

OUT OF TIME

by Rabbi Label Lam

And the Egyptians enslaved the Children of Israel with breaking labor. (Shemos 1:13)

There's a play on words that helps us understand how it is, according the Midrash, that almost the entire nation was recruited for slave labor. The Baal Haturim breaks down the word for "breaking" - b'farech- to mean with a soft mouth: peh-rach.

The Egyptians dealt cleverly with the Children of Israel. They induced them to work, at first, just to show their national loyalty and pride. Later they were held to that impossibly high standard of production. At first they were seduced with a soft mouth and only later were crushed by the weight of the daily quota.

The Torah is not just an historical account or a legal code, but a teaching-book for us to learn about our lives. What is the relevance to us of understanding the nuance of some ancient word?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lutzatto writes in his classic ethical work The Mesilas Yesharim - The Path of the Just: "This is one of the strategies of the of the negative inclination and his craftiness, to increase the work with constancy upon the minds of men until there remains no time for contemplating or observing in which direction they are going. Because he knows that if they would pay attention even for a moment to their paths, they would certainly and immediately feel remorseful about their actions. The regret would then grow to such a point that they would abandon their bad actions completely.

This is one of the advices of the wicked Pharaoh, as it says; "Increase the work load upon the people...(Shemos 5:9). His intention was not to leave any space for them to think at all and discover a method of resisting. Rather he was trying to occupy their minds and confuse them from any form of contemplation through constancy of work without any interruption. So is the advice of the negative inclination in reality against people. He is a man of war and skilled in his craft. It is impossible to escape from his methodologies except with great wisdom and profound insight."

A friend of mine told me that he was happy initially when, through the blessing of technology, he was told by his boss he could work from home. With the use of a home computer he would save himself many hours in commuting time each week.

In the comfort of his living room, in pajamas, he would now be able to earn a living wage. That's how he felt at first. Later, what happened was, he started getting calls further and further into the night.

Soon he was "on call" 24/7. How was he going to handle Shabbos? Even 24/6 would prove too much for him. When would he find sacred time for his kids, wife and himself?

This new work set up became a major intrusion. At first it entered benignly with a smile and only later choked his entire life. Once the walls of his home became included in the definition of work so all of his time became fair game. Somehow, by being aware, he was able to disengage himself from the new arrangement. Others, though, are still occupied as fulltime workaholics.

It's not just work. The music is turned louder in every room. The phone is actively in use in every place - private and public. In the weighing room at the hospital, at the airport, we are being baby sat by large screens on volume ten. They shout the message of Pharaoh and distract our minds at even the most precious moments from ever paying closer attention to that soft still voice.

The world seems more like a giant gambling casino or a mall, these days, without clocks. As the pages of the calendar fall off, money either accumulates or dissipates, and in spite of all the wonderful devices we have acquired to save time and conquer space, in the end, eventually and often tragically we find ourselves out of time.

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