

TO SINAI AND BEYOND

by Rabbi Label Lam

They said, "Let us now go for a three-day journey in the wilderness and we shall bring offerings to HASHEM our G-d..." The King of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you disturb the people from its work?" (Shemos 5:3-4)

So Moses spoke accordingly to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses because of shortness of breath and hard work. (Shemos 6:9)

Is there such a person that when you tell him good news he isn't happy!? For example: "A baby boy was just born to you!" or "Your master has set you free!" and he isn't happy? So why does it say: "They did not listen to Moses..."? It was difficult in their eyes to separate from the idolatry of Egypt! (Mechilta)

Why did Moses ask for a three day leave initially? Did he really intend to return afterward? What is this disease- "shortness of breath" that prevented the people from hearing Moses message of hope? When offered a chance to leave the prison, would an inmate refuse because he still has some menial task to perform? Absurd! Was their sense of mission so myopic that they were trapped by their own lack of vision?

Years ago I was working on three different projects simultaneously: 1) Learning with businessmen 2) Recruiting college students to go to Israel for a summer 3) Teaching, as a volunteer, in the N.Y. State prison system. One Shabbos night at a gathering of friends someone asked me, "How's it going with the business people, the college students and the prisoners? In a moment of unusual lucidity I answered, "To tell you the truth, the businessmen are in prison, the college students are in business, and the prisoners are in college!"

How so? The pressure in the working world is often so great that the average person finds it extremely difficult to pry himself away for an hour a week to learn Torah even if he knows it's good for him. He often finds himself in this vice of time that never lets go. The magic screen or the cell phone is ever beckoning combined with many other pressures and worries that create the invisible walls of his prison. The typical college student is busy even in the summer with this internship or that mediocre job or some exotic adventure. It's great that they are ambitious but we're talking about a few weeks out of one's entire lifetime to seek out answers to the "BIG" questions and they're busy trying to figure out how to turn this Brit Lit degree into mega-bucks. Then the prisoners they have the time to study and many are busy filing briefs and researching all day the legal facts that

surround their case and offering opinions on others', as if they're in really in college.

Why had Moses requested only a three day visa for the entire Children of Israel? It may have been less of a strategy to deceive Pharaoh and more of a way not to overstate the itinerary, all for the sake of the Children of Israel. They were not ready to hear that this journey might lead to a lifetime commitment. In their minds, at that time, a three day seminar/vacation was all they could dream of or tolerate.

The Chazon Ish writes: "When a person with a sensitive soul finds some quiet time to meditate on existence, away from the pulls of desire, astonishment overtakes him. The sight of the heavens above and the earth below fills him emotion and wonder. The world suddenly strikes him as a mystery, a marvelous enigma...And the desire to fathom this mystery consumes his soul. He is willing to brave fire and water to gain understanding. He wonders: What is the point of this life, however pleasant it may be, if its purpose eludes him."

After three days there's the certain hope that having tasted the difference an appetite for pure goodness would take root in their hearts and they would easily choose to march forward to Sinai and beyond.

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