

God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHVH. I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am YHWH. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, YHWH, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I YHWH." **But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they could not listen to Moses, *mikotzer ruach ume'avodah kashah*** (Exodus 6:2-9)

Parshat Vaera continues the story of our transformation from slavery to freedom. It seems that the first obstacle to overcome was not the most obvious, the power of Pharaoh and his minions, but the inner obstacle of "Kotzer Ruach" that kept the Israelites from being able to even hear Moses.

Kotzer Ruach- a constricted spirit; literally, a shortness of breath. We all know what it is to be in that place of constricted spirit, where we are unable to see the possibilities that lie before us, or to appreciate the gifts that have already be given us. How do we extricate ourselves from those narrow straits?

First, we breathe. We literally remember to take a deep breath, and press our inner "refresh" button. We turn to whatever tools we have acquired, the embodied tools of prayer, or exercise, etc. that restore a sense of equanimity to our bodies and minds. These are the tools that open our spirits to a greater awareness of gratitude, open-heartedness, and possibility. Sounds simple. But the truth is, all practices take, well, practice. We are better served if we don't wait until we find ourselves in desperate straits, but rather develop our capacity for our awareness regularly. That's what it means to develop a spiritual practice.

In my own experience, my capacity for meaningful prayer- prayer that connects me to a greater sense of compassion and gratitude- is enhanced immeasurably by my parallel practice of meditation. This month, I'll be exploring that practice in a new way. Although I have been on week-long Mindfulness retreats in the past, I will be leaving this weekend for a three-week retreat (I will be returning January 17th). The retreat is held in social silence- that means no cross conversations with other retreatants. There will be an opportunity to ask questions, and to occasionally debrief with one of the teachers.

If this sounds a little crazy to you, there is a small part of me that shares your opinion. I know, however, that is just my "short of breath" fear whispering to me, and that actually, this is just the next step in my evolving practice. I look forward to sharing something about the experience when I return in January.

Wishing you the sweet renewal that comes from a deep cleansing breath,

Rabbi Dan Liben