



## **Va'eyra: Shortness of Breath**

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

The first encounter did not go as planned. In last week's Parsha, Moshe and Aharon told Pharaoh to release the Jewish people. Pharaoh, incensed that Moshe and Aharon would question his absolute authority and distract his slave work force with dreams of emancipation and freedom, responds with two simple words, "*Tichbad ha'avoda*, let the work become more intense." The daily quota of bricks was increased and the Jewish slaves were required to forage for the raw materials to construct them.

In this week's Parsha, Moshe tries to lift the spirits of the people and once again stoke the fires of optimism and hope. "Therefore, say to the children of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will take you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you from their labor, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you to the land, concerning which I raised My hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as a heritage; I am the Lord (Exodus 6:6-8).'"

We would have expected the Jews to feel the first tingle of freedom, the optimism of emancipation, the hope that there is a light at the end of the tunnel; to rally around Moshe, hoist him on their shoulders and begin to plan for a beautiful future. But that is not what happened. Instead the verse says, "Moses spoke thus to the children of Israel, but they did not hearken to Moses because of [their] shortness of breath and because of [their] hard labor (Exodus 6:9)." Unexpectedly unresponsive. What happened? How are we to understand the reaction of our ancestors to this beautiful message of hope and salvation?

The *Meshech Chochma* (Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, 1843-1926) explains that they were listening and attentive to every word until Moshe began to speak about the Land of Israel. When Moshe said the words, "I will bring you to the land .... And I will give it to you as a heritage," they tuned out. Why? "*Mi'Kotzer Ruach U'meyavoda Kasha*, from shortness of breath and hard labor. For it is the way of those who are suffering to only want to hear that their suffering will end. But they cannot absorb or internalize a message of future success and salvation." When a person is in the midst of difficult times, the most they can imagine is the alleviation of their present pain. If you tell a person dealing with crisis and conflict, that one day everything will be amazing, miraculous and beyond imagination – they will not have the emotional bandwidth to internalize this information. When Moshe tells the people that God is going to take them out of Egypt and redeem them from their suffering – the people hear and eagerly anticipate this reality. But when Moshe then says, "and God will take you to the Land of Israel and you will be an autonomous successful nation" – they tune out. Not because they don't want to believe – but because they can't. They were so overwhelmed by the enormity of their difficult circumstances that they could not see beyond the removal of their present pain.

The Maggid, Rav Nachum of Chernobyl (1770-1837) once stayed at the inn of a simple Jew. As was his practice, Rav Nachum awoke at midnight to recite *Tikun Chatzos* (the prayer to mourn for the destruction of the Temple). Rav Nachum lost himself in prayer and began to cry over the ongoing suffering of our people. The inn-keeper quickly ran to Rav Nachum's room to see if everything was alright. "Rebbe, I heard you crying, is something wrong?" Rav Nachum responded, "I was crying over the destruction of the Temple." "Rebbe, I am not familiar with the Temple or its destruction," said the simple inn-keeper. Rav Nachum then proceeded to explain to the inn-keeper about the Bais HaMikdash and all it meant to our people. After concluding his explanation, Rav Nachum said, "My dear brother, don't despair, Moshiach will come soon and we will rebuild the Temple. But tell me when Moshiach comes, will you be ready to travel the land of Israel?" The inn-keeper responded, "Rebbe, I must ask my wife." He returned a few minutes later. "Rebbe, my wife said that we can't ascend to the Land of Israel when the Moshiach arrives as we have cows, chickens and horses and we must look after them." The Rebbe would not give up. "But there is so much anti-Semitism, the Tartars, the Cossacks – every day there is someone else who wants to kill us. Forget about the animals and promise me that when Moshiach comes you will ascend with him to the Land of our Forefathers". "Rebbe, I understand your words – let me go discuss it with my wife." The inn-keeper returned a few minutes later, "Rebbe we discussed it and my wife said that you should pray that the Tartars and Cossacks should be taken to Israel and we will live here in peace with our livestock!"

There are times when we become so embedded in our present that we can't see a future. Often, we are so blinded by our current circumstances that we can't see beyond them, even though beautiful blessing is within reach. This lack of vision can be the result of feeling overwhelmed by the difficulties and challenges of life. But it can also be the result of being too busy with the "Livestock" of everyday life. We each have a destiny and are here in this world to do something meaningful and important. If we are encountering difficult circumstances, we must constantly remind ourselves that it will be alright. Even if we are overwhelmed by the details and responsibilities of life we must remind ourselves that we each have a beautiful destiny which needs to be actualized. Even if we are "short of breath" we must find the strength to look beyond our present into a beautiful future.