? Where do I want to be in the future? Am I on the right track? Am I heading in the right direction?¹⁰

It's important to choose a fixed time to do this work. Otherwise it just won't happen.¹¹ Choose a time that is convenient and quiet and allows you some time free from distractions. At the end of the day, is usually appropriate, such as straight after Maariv.¹²

The story of Bnei Yisrael being redeemed from Mitzrayim is a story that applies to all of us today. We are all trying to break free from our personal Mitzrayim and we all have to deal with our own personal Pharaoh. If we understand Pharaoh's tactics, we have a better chance of being successful.

Let's try something this week:

1. Commit to spending a regular time each day to just think. Try to focus on the two points that we listed above, or any other issues that you feel are important.
2. Pick a regular time to do this work... and stick to it!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁵ Section 1, Chapter 3. The above extract includes some of the footnotes contained in the Feldheim elucidated Derech Hashem.

⁶ One of the recent gedolai hador, he passed away on 18 July 2012 at the age of 102. I read this story in an article that was printed on the occasion of his first yearzeit. The time periods that I quote above may not be accurate, but the idea of the story is clear.

⁷ If one wants to manage their time efficiently, it is vital to appreciate the difference between 'important' and 'urgent'.

⁸ If I had to catch up on 30 minutes of wasted time, it would probably take me about... 35 minutes.

⁹ I am not suggesting that cheshbon hanefesh and hitbodedut are the same thing. The differences are beyond the scope of this article. But they share a common feature – they require quiet focused time, free of distractions.

¹⁰ It shouldn't be necessary to assess your goals every day. Once a month or once a week should be sufficient.

¹¹ I'm speaking from experience.

¹² I don't recommend waiting until you are in bed. If you are like me, you are already fast asleep well before your head hits the pillow on most nights. While you are taking a shower might work, but one should be careful not to think certain holy thoughts while in the bathroom. If you would like further details speak to your Rabbi or be in touch with me.