

Charging Through Life? (Edited Transcript)

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Picture the scene: the cavalries of two armies charging towards one another, with long spears and swords they charge at each other on horseback. Think about it: what's in it for the horse? Why is he charging ahead? The horse on his right is charging and so is the one on his left; so he charges on. Everybody is charging toward destruction. The riders have made a conscious decision to fight in the army, but why are the horses doing this?

In Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 6, the prophet Jeremiah describes how sometimes people live life like horses in a cavalry charge, going through the motions and doing what they think they have to because everybody around them is doing the same thing. We are just charging on, not really thinking. To use a modern-day example, it is like horses in a race. The rider - so he hopes - is getting fame and fortune, but what does the horse gain? He is just charging ahead, with his blinkers on.

Many of us live life charging forward without thinking. How do we avoid this?

Stopping to think

The Mesilat Yesharim, one of our classic philosophical - and practical - works written by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal, of Italy in the 1700s, quotes this passage from the prophet Jeremiah and says the only way out is to stop and think. We need to stop for a moment and think about where we are headed, what life is about and what our purpose is.

In last week's parsha, Shemot, we read about the enslavement of the Jewish people and how Moses arrives on the scene to begin the process of redemption. This week's parsha, Va'era, continues with the events of the Exodus, though the people are still very much enslaved. We read at the end of last week's parsha about how the people initially welcomed Moshe with open arms; but after Moshe's first encounter with Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded by making things worse for the people. He said (Shemot 5:9) Tichbad ha'avoda at ha'anashim've'al yish'u bedivrey sheker, 'make the work harder for them and let them not turn to false ideas.' Pharaoh saw the people were starting to feel a sense freedom and he was worried about it, so his tactic was to make them too busy to think.

The Mesilat Yesharim says Pharaoh knew that the way to prevent the people from thinking about freedom and the important things in life was to make them so busy they could not pause to think. And that, says the Mesilat Yesharim, is really when the yetzer hara - the evil inclination - thrives, when we are so busy we can't even stop to think. We become enslaved to the wrong path in life; we can't even get our priorities straight and we can't even lift our heads up to see the bigger picture. Thus, we live life like the horses in the cavalry charge.

Pharaoh's strategy worked: we read at the beginning of this week's portion that by this stage, after Pharaoh had made the work harder for them, Velo sham'u el Moshe mikotzer ruach ume'avoda kasha, 'they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of spirit and because of hard work.' Their spirits were low, they couldn't see the big picture anymore because things were too hard and they couldn't stop to think. It wasn't just the hard work because the work was difficult even before Moshe had come. But when Moses first arrived they still had some breathing space and that meant they could welcome Moses and his message of redemption. Now, they could no longer do it because they couldn't even stop to think.

Finding the space to foster our faith

The lesson that Rabbi Luzzatto gleans from this is that the only way to real freedom from the enslavement of our day-to-day lives is to be able to have the time to stop and to think. Stopping to think is not just about stopping and thinking but about doing something

positive. It's about finding faith and making a connection to Hashem, despite the difficulties and challenges that we may be facing; to be able to say, I believe in Hashem and I will find my inspiration in Him. That is the beginning of the process of stepping out of the cavalry charge and seeing the broader picture.

Let us look at what Pharaoh was trying to stop them from doing, and then learn from that what we can do to make that positive connection with Hashem. Pharaoh said *ve'al yish'u bedivrey sheker* 'let them not turn to false ideas.' Various commentaries explain that *bedivrey sheker* means 'words of emptiness.' To what does this refer?

According to the Midrash, the people at that time had inspiring writings that they used to read on Shabbos. Of course, Shabbos had not yet been given to them as a mitzvah but they did have off on Shabbos - that is, until Pharaoh increased their workload to the point where they could not rest - and they used to read inspiring writings. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, one of the great rabbinic thinkers of the 20th century, opines that this inspirational reading was from Psalms. We know that the Psalms were authored by King David, except for eleven chapters which, according to the Gemara, were authored by Moses - from psalm 90 through psalm 101. Every Shabbos we say psalm 92 in the davening - *Mizmor shir leyom haShabbat*, the psalm for the day of Shabbos. But if we look through that psalm we find no reference to Shabbos. The introductory words say, 'this is the psalm for the day of Shabbos' but the rest of the psalm doesn't actually talk about Shabbos. It talks about the problem of the flourishing of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. It says, don't be disturbed by the flourishing of the wicked, because they flourish like grass which comes and goes quickly. But the righteous are like the cedar trees; they take a long time to flourish but they are there forever - not only in this world, but in the next world as well.

