



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Vaera: Breathless Living

The opening lines of our parsha feature an impassioned divine promise of freedom, an end to the slavery and the vista of national redemption. But when Moses and Aaron deliver the message, the Israelites are deaf to these ideas; they are too broken by slavery:

They did not listen to Moses, because of their shortness of breath and hard labor. (6:9)

I have been thinking about this “shortness of breath – קוצר רוח”, translated by others as “crushed spirit.” When one is short of breath, one is simply struggling to survive, to continue living. One has no time for grand hopes of the future; one is caught in the pressures of the moment. Israel cannot envision their incredible future when they are under the taskmasters whip.

This reminded me of the following passage, an experiment, from Malcom Gladwell’s, “The Tipping Point.” It is a stunning example of how we betray our long-term values for the needs of the moment:

Some years ago, two Princeton University psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson, decided to conduct a study inspired by the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. ... That story, from the New Testament ... tells of a traveler who has been beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Both a priest and a Levite – worthy, pious men – came upon the man but didn’t stop, “passing by the on the other side.” The only man to help was a Samaritan – the member of a despised minority – who “went up to him and bound up his wound” and took him to an inn.

Darley and Batson decided to replicate that study at the Princeton Theological Seminary. Darley and Batson met with a group of seminarians, individually, and asked each one to prepare a short, extemporaneous talk on a given biblical theme, then walk over to a nearby building to present it. Along the way to the

presentation, each student ran into a man slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The question was who would stop and help?

The professors who administrated the test had some of the students prepare a class on the story of the Good Samaritan, and yet, in the reality, the only factor that influenced whether they would help the man on the floor was whether the participants were told that they were late for their lecture, or that they had plenty of time.

On several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way. **The only thing that really mattered was whether the student was in a rush. Of the group that was, 10 percent stopped to help. Of the group who knew they had a few minutes to spare, 63 percent stopped.**

What this study is suggesting, in other words, is that the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end, in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behavior. The words “Oh, you’re late” had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate into someone who was indifferent to suffering – of turning someone, in that particular moment, into a different person.

In short, even the most ideological of us, if we think we are late for something important, have the tendency to abandon our deepest principles and our human compassion due to the momentary pressures. Eisenhower is quoted as saying: “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.” But we frequently find ourselves responsive to urgent emails and the needs of the hour rather than the things we truly need and desire. Our task is to slow down, and not live a life of “short breath and harsh labour.”

### **To Discuss:**

- How can our life reflect our deepest values and ideals, placing them at the forefront of our lifestyle rather than other “urgent” demands?
- How often do we break our own “red lines” when we are in a rush? (eg. texting while driving etc.)
- What are other examples of this?
- How can we rise above the helter-skelter pace of life?

I think that this is certainly a valuable topic for a discussion at the Shabbat table.

Shabbat Shalom!