

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Va'era

פרשת וארא

January 9, 2016

כ"ח בטבת תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 6:2-9:35

In this *parasha*, through Moshe and Aharon, Hashem brings plagues on the *Mitzrim* (Egyptians), and Paro repeatedly refuses to allow the *Bnei Yisrael* to leave.

When Moshe goes to speak with Bnei Yisrael about redemption and the wonders that God will use to bring them into the Land of Israel, the Torah tells us [6:9]: “ וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ, ” – And they did not listen to Moshe because of [their] broken [literally, narrowed] spirit and hard work.”

“קִצְרֵי רוּחַ” is an interesting phrase. It appears in various forms in books of the *TaNakh*.

- *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 21:4: “ וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהַר הָהָר, דָּרָךְ יַם-סוּף, לְסַבֵּב, אֶת-אֶרֶץ; – And they journeyed from Mount Hor by the way to the Reed Sea, to circle the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became broken because of the way.”
- *Michah* (Micah) 2:7: “ הֲאִמּוֹר בֵּית-יַעֲקֹב, הֲקִצְרֵי רוּחַ ה'--אִם-אֵלֶּה, מִעֲלֵלָיו; – Do I change, O house of Yaakov? Is the spirit of Hashem broken? Are these His doings? Do not My words do good to him that walks uprightly?”
- *Mishlei* (Proverbs) 14:29: “ אֶרֶךְ אַפִּים, רַב-תְּבוּנָה; וְקִצְרֵי-רוּחַ, מְרִים אֲוֵלֶת. – He that is slow to anger is of great understanding; but he that is broken of spirit exalts folly.”

What are the implications of קָצַר רוּחַ in our *parasha's* verse and in these other verses?

Rashi [11th Century Franco-Germany] elucidates the effects of קָצַר רוּחַ. He says, "Because of brokenness of spirit: when someone is upset, their spirit and breath are shortened and they cannot breathe deeply." The Bnei Yisrael were unable to listen to Moshe because they were as anxious as someone who cannot catch his breath, or perhaps who is manifesting shortness of breath psycho-somatically.

Meshech Chochmah [19th to early 20th Century Eastern Europe] elaborates on this. He states, "This refers to [their inability to listen to the idea of] entering the Land of Israel. Because it is the way of those whose spirit is broken, that they want to hear only what is immediately involved in getting out of their troubles, and they don't want to hear any promises about the future or the success of God's wonders, etc."

The explanations of both *Rashi* and *Meshech Chochmah* reflect the real psychological effects on someone whose spirit has been broken. Many of us can relate to these ideas through personal experiences in our own lives.

We don't often think of masters attempting to break their slaves' spirits. But the Torah reflects that this is what happened in Egypt, and indeed, the same seems to have been true in the antebellum south.

Given the broken spirits of the Egyptian slaves, it is even more remarkable that they were inspired enough to organize themselves for an Exodus of some 1.2 million people. When we think about the Israelites' psychological state, the Exodus becomes an even more impressive event in our Jewish story.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How do the comments of *Rashi* and *Meshech Chochmah* explain the other verses cited above?
- What does it mean to be of "broken spirit"? Have you ever seen someone in that state? What can we do to repair their spirit?
- How were slavery in Egypt and in the South before the Civil War alike? How were they different?