

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
Parshat Va-era – Exodus 6:2-9:35
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In the opening verses of our *parsha* this week God instructs Moses to go to the Israelites and declare:

Say to the Israelite people: I am the ETERNAL ONE. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the ETERNAL ONE, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I [am] the ETERNAL ONE.” (Exodus 6:6-8)

We know these verses quite well as they form an important part of the ritual at our *Seder Shel Pesach* – coming in April. These verses contain the promises our Sages link with the cups of wine we bless and drink as a part of the ritual. However, as I studied our *parsha* anew this year, I found my focus on the very next verse:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֹר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה:

But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, **their spirits crushed** by cruel bondage. (verse 9)

Given the complex range of events in recent times, I was drawn to the final phrase of the verse: *v'lo sham-u el-Moshe mi-kotzer ruach u-mey-avodah kashah* – “they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.” In his well-regarded translation, Dr. Everett Fox renders this as “they did not hearken to Moshe, out of shortness of spirit and out of hard servitude.”¹

So often I find Dr. Fox’s translation more faithful to the meaning of the Hebrew words. Still, even as I read his translation, I am drawn to reading the Hebrew slightly differently – *and through a Mussar lens*.

The phrase *kotzer ruach* is generally understood to mean “impatience.” Yet, *kotzer* is related to the word *katzar*, as in “short.” And *ruach*, as we know carries a variety of meanings – “wind,” “breeze,” “soul,” and “spirit.” As I prepare these words, I am very much aware of our *Mussar Institute* gathering this coming Sunday – ***Ruach Chaim – Living with Spirit, Lifting Up our Lives in Trying Times***. Little did we know when we chose this theme back in September that it would resonate on so many levels.

¹ *The Five Books of Moses*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995

Now, in these later days of January, our spirits truly need uplift as we reckon with the ceasefire in Israel and the release of three hostages just days ago. We are holding out hope the next group will come home in the days ahead, with the remaining hostages to be returned in the coming weeks. We are still watching the devastation from the horrific wildfires in Southern California. This week has brought a leadership transition in the US, which is a cause for celebration for many, even as it brings anxiety for others. And there is so much more. I daresay, each of us could use some bolstering of *ruach*.

For me, the phrase *kotzer ruach* resonates powerfully as I reflect on numerous conversations in recent weeks and months with my teen students; with the members of my congregation in Jackson, Mississippi; with members of our TMI community; as well as with family and friends in California and in Israel. We live in a world and time when information (and disinformation) is constantly bombarding us. The reality of *kotzer ruach*, which I am viewing as a shortness or deficiency of *ruach/spirit*, or as something less than a full soul, is a challenge.

In a section of *Ohr HaTzafun*² entitled *Amalut BaTorah – “Striving in Torah,”* Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, comments on the challenge the Israelites faced as a result of their servitude in Egypt. He teaches:

We see that when the children of Israel reached a certain level of *Emunah/faith* (in last week’s *parshah*) what is written about them, וַיַּאֲמֵנוּ – *Va-ya-ameyn Ha-Am* -- "And the people believed." (Exodus 4:31) At this point they merited *geulah/redemption*. Yet we know that this *Emunah/faith* was *k'lushah/faint*. [Hence, this week we read that] "They listened to Moses with *kotzer ruach/impatience* and *avodah kasha/hard work*." (Exodus 6:9)

Only later, when they reached the Sea of Reeds, does the Torah testify about them, that they come to complete faith, as it is written: "And they believed in God and in Moses God’s servant." (Exodus 10:10)

In *Shiurei Chumash Shemot*,³ Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe adds that "It is not that the Israelites lacked *emunah*, since we have already seen (as noted by the Alter of Slabodka) that their *emunah* is verified in Exodus 4:31." We might ask ourselves the same question as we face challenges in our own time. Is it that we are deficient in *emunah*? Or is it that the challenges we face evoke *kotzer ruach* which can be an impediment to *emunah*?

In *Beyt Kelm*, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm references a comment from Ramban on our verse⁴ wherein we are taught:

² *Ohr HaTzafun, Vayikra*, III:17

³ *Shiurei Chumash Shemot*, page 58

⁴ Ramban on Exodus 6:9

It was not because they did not believe in God and in God's prophet [that they did not listen]. Rather, they paid no attention to his words because of *kotzer ruach*/impatience of spirit, as a person whose soul is grieved on account of their misery does not want to live another moment in their suffering, even though they know they will be relieved later. The "impatience of spirit" was their fear that Pharaoh would put them to death, as their officers said to Moses, and the "cruel bondage" was the pressure, for the taskmasters pressed upon them and hurried them [in their daily task], which gave them no chance to hear anything and consider it.

Rav Simcha Zissel builds on this stating that, "[Pharaoh's] advice⁵ that his taskmasters increase the burden on the Israelite slaves was successful [in breaking their spirits.] Hence it is written, 'they did not hearken to Moshe, out of shortness of spirit and out of hard servitude.'" He further suggests that the increased burden may have had nothing to do with their *emunah*. Rather, bowing under their harsh labors, they were too downtrodden to hear Moses' call to them.⁶

We know from our own life experiences, when we are feeling the "weight of the world" we may find ourselves unable to see, hear, and think clearly. For some, challenges will extend to their sense of *emunah*/faith and even *bitachon*/trust. When we are burdened, we too, may find ourselves in a place of *kotzer ruach* – diminished spirit. This is a pretty common occurrence in a world as challenging as ours. For me, that is part of why I stay on the *Mussar* path – why I study regularly in *hevruta*, participate in *Va'adim*, and cherish our TMI Community and its various offerings. When my *ruach* is diminished, I am reminded that I do not walk alone. There are companions who will lift me when I am troubled. At the same time, I bear the *achrayut*/responsibility of helping others who may find themselves suffering from *kotzer ruach*. This all lies very much at the center of *nose-a b'ol im chaveyro* – bearing the burden with one's fellow, a *middah* deemed so important by the Alter of Kelm, that he set it at the very beginning of his teachings in *Chochmah U-Mussar*.⁷

Kotzer Ruach, however one understands it, is a challenge in our time, as it was for our ancestors in ancient Egypt. Moses came to guide them, with God's guidance out of their diminished state. May our sharing of the *Mussar* path – and especially Sunday's *Ruach Chaim* gathering help us to lift our spirits, even as we work to lift those of others with whom we are privileged to share this path!

⁵ In Exodus 5:9 – "Let heavier work be laid upon those involved; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises."

⁶ *Beyt Kelm Shemot*, page 91

⁷ This is explained in *Rav Yeruchom: The Life, Wisdom, and Worldwide Impact of Rabbeinu Yeruchom Halevi Levovitz*, by Rav Shaul Hutner, Judaica Press, see pages 43ff

FOR FOCUS:

- In which aspects of your *neshamah* do you feel *kotzer ruach*?
- Towards which *middot* might you turn to bolster your *ruach*/spirit?
- Who are the partners on your *Mussar* journey to whom you can turn for support in strengthening your *ruach*? To whom do you need to lend support and strength at this time?