

## They did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work. (6:9)

Shortness of breath, lack of spirit, and backbreaking work devastates a person, so that he does not respond favorably to assurances that he will achieve salvation. When a person is wasted, it is difficult to get him to listen – regardless of the positive nature of the message. The lack of spirit and hard work seem out of sequence relative to one another. One loses spirit as a result of overwork – not the other way around. Why does the Torah precede hard work with a lack of spirit? Perhaps spirit refers to spirituality. When a person is connected to *kedushah*, holiness, he becomes more spiritual. A spiritual person views physicality through a different lens. Physical labor does not take the same toll on a person when he is connected to Hashem. The pain exists, but man rises above it.

The evening devoted specifically to perpetuating the Egyptian bondage/liberation experience is the *Pesach Seder* night. This service, which is carried out in the context of a festive meal, is a fifteen-step process through which we relive the past, exalt in the Redemption, and pray for the future. It is a heightened transformative experience. The evening revolves around the questions asked by the children (initiated by their parents). It is all about questions and answers, since such a process facilitates this evening as a learning experience. When people ask, they indicate interest. It is much more than a simple dialogue. The evening begins with *Kiddush*, sanctifying Hashem's Name over a cup of wine. Traditionally, this is the *Seder's* commencement. If the *Seder* is all about questioning, why do we not begin with the child's *Mah Nishtanah*? Why is this night different? This is the symbolic question, which leads into the story of *Pesach*, its origin and effect on the present, as we live as Jews in a secular society.

The *Alexander Rebbe, zl*, explains that the questions must follow *Kiddush*, because a Jew does not initiate his *Pesach* experience -- or any religious dialogue or experience -- with questions. He must first make *Kiddush*, link himself to Hashem, to faith in Him with the utmost conviction. To question without faith is to scoff. Once one has concretized his bond with Hashem, he can then ask his questions. It is much like a person holding on to a kite which is flying in every direction in the wind. As long as the kite is rooted in a person's hand, it may fly all over and it will not fly away. If it is not firmly connected, it will quickly be blown away. Likewise, when we are firmly rooted in Torah, we remain connected; we may question, we may wonder, we may cogitate. We will temporarily move to the right, to the left, up and down – but not away.

The Jewish People's lack of "spirit" allowed them to fall prey to the effects of the slave labor to which they have been subjected. The Holocaust years, the purgatory – both spiritual and physical/emotional, was the painful period most similar (in our time) to the travails endured in Egypt. Although we endured a thousand-year period of almost daily suffering and murder during our European exile (Eastern and Western), it was not a systematic organized debasement of persecution and brutal murder, such as was evinced during the Holocaust. Even during this time of

madness, when the suffering and pain was indescribable, the faith of many Jewish men and women maintained them, carrying them to the greatest heights. Some survived to see the reward for their commitment, in the generations of committed progeny which they subsequently nurtured.

Perhaps, this is why the *Seder* begins with *Kadeish*, which means sanctify (yourself). One would think that the term *Kiddush*, referring to reciting the blessing over the wine, would be more appropriate. I think the *Baal Haggadah* is intimating to us that, before we commence with the questions, we should properly sanctify ourselves.

Two forms of questions arise. First, the word question itself is derived from the word, quest, which means to seek. A true questioner seeks an answer, an explanation. He makes an inquiry, because he truly wants to understand. Second, is the questioner who only seeks to challenge, to impugn, to oppose. He does not seek an answer; he already has the answers.

There was probably no period when our faith as a nation – both collective and individual faith -- was under greater duress than during and after the Holocaust. Mere words cannot describe the travail and the accompanying questions that were on the minds of those who suffered. Yet, many survived with their faith intact. They are the progenitors of this generation, and they were the ones whose example imbued us with the importance of *kadeish*, sanctify yourself.

We have no shortage of stories of faith connected to the Holocaust. I just came across two inspiring vignettes. It was the second night of *Pesach* in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1943. One bunker was still standing after days of destruction. This was the end. Tomorrow the Warsaw Ghetto would be history, another notch on the collective gun belt of the Nazi war machine. One Jewish family was still alive on that night. Probably there will never be such a *Seder* – ever again. Moishеле, the young child, began the *Mah Nishtanah*: “*Tatty*, why do we have to suffer so much – more than any other nation?” Moishеле’s father had one answer: The standard answer that we all give, the one given by the *Baal Haggadah*: *Avadim hayinu l’Pharaoh b’Mitzrayim*; “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” He continued with the discourse on Jewish history which demonstrates that there is a Divine Plan which guides our lives.

Moishеле was not satisfied. He had another question – one more piercing than the first. “*Tatty*, will you be alive for the next *Seder* (next year) to answer my questions? (Furthermore), will I be alive to ask the questions? *Tatty* – will there be any Jews alive, anywhere in the world, to celebrate *Pesach* and ask the questions?”

When Moishеле asked this question, silence reigned, both on earth and in Heaven. Everyone wept – on earth and in Heaven. It was the ultimate question; its poignancy was compelling. Moishеле’s father was an emotionally strong man. This question tore at his heart. What could he tell his young innocent son? Then the answer came to him, almost as if Heaven sent: *Ki b’Shem Kodshecha nishbata lo shelo yichbeh neiro l’olam vaed*, “For by Your Holy Name You swore to him that his lamp will not be extinguished forever and ever.” His father said, “Moishеле, I do not know if you will

be alive, nor do I know if I will be alive, but one thing I know for certain: there will be a Moishela somewhere. There will always be a Moishela who will ask the questions, because the One and Only promised that there will always be a Moishela!”

It was 1942, in a small village in Poland. For some reason, the Nazis seemed to have forgotten about the Jews in the village. The residents were acutely aware of the roundups, the mass murders, the concentration camps. For some reason, however, they had been passed by-- until one day when the announcement came that all the Jews were to gather in the synagogue at twelve in the afternoon of the coming *Shabbos*. No one knew the meaning of this announcement with certainty, but, in the back of their minds, they had no doubt. Some escaped; others remained. They had nowhere to go. Running into the forest was not a choice. Staying at home was all they could do -- and wait. Perhaps they would be spared.

It was Monday when the announcement was made. The community's elders convened a meeting of all the citizens to be held in the *shul*. Let everyone offer their voice. Perhaps they could come to a consensus of opinion. Many spoke and offered their suggestions. Suddenly, Yochanan the Tailor, a man who kept to himself, a man of few words, asked to be recognized. He had something to say: “My friends, would you like to know what I think? We have only a few more days to live. Tomorrow is Tuesday. Let us celebrate *Pesach!* On Wednesday, we will celebrate *Shavuos*. Thursday, we will celebrate *Succos*. We cannot leave this world without celebrating our *Yamim Tovim*, Festivals. They are a part of our lives. Friday will be our *Rosh Hashanah*, and *Shabbos*, the day that we are to convene in the *shul*, will be our *Yom Kippur!*

“Is there anyone in this *shul* who will exchange even one moment of his life to be like one of the Nazis? You would rather die a thousand deaths than live like one of them for a minute. Let our children know that we are spending our very last moments on this world celebrating the blessing of being Jewish!”