

לכֹּהֵן אָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבָדֵתָם וְגָאֵלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ זְטוּיָהּ וּבִשְׁפָטִים גְּדֹלִים: וְלִקְוֹזְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעַם וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם לְאֱלֹקִים וַיִּדְעוּתָם כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם: וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נְשִׂאתִי אֶת יָדִי לָתֵת אֶתָּהּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב וְנָתַתִּי אֶתָּהּ לָכֶם מִוְרֵשָׁה אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק: וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵל מֹשֶׁה מִקִּצֵּר רוּחוֹ וּמֵעֲבָדָה קָשָׁה:

(שמות פרק ו:ו-ט)

Therefore, tell the Children of Israel, “I am Hashem, and I will take you out from under the suffering of Egypt, save you from their slavery, and redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. And I will take you to Me for a nation, and I will be to you for a Lord, and you will know that I am Hashem your Lord that takes you out from under the sufferings of Egypt. And I will bring you to the land that I raised My hand (in oath) to give to Avraham, to Yitzchok and to Yaakov, and I will give it to you as a heritage - I am Hashem. Moshe spoke thus to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of spirit and difficult labor.

(Exodus 6:6-9)

From the Torah you see that two issues prevented the Jews from “listening” to Moshe: (1) Shortness of spirit (*kotzer ruach*) and (2) Difficult labor. One readily understands how back-breaking labor can deny a people inspiration. If one is physically exhausted, he often has great difficulty generating enthusiasm. I am confident that we can all relate to this idea from our own experiences returning home from a full days work. One can only imagine what our mental state would be if our work involved physically exhausting labor!

What is more difficult to understand is “shortness of spirit”? What exactly is that, and how is it a distinct problem from difficult labor? Why even bother mentioning it? Wasn’t the shortness of spirit (assuming it means an inability to be inspired), merely the result of the labor? If so, why is it listed as a second reason they did not listen to Moshe?

The source of “shortness of spirit” is an earlier development in the slavery of the Children of Israel. It is such a subtle point, that its significance can be easily overlooked.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן תַּפְרִיעוּ אֶת הָעָם מִמְעַשְׂוֵי לָכֹהֵן לְסִבְלוֹתֵיכֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה הֲזֶן רַבִּים לָתֵת לָעַם הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁפַּתְתֶּם אֹתָם מִסִּבְלוֹתָם: וַיֵּצֵא פַרְעֹה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת הַנְּגָשִׁים בָּעַם וְאֵת שֵׁטְרֵיו לֵאמֹר: לֹא תִאֲסָפוּן לָתֵת תְּבָן לְעַם הַלְבָבִים כְּתַמּוּל שִׁלְטִים הֵם יִלְכוּ וְקִשְׁעוּ לָהֶם תְּבָן: וְאֵת מִתְכַנְּת הַלְבָבִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם עֹשִׂים תַּמּוּל שִׁלְטִים תַּשִּׂימוּ עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא תִתְּרְעוּ מִפְּנֵוּ כִּי גְרָפִים הֵם עַל כֵּן הֵם צֹלְקִים לֵאמֹר גְּלֹכָה גְּלֹבְזָה לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ: תִּכְבַּד הָעֲבָדָה עַל הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁעוּ בָּהּ וְאֵל יִשְׁעוּ בְּדַבְרֵי שִׁקְר:

(שמות פרק ה פסוק ד-ט)

The King of Egypt said to them, “Why shall Moshe and Aharon disturb the nation from its activities - go to your burdens!” Pharaoh said, “The nation of the land are many now,

and you are going to relieve them from their burdens?” Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters and the policemen on that day saying, “Do not continue to give straw to the nation to build the bricks as in the past; they shall go and gather straw for themselves. The quota of bricks that they have done in the past you shall demand of them, do not diminish from it; because they are slacking, they therefore cry out saying, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our Lord.’ Weigh down the burden on the men and they will do it, and they will not occupy themselves with nonsense.”

(Exodus 5:4-9)

When Moshe announced to the Children of Israel, that God was redeeming them, he inspired the entire nation, despite their physically drained state and resulting mental weakness. The response of Pharaoh, curiously enough, was *not* to make the labor more strenuous, but rather to create greater pressure to meet quotas and deadlines. Previously, the materials for the bricks were provided by the government. From now on, the Jews would have to procure the materials as well. I do not know if the government imported the materials, or from whence they otherwise derived, but it would appear that the Jews were forced to search all over the land for materials that were not readily available. Furthermore, not only were they now required to supply themselves with the raw materials, but the required output of final product was not reduced an iota. This combination resulted in an intense pressure on the Jewish slaves to spend every waking moment involved in their work, in one way or another.

The verses state his intent explicitly: to prevent inspirational thoughts of independence from entering their minds. He forced them to focus on the labor to such an extent that there was no time to think about anything else. If they would tarry, even by mere day-dreaming, they risked failure in fulfilling the quota of bricks. The result would be severe beatings and other unpleasant consequences.

