

A CLEAN BREAK

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And it was, that when Paro sent the nation out, that G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, though it was close; for G-d said 'the people may change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.'" [13:17]

The Jewish people needed to break away entirely from their lives as slaves in Egypt. They were not ready for war, to resist. There was a spiritual component of this as well, given our Sages' teaching that the greatest war is the one within ourselves, between our Good and Evil Inclinations. The Philistines shared many of the same immoral practices as the Egyptians, and exposure to their society could have been a further negative influence. Instead, G-d effected a "clean break" from the degraded practices and enslavement of Egypt, taking us out into the open desert.

Rabbi M. Miller of Gateshead, in his book "Sabbath Shiurim," identifies this -- the sudden break -- as one of two competing models for how one should halt a bad habit or practice. The other, of course, is more gradual -- and he finds a source for this in the Torah as well: Moshe says to Paro, *"and now, let us go out three days' journey into the desert, and we will sacrifice to HaShem our G-d."* [3:18]

Why did Moshe imply that the people would return in three days, when they were never to return? The Malbim says that Moshe wanted to offer Paro the easiest possible request -- demonstrating the extent of Paro's evil when he refused even to do that. For the Jews, however, says Rabbi Miller, this was designed to accustom the Jewish nation to the idea of leaving. They could go out into the desert for a while, but still have the opportunity to return. This provides a paradigm for the idea of a slow, gradual transition.

So, which method is best? When a person wants to change his life for the better, should he gradually modify his practices, or suddenly leap into a new pattern of behavior?

The answer, Rabbi Miller says, is that we need both. To make a sudden change has obvious risks -- if one fails in the attempt, then he or she has accomplished nothing, and may be too bruised to try again. "To undertake more than one is really capable of, and then to regret one's action, is worse than never to have tried at all: the aftermath of failure can become a serious and permanent drawback to moral progress." At the same time, the advantage of sudden change over gradual shifts is that once a person successfully crosses a narrow bridge, he or she can "burn it" -- and permanently close out the bad behavior.

What one should do, he says, is follow the model of the Israelites. First, think about making a "small"

change -- to go out three days' journey. Gradually build strength and confidence. Improve gradually. Then, when one is ready, make the leap forward which will firmly establish new practices and do away with the old.

Good Shabbos,
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