

SOMETHING ASTONISHING

by Rabbi Label Lam

On that day Pharaoh ordered the taskmaster over the people and its foremen, saying, "You shall no longer give straw to the people to manufacture the bricks as yesterday and the day before yesterday; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the quota of bricks that they were making yesterday and before yesterday you shall impose upon them- do not reduce it- for they are lazy; therefore they cry out saying, 'Let us go and bring offerings to our G-d.' Let the work be heavier upon the men and let them engage in it, and let them not pay attention to false words." (Shemos 5:6-9)

Pharaoh was not the first or the last evil genius to employ this very strategy to capture the bodies and minds of humanity. The Nazis too had a saying upon the gates entering Auschwitz, "Arbeit Macht Frei-Work Makes Free". If people will be kept distracted and busy enough then they will have been effectively enslaved and forever.

The Mesilas Yesharim latches onto this statement of Pharaoh explaining how this is actually the advice of Yetzer Hora- the evil inclination: "They pay not heed to their deeds and they fail to consider whether they should embrace them or flee from them... In other words, they were constantly propelled forward by the impulsiveness of their habits and ways, without leaving themselves time to critically examine their conduct. As a result, they fell into wrongdoing without being aware of it. This is surely the ploy of the evil inclination, which relentlessly labors to burden the hearts of the people until they are left with no spare moment to contemplate or to observe the path they are taking. For it knows that if they would only minimally devote attention to ways, they would no doubt, immediately begin to regret their deeds, and this regret would intensify until they would abandon their sin altogether.

This is similar to the advice of the wicked Pharaoh who said, "The work shall be made harder for the men, so that they should be busy doing it and not talk about trivialities." His intent was not only to deny them any respite from their work but to take note of their plight or to plot against him, but also to prevent them from any reflection, by means of ceaseless toil."

Decades before "Blackberry" Professor Leo Strauss observed about the confused state of the human condition: "...we can be or become wise in all matters of secondary importance, but we have to be resigned to utter ignorance in the most important respect: we cannot have any knowledge regarding the ultimate principles of our choices, i.e. regarding their soundness or unsoundness; our principles of have no other support than our arbitrary blind preferences. We are then in the position

of beings who are sane and sober when engaged in trivial business and who gamble like madmen when confronted by serious issues - retail sanity and wholesale madness."

Is there a solution? The Chazon Ish writes in Emunah v' Bitachon, "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 with 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?"

The first step might be to do something called "nothing". In that pause be prepared to wade into the quiet of a Shabbos, away from the pulls of desire, and be overtaken by **something astonishing**.
DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).