The approach of Pharaoh reflects a sophisticated understanding of the human psyche, and a cold, calculated response to the redemptive dreams of our people. The mental mechanism utilized by Pharaoh involved forcing their minds to be focused solely on their work through the pressure of imminent deadlines (and the consequences of failing to meet them). He understood that despite back-breaking labor, a human being still has time to dream, to think, to consider the state of his life and his aspirations. Therefore, his response to the inspiration Moshe produced was not to increase the difficulty of the labor, but to ensure that they did not have the *time* to even think about it. There was simply too much to do.

For this reason, “shortness of spirit” is a distinct reason why the Children of Israel did not “listen” to Moshe. It is not a reference to their weakened mental state resulting from the labor, it refers to their inability to consider the message of Moshe due to the constraints on their time – there was not a spare moment.

I think that we find this type of pressure easy to relate to. We understand deadlines, we experience constant stress and pressure. In modern times, even stores and businesses whose doors close at

night, stay open twenty four–six due to the internet and the blackberry at one’s side. We are constantly “on the go”. We should not fool ourselves however, into believing that it does not affect us.

When we feel stressed and pressured, we become unable to properly focus on our *avodas Hashem*. It is plainly, and painfully obvious that when one is under pressure and experiencing stress as a result, he cannot avoid some degree of negative expression of his strain (usually towards his wife and children, or whomever is closest to him). This type of pressure causes us to lose our focus on the details of our *mitzvos*, and sometime the actual *mitzvos* themselves (loving others as ourselves is also a *mitzvah!*). We risk becoming, almost robots, mechanistically performing our duty on the proverbial economic assembly line. How lovely.

The *Messilas Yeshorim* tells us that the very first step towards God and the next world, is consciousness – becoming aware of and considering our actions. What am I about to do? How shall I do it differently in the future? At the very least, what did I just do! We tell our children all the time, “Think before you act”. This is difficult enough when we are not under pressure, and nigh impossible when we are stressed out.

How do we deal with this unavoidable reality?

One thing to keep in mind, is that the most difficult time to deal with stress is once we are experiencing it. We have to try to deal with it before it is being experienced, by developing and maintaining the proper perspective; awareness of “reality” and priority. What is important? What is our priority? No mentally healthy individual, no matter how stressed, will beat up the boss, because he knows his job is at stake, and that is the “most important” thing. However, if we *know*¹ that one of the three basic purposes of life² is to respond properly to those moments when we are challenged by the stress, then dealing harshly with our loved ones becomes the “most important thing”, and THAT is actually beating up the Boss – Hashem – who commanded us never to do that! True, this is easier said than done – but that doesn’t absolve us of our responsibility to be conscious of it!

There is one area that is completely in our control, and unfortunately, by not controlling it, we become our own Pharaoh. Humans seek constant stimulation. We find it impossible to walk down the street without our eyes wandering everywhere, searching for *something* interesting. Try, for ten seconds to think about *nothing*. Not white, *nothing*. I dare you!

It is not surprising therefore, that in today’s world, no one is sitting still. Everyone is constantly involved with their phone, ipod, or something. Our constant search for stimulation is not a problem, it is a beautiful, unique aspect of humankind. The issue is how we use this drive. I find that most people use this

1. Knowledge = An intellectual idea that has been internalized and translated into an emotional reality.

2. See the first chapter of *Messilas Yeshorim* where he unequivocally states that the purpose of life is threefold: To (1) serve God, (2) do *mitzvos*, and (3) pass the challenges and tests of life.

talent to distract themselves; to create a “shortness of spirit”; never allowing their minds to focus on any given thought for more than a few seconds, at best, a few minutes. Certainly not considering their actions, past or future.

In school, at meetings, even important business meetings, many, if not most of those present, are *distracting themselves* with their (im)personal devices. We have allowed ourselves to get sucked in to a culture of distraction. We have nearly lost our ability to concentrate. We are busy, very busy. When we live like this, how will we ever find the time to think about what we are *going* to do and what we *just* did. Was our action proper or improper? How will we respond next time. How does God want me to respond? How can I develop the correct perception so that I will not respond emotionally next time? These are the thoughts we should be having while we are walking, driving, or whenever we have spare time.

To sum up, I think that there are two areas today that result in a “shortness of spirit”: (1) Our constant focus on our livelihood and (2) our constant involvement with forms of stimulation.

Pharaoh invented the first blackberry, *kotzer ruach*³. We must not be our own Pharaoh, we need to find ways to relax and think about our lives, our actions and our responses. We need to find ways to put down the blackberries and everything else that keeps our minds misdirected and occupied with work and often pure nonsense, so that we can focus better on what is really important. How to do this may not be so simple for everyone, but I think the point is valid and well worth considerable consideration.

Sorry for the heavy *mussar*, and I am saying it to myself, but I think that it is a critical problem in today’s world. I see it all the time.

3. See *Messilas Yeshorim* in *zehirus* who makes reference to this approach of Pharaoh in exactly the way we mentioned.