

Dvar Torah for Parshat Shemot 5571 Body & Soul

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Dvar Torah for Parshat Shemot

Based on Likutey Moharan I, Lesson #22:4–5

“The Egyptians subjugated the Children of Israel with hard labor” (Exodus 1:13). Rashi comments: Hard labor that crushes and breaks the body.

Body and soul. We all hear what the body says. It is not at all shy or reticent about expressing what it craves. Its cravings get so loud that it can't hear you—your neshamah (soul). While your body is busy trying to grab all the gusto it can, your neshamah is picking up its pleasures, all sorts of Divine perceptions. The neshamah wants to share them with the body, but it can't get close enough. Why? Because the body is too aggressive, a pleasure-seeking juggernaut. The neshamah would be in mortal danger.

This is where most people leave it. The body is in control, by dint of force and by the seduction of pleasures, real and imagined. But a Jewish soul is made of sterner stuff and can fight back to resume its rightful position. How? By breaking the body.

“Breaking the body” has a bad reputation nowadays. People associate it with old-time asceticism: fasting, flogging, rolling in the snow and all that sort of stuff. Or they associate it with plantation-style or chain-gang backbreaking labor. There’s an easier, more pleasant way to break your body. You can do it with a krekhtz, a good old-fashioned Yiddisheh sigh, the kind Bubby and Zeidey used to make.

Where does Rebbe Nachman get this idea from? He gets it from the Talmud, which teaches: Sighing breaks a person’s body (Ketuvot 62a).^{*} Not only a krekhtz, but any holy sound is a counter-punch that silences the body’s cry of “More! More!” For example, raising your voice to pray or study Torah with a little more oomph, and jingling coins (or making a fund-raising pitch) to collect tzedakah (charity) have the same effect.^{**} These all work because it takes chutzpah to make noise, and it takes holy chutzpah to make holy noise.

What benefit does the neshamah have from sharing its perceptions with the body? Without holy chutzpah, it’s impossible to be all the Jew you can be. Rebbe Nachman explains that in the life of every neshamah there are setbacks and downswings. (Surely you know from your own experience.) How can she pick herself up? If-if-the body is kosher, its enjoyment of physical pleasure reminds the neshamah of her pleasures, and she can again rise to them.

So, you can break your body by slaving for the Egyptian king and become further enslaved, or you can break it by krekhtzing for your Jewish soul and go up from Egypt land. The choice should be clear. Don’t be shy and don’t be afraid. Go down and tell Pharaoh to let your neshamah go.

agutn Shabbos!
Shabbat Shalom!

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^{*}Rebbe Nachman himself practiced the Talmud’s advice and found

it to be true. He would groan so deeply that afterward he was unable to lift his hands (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #167).

****Singing a holy song (for example, Shabbat zemirot [table-songs]) is also "body-breaking."**