

# WHO'S SHORT OF BREATH?

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

At the end of last week's sidrah, Shemos, Hashem punishes Moshe for having questioned his mission in Egypt - that since he came things had only gotten worse. This week's parsha, Va'eira, begins with Hashem repeating Moshe's mission - telling him to once again encourage the Jews not to lose faith. Moshe does what Hashem says, yet the Jews are not encouraged by his words. "And they did not listen to Moshe, because of shortness of breath, and hard work." (6:9) Apparently, the Jews were so overcome by the burden of slavery that they no longer had the patience nor the wherewithal to embrace Moshe's message of redemption and freedom.

Immediately following this, Hashem commands Moshe to repeat his message to Pharaoh to allow the Jews to leave. Predictably, after his lack of success in convincing his own people, Moshe questions his ability to convey a message to Pharaoh. "Moshe spoke before Hashem, saying, 'Even the Children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh do so?' (6:9) The apparent fault in Moshe's argument is this: The Torah explains quite clearly that Bnei Yisrael's not listening to Moshe was because of the pain of their slavery. If so, who's to say that Pharaoh, whose thoughts had not been overcome by "shortness of breath and hard work," will not take heed of Moshe's warning?

The Ralbag has a very novel understanding of the "shortness of breath" mentioned in the pasuk. (Were it not that he would introduce it, I certainly would not have the courage to say it on my own!) He explains that it does not refer to the Jews at all, but rather to Moshe! Perhaps we can understand this as follows: When Moshe first approached Bnei Yisrael in last week's sidrah with his message of redemption, he was all fired-up and excited about his mission. He had been charged with removing a nation from slavery - a nation that had suffered subjugation for over 200 years. Moshe's enthusiasm was palpable, and the people felt his positive energy, and were encouraged and inspired by it. As we read in last week's parsha, "The nation believed. (4:31)"

By the end of last week's parsha, however, Moshe gets a "dose of reality." Things are not going quite as he had hoped. While Bnei Yisrael accepted his message, Pharaoh did not. Not only had he not succeeded in making things better - things have actually taken a turn for the worse. Pharaoh had increased the Jews' workload. Moshe is disheartened, and questions his mission. Hashem calms Moshe, and reassures him that, despite all appearances, things are still going according to plan. Moshe returns to the Jews, and delivers his message once again, doing so however with just a tiny bit less enthusiasm and energy than he had done so the first time. It's hard to continue to deliver a message of redemption and freedom with the same zest and gusto knowing what the Jews are

likely thinking - that so far things had only gotten worse! Bnei Yisrael immediately pick up on Moshe's waning energy level. They did not listen to Moshe due to the shortness [of Moshe's] breath - a message is only as powerful as its bearer. In this case, there was just a wee bit lacking, and that made all the difference in the world. (This understanding of the Ralbag is based on the explanation of R' Bernstein z"l).

The holy Alshich explains the words of the Shema, "And these words shall be upon your heart... and you shall teach them thoroughly to your children, (Devarim 6:6-7)" in a similar vein. To the extent that "these words" are upon your own heart, you will be able to teach them to your children. If you have a strong and palpable appreciation of the value of Torah and mitzvos, then your children (and students) will pick up on this, and will take what you say seriously, gaining insight and encouragement from your words. If, however, there is even the smallest fault within your own heart, then your message will not be imparted to your children. They will instinctively pick up on your own lack of enthusiasm, and will scorn your words and lectures inside themselves.

Perhaps this helps to understand Moshe's contention to Hashem: Behold, the Children of Israel have not listened to me - for my message did not carry the level of enthusiasm and energy needed to warm their hearts. If so, how will Pharaoh listen to me - surely he, who innately wishes to dismiss my words, will pick up on my diminishing energy, and will not be convinced by my message.

We all know or have met people who, simply by walking into a room, change the entire atmosphere. Of course, there are those people who are so sour and embittered that all one needs to do is to be in their presence and one is left with a bitter taste in one's mouth. But then there are the Moshe Rabbeinu's (here being the exception) - the people who just have to ask you to do something, and you'll do it just to please them, because you know it's important to them, and because they convey their message with such energy and urgency. When we surround ourselves with such individuals, we feel energized. And when we strive to become such people, we energize others.

So much of what we do effects others: Our children, our students, friends, even a stranger we meet on a bus. By making sure our hashkafos are solid within, and that we really feel and believe what we preach, we guarantee that our effect on others will be a positive one.

Have a good Shabbos.

*This week's publication has been sponsored in memory of Harav Meir Tzvi Yitzchak ben Harav Chaim Yoel Dohany, by his son.*