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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Va'era

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And Moshe spoke so to the children of Israel; but they hearkened not to Moshe for anguish of spirit and for cruel bondage." (Shemot 4:9)

Moses had a great message: ending slavery, beginning freedom, leaving for a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. But no matter how great the message, it has to reach the intended audience successfully. Many great ideas and plans have cropped up throughout history; but they simply faded into oblivion because they didn't convince the public.

Moses had a great message, but the Israelites themselves were not receptive due to *kotser ruach va-avoda kasha*, anguish of spirit and cruel bondage. As slaves, they were physically so strained and exhausted, Moses' words did not resonate; the message struck them as being impossibly unrealistic. Commentators explain *kotser ruach* in different ways. The Israelites were short of breath, gasping under the pressures of their labor. The Israelites' spirit was anguished i.e. they were psychologically unprepared to listen to Moses' pipe dream.

Dr. Nahum Sarna in his Torah Commentary on *Sefer Shemot* translates *kotser ruach* to mean "the Israelites' spirits were crushed." Sarna writes that, "*ruach* is the spiritual and psychic energy that motivates action. Its absence or attenuation signifies atrophy of the will" (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, page 32).The Israelites could not absorb Moses's message because the physical and mental toll of slavery plunged them into a state of hopelessness.

A fascinating interpretation was suggested by the Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, 1288-1344, Provence). He applies the term *kotser ruach* not to the people of Israel—but to Moses! Moses did not get his message across because he did not prepare properly, he did not relate meaningfully to the people. He was a loner, a prophet, a spiritual personality who did not grasp how best to win over the public. He was not eloquent enough, not engaging enough. In his own words, he was *aral sefatayim*, of uncircumcised lips i.e. unable to formulate his words clearly enough.

The Torah is pointing out the vital conditions for a great message to be successful: the messenger must be effective, the audience must be receptive, external obstacles must be overcome. In the case at hand, Moses had to relate effectively with the people; the Israelites had to be open to the message in spite of their slave conditions; and Pharaoh's opposition had to be overcome. These are the themes that pervade the Torah's narratives of the Exodus.

The transition from slavery to freedom was not a simple process. It took ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go—and even then he decided to pursue them with his troops. It took Moses much patience to hone his own effectiveness in reaching the hearts of his people. And it took the Israelites a full generation to internalize freedom and ready themselves to enter the Promised Land.

Turning to our situation today, we have a great message—a Torah way of life that promotes spirituality, morality, idealism…the ways of peace and pleasantness. Yet, the message doesn't always get through to the large masses of the Jewish community. Sometimes, the problem is external obstacles—the pressures of work, the secularization of society in general, the challenges of an entertainment-based society. Sometimes, the problem is lack of receptivity of the Jewish public to a religious message. Many Jews grow up with little or no deep Jewish education; they are too preoccupied with their businesses and social lives to give much attention to a challenging religious message. And sometimes the messengers—rabbis and teachers—do not relate to the genuine spiritual and intellectual needs of the public.

*Kotser ruach* in our times may be referring to a diminished spiritual sense. Vibrant religious life needs a vibrant religious spirit. It needs us to be open to the challenges of religion at its best. It needs us to hear the message, to overcome obstacles, and to have leaders who can articulate a sophisticated spiritual framework for our lives.

But *kotser ruach* might be an accurate description of why many people fail to achieve their maximum potentialities. Their spirits are stunted; they don't dream big enough; they are satisfied with their day to day lives without imagining they can do better, achieve more, reach beyond. They settle for the status quo without envisioning a grander framework for their lives.

If we are to be our best selves, we need to overcome the *kotser ruach* that curtails our dreams, imagination and creativity.