We have to look at things with a long-term perspective. If we were to plant two seeds in the ground, a grass seed and a cedar tree, the grass would start growing much quicker. So too the wicked sometimes flourish and the righteous person takes a long time to thrive; but we have to look at the full perspective, not only of this world but of the next world as well.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky says that it was during this time, when the people were enslaved and suffering in Egypt and were looking to Moshe for inspiration, that he penned the words of this psalm to uplift their spirits.

Taking time out for prayer

This relates to prayer as well. According to the *Ba'al HaTurim*, one of our great commentators from the Middle Ages whose specialty in his commentary on Chumash is finding where else in Tanach we find the same words or expressions, says this word *yish'u* in Pharaoh's words *ve'al yish'u bedivrey sheker*, 'let them not turn to false ideas,' appears only in one other place in the whole of Tanach and in that context (*Shmuel II 22:42*) it is talking about the people praying to G-d and not getting answered. The *Ba'al HaTurim* connects the two contexts where this word *yish'u* appears and says this is to teach us that when one prays to G-d one has to be honest. The key to prayer is that it must come from the heart; it has to be sincere, not just going through the motions and the externalities - having a Siddur open in front of us though our mind is in many different places. It means having a spiritual and emotional connection to Hashem.

Of course, we pray to G-d and sometimes he grants our request and sometimes He does not. He hears our prayers even though things may not turn out the way we would like, just as parents sometimes do not give a child what the child asks for because it isn't good for the child. Even though the request was not granted, the child is still secure in the knowledge that there is a loving parent who is listening and taking note of the request. Real prayer should have the power to uplift and transform us, to give us a chance to see life from a different perspective, outside the cavalry charge. We pray three times a day, *Shacharis*, *Mincha* and *Maariv*; at each stage in the day we have the opportunity to step out of life and connect with Hashem. This is why, when we step into the *Amidah* prayer, we take three steps back and then three steps forward: symbolically, we are taking three steps back out of our lives, and then three steps forward into the presence of Hashem. These moments give us the opportunity to have the clarity, peace and tranquility that come with knowing that G-d is in charge and no matter what happens in the end, He is a loving father and we can connect with Him. Prayer thus gives us a broader perspective.

Taking time out for Torah learning

The third aspect of yish'u is Torah learning. The Midrash connects the word yish'u in the verse discussed above with the word sha'ashu'im found in the verse in psalm 119, where King David writes luley toratcha sha'ashu'ai az avadeti b'oniyi, 'were it not for Your Torah which is my delight, I would have been lost in my affliction.' As we know, King David had a very hard life. He had many enemies - King Saul who didn't want him to take over the kingship, his son Absalom who rebelled against him; he suffered family tragedies as well. King David is saying in this verse that what got him through the challenges and difficulties, what gave him a sense of perspective, joy and inspiration, was learning Torah. That, too, enables us to take a step back. Each person on his or her level can find something to learn, to get out of that cavalry charge of life and see the broader perspective and get a sense of inner peace and tranquility. In prayer we talk to Hashem; when we learn Torah, He talks to us.

Pharaoh was saying, I do not want them praying or learning. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh comments that Pharaoh said they must not turn to 'words of emptiness,' because Pharaoh is coming from an anti-Torah, anti-Hashem position. Pharaoh was saying, this is nothing, this is empty and therefore do not let them turn to such nonsense. But we know that prayer and Torah study are real and can uplift and transform our lives.

G-d gave the Torah for all times and it is indeed relevant in all generations. But in today's day and age especially, the Torah and its message seem even more relevant. The way that people are rushed and pressured, the cavalry charge is all the more apparent. The Torah provides the formula to enable us to step back from life and see a much bigger picture.

Through faith, prayer and learning Torah we can see things from a much broader perspective. We can step out of the rush of life and get a sense of inner tranquility. More importantly, we can ensure that we are on the right path, that we are not just charging aimlessly but are actually leading a life of purpose, according to G-d's will.