

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

SH'MOT 5785

After Moshe and Aharon demand, in Gd's Name, to release the Jewish people from bondage (5:1), Par'o responds by intensifying the enslavement, refusing to give the people the straw to make the bricks, thus compelling them to gather up the straw themselves to yield the same tally of bricks for the day (5:6-7).

Question: Why would Par'o issue such an edict when in so doing, their lack of rest would surely negatively impact the quality of their labor? And this, especially after granting them one day of rest - Shabbat - at the behest of Moshe, years earlier (Sh'mot Rabba 1:28).

The Torah gives us his rationale: The fact that the people were now clamoring to leave Egypt was a direct result of the free time they had to reflect and consider their fate. Better that they be burdened with more work and "not talk about false matters" (5:8-9). And it worked. When later (6:9), Moshe disclosed to them the news of their imminent redemption, they "did not listen because of their shortness of spirit and hard labor." As R. Yaakov Kamenetsky observes (Emet L'Yaakov, ibid), their inability to harken to Moshe's words was a function of their lack of any

Shabbat leisure time to contemplate Moshe's promise of deliverance and thus feel strengthened and encouraged by that assurance.

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato (Ramchal) in his celebrated Mesilat Yesharim (chapter 2) references this Biblical episode to draw our attention to one of the yetzer hara's most calculating schemes to trip us up. "In truth, this is among the cunning strategies of the evil inclination: to relentlessly burden people's hearts with his service so as to leave them no room to reflect and consider which road they are taking. For he knows that if they were to put their ways to heart even the slightest bit, certainly they would immediately begin to feel regret for their deeds. The remorse would go and intensify within them until they would abandon the sin completely. This is similar to the wicked Par'o's advice saying 'intensify the men's labor...' (Sh'mot 5:9). His intention was to leave them no time whatsoever to oppose him or plot against him. He strove to confound their hearts of all reflection by means of the constant, incessant labor. This is precisely the ploy employed by the evil inclination on human beings. For he is a skilled warrior, expert in the art of cunning. It is impossible to escape from him without great wisdom and far-reaching vision. This is what the prophet screamed out 'give heed to your ways!' (Chagai 1:7)."

Of course, it would be a foolish error - and a very reckless mistake at that - to think that the yetzer hara's nasty machinations were operative only in ancient times. There are many ways for the evil inclination to characterize a slave behavior and frame it in contemporary terms. Not the least of which when a person is so terribly busy that he neglects, either intentionally or otherwise, to stop and seriously ponder whether he/she ought to be doing something different with their life. Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider puts it quite sharply: "Being 'too busy' has been identified by contemporary thinkers as a modern-day malady. We feel like we are 'pressed for time', that 'there is not enough time in the day', and that we are 'running out of time'. This has affected the way we relate, or fail to relate to one another; this has affected the way we relate, or fail to relate, to our Creator."

In his day, Rav Shlomo Hoffman zt"l, (1922-2013) was an extraordinary teacher and mentor to the great rabbinic leaders and educators throughout Israel. His knowledge, which he gleaned from the writings of Rambam (Sh'moneh P'rakim), the Vilna Gaon (Mishlei) and Rav Yisroel Salanter and taught to him by Rav Yitzchak Sher zt"l, enabled him to cultivate practical psychotherapeutic skills and pedagogic strategies which proved to be of inestimable value to

the countless people and institutions he helped. In a collection of his wisdom, he relates again and again the critical importance of self-reflection: "The first step towards character improvement is self-awareness - the understanding of the workings of the nefesh [the internality of a person] ... If a person does not know how his inner world works, how can he hope to recognize what is wrong and try to improve it? ... Achieving self-awareness means recognizing the forces deep inside us that guide us subconsciously. Thereby we can understand the internal forces that work in us and activate us." (Secrets of the Soul, Compiled by Rabbi Meir Simcha Stein, pp. 201, 223) And it is this very "taking out the time" to engage in such self-awareness - such focused mindfulness - that the yetzer hara attempts to thwart by distracting us with so much busyness.

In Moshe's encounter with the "burning bush", the Torah relates that Moshe said: "Let me turn now and see this great spectacle..." (3:3) On this phrase, ASURA NA V'ER-EH... the S'foron comments: "I will contemplate..." Moshe had been a shepherd for some 40 years. His tending of the sheep had become a habitual lifestyle for him. True, the sight of the burning bush was strange, but he could have ignored the phenomenon and continued on with his daily routine. Yet, he chose to "turn and consider", and

with that movement towards and Moshe's mindfulness, he begins his ascent to greatness and renown.

R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne reports in the name of his illustrious rebbe, the Ba'al Shem Tov (Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Parshat Vayishlach) that, in Egypt, there was, in addition to the exile of the people, the exile of da'at. What is DA'AT? On the phrase, VAYEIDA ELOKIM - and Gd knew (2:25), Rashi comments "He was concentrated - intensely focused - upon them [the plight of Israel] and did not hide His eyes [from them]." Da'at then is the conscious awareness to attend to something important. If so, then conversely, slavery - a slave mentality - is the absence of da'at, the all-too human tendency to unthinkingly follow the conventional routine and avoid examining whether this mechanical behavior is advisable and commendable. Indeed, only with the emergence of da'at, did the process of redemption begin.

The clear lesson from Israel's servitude in Egypt is that true freedom requires an individual to make the heroic pause, to put a halt to the busy distracting over-workings of life and courageously confront and contemplate one's life-direction and mission. Woe to the person who attempts - in Eric Fromm's felicitous phrase - to "escape from freedom". Modern man can be no less the slave

than were his ancestors. Of course, we must spend significant chunks of our time pursuing our chosen endeavors. However, come Shabbat, come Yom Tov, come those quiet moments when we are still and inactive, it is then that we must prevail against our yetzer hara and commit to use that precious time to get to "know thyself" and change our behavior and course accordingly. 