

## Vaera 5781 “Kotzer Ruah”

At the beginning of this week’s parashah, Moses has already been to Pharaoh once to ask him to let the people go. Pharaoh has reacted, predictably, by doubling the people’s workload. So perhaps it’s not surprising that when the Holy One appears to Moses again at the start of this week’s reading to reinforce the message of redemption, and Moses goes once again to the people to tell them that they will be redeemed ‘with an outstretched arm and extraordinary chastisements’<sup>1</sup>, the people give Moses the brush-off. As Rashi’s notes on the parashah state,

*If a person comes to your door and tells you that tomorrow you’ll be a king, you don’t believe them.*

The Torah tells us that the people refuse to listen to Moses for two reasons:

*mikotzer ruah u’me-avodah kashah.*

- in our translation, ‘their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.’

The first of these, *kotzer ruah*, can be understood in multiple ways.

*Kotzer ruah* can just mean ‘shortness of breath.’ Some of our commentators - Ramban, for example - see this shortness of breath as being physical (we should remember that Ramban was a doctor in his day job). He teaches that the people buried themselves in their physical work, to make themselves breathless and distract themselves from their feelings. This gives us the image of the people turning their backs, getting on with their labor, tuning Moses out completely.

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<sup>1</sup> Shemot 6:6

Rashi and other commentators<sup>2</sup> understand the breathlessness as having a different cause - that when people are distressed, their breath patterns change. Today we know this to be scientifically true - there are many practices where we deliberately alter our breath so as to calm ourselves down. This gives us the image of the people hearing Moses' words, but being so distressed that it blocks out their ability to listen to them.

By contrast, Ibn Ezra understands the *kotzer ruah* to mean 'impatience.' The people were just worn out with the length of the exile. This isn't so much a physical exhaustion as an exhaustion of hope.

And the Moroccan rabbi Chaim ibn Attar<sup>3</sup> understands the word *ruah* differently yet again. He speculates,

*perhaps it was because the people had not yet received Torah - they were spiritually reduced, because Torah has the capacity to broaden a person's mind and heart.*

On this understanding, the people weren't capable of listening to Moses because of a fault in their perspective. In our spiritual tradition, this state is called *mohin d'katnut*, 'small brain.'

Breathlessness, sorrow, hopelessness, diminished perspective...does any of that sound familiar at all?

Once again, Torah is speaking to our lives. This is a time of *kotzer ruah* - the literal breathlessness that comes with COVID and the figurative shortness of spirit and loss of hope and perspective. [It is also a time of *avodah kashah*, a feeling of dragging exhaustion, as if the specific gravity of life has changed and everything takes x times more effort. It is a time when it is easy to fall into misplaced beliefs]

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<sup>2</sup> eg Siftei Hachamim (Shabbethai ben Joseph Bass, Poland 1641–1718)

<sup>3</sup> 1696-1743

The commentators - even the doctors among them - don't prescribe what to do in these circumstances. But let's imagine them here with us and put them on a panel together. Perhaps we can infer something from their various understandings. What would they suggest we do to address their diagnoses?

Ramban, who teaches that *kotzer ruah* is the breathlessness that comes from distraction, might gently suggest that it is okay to allow ourselves to name our feelings and help others to name theirs. So often when we reach out to each other we get the response, "Oh, I'm okay," or, "I'm fine, I guess." How often do we accept that as being true? Perhaps if we took a little more time with each other or invited a little more disclosure, we'd get to hear how we really feel, how the other person's feelings help us draw closer to our own. Ramban goes on to teach that under the distraction there's fear and a feeling of pressure. It seems likely that the same is true for us today. If we can slow down and share those feelings, then perhaps we become more able to attune ourselves to what might be good in the situation - such as the fact the conversation is happening, that we want to draw close to each other.

Rashi, for whom *kotzer ruah* is the breathlessness of sorrow, might suggest something similar.

Ibn Ezra, who understands *kotzer ruah* as impatience and loss of hope because of the length of the exile, might suggest that we try to stop counting. There are so many reminders in our lives of how long the pandemic has been - in days, in weeks, in months - and so many speculations about its future that it's nearly impossible to bring ourselves into the present moment - which, of course, is the only moment we truly have. Perhaps Ibn Ezra would prescribe that we do something that anchors us in the present moment. Those things often involve using our bodies. Maybe a walk, maybe just opening a window; maybe cooking something, or making something with our hands. Maybe some actual stretching or exercise. All of those can work to ground us and remind us that while the past is done and the future is unknown, we do have the moment in which we are living.

And as for Rabbi ibn Attar - his remedy reminds me of a favorite quotation, from T H White's *The Once and Future King*. This is Merlin the magician speaking to a young King Arthur:

*"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn."*<sup>4</sup>

The idea that we can comfort ourselves by learning something new and changing our perspective as a result is profoundly Jewish. Perhaps Merlin also understood that a new piece of wisdom has the power to move us from *mohin d'katnut*, small mind, to *mohin d'gadlut*, expansive mind. If we can alter our perspective, broaden our horizons, we really do become more able to address what is happening to us every day and find meaning in it.

Those are just some of the remedies on offer for our present state of *kotzer ruah*. But we are all each other's teachers, because Jewish learning happens in relationship. Let's not forget that we all have wisdom we can pass on to each other.

And perhaps together we can create a space in which some goodness can land.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>4</sup> T H White, *The Once and Future King*