

Going Slow: The Ultimate Rush

Category: Bo, Shemos

The Jews left Egypt in a rush. What was the problem with that?

Rushing

In Jewish law, there is something called “Meal Laws,” in which we are instructed how to eat. Maimonides says that eating fast and eating too much is the root of all illnesses in the human body.

Another interesting law concerning eating is that one is forbidden to speak in the middle of eating, simply because one may choke on the food. That’s why, if you ever find yourself sitting at a meal with other Jews and you express your opinion on whatever subject and no one reacts, don’t assume that your friends have no opinion on the matter or that you maybe said something foolish. More likely, their mouths are full of food; once they finish, they’ll be glad to get into a robust debate with you.

In this week’s Parshah, we read the opposite in the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

Every Jewish kid knows why we eat matzah on Passover: since the Egyptians rushed the Jews out of Egypt and they didn’t have enough time to let their dough rise, they baked matzos instead. As the verse (Exodus 12:39) explicitly states: “They baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into matzah cakes because it had not risen, because they had been chased out of Egypt and they couldn’t wait...”

But before that, as part of the Exodus schedule on the first of Nissan, which was two weeks before the Exodus, G-d planned for everything to be in a rush.

When G-d gave the Jews the mitzvah of the Passover Sacrifice and the entire Seder for “Passover in Egypt,” the Torah tells us: “This is how you shall eat it: Your belts tightened, your shoes on your feet and your walking sticks in your hands.” And then comes the clincher. “And you shall eat it in haste,” which Rashi explains, “frantically and quickly.” So not only was the matzah baked

frantically—the Passover Sacrifice must also be eaten frantically!

This means that even though G-d commanded them, “No man among you shall exit his home’s door until morning,” still G-d wanted the Jewish people to eat the Passover Sacrifice hastily. As the Torah itself later testified in the Book of Devarim (15:3), “For in haste did you depart from the land of Egypt.”

We see that everything about the Exodus was frantic and rushed. The Egyptians were frantic that the Jews leave in the middle of the night, and the sooner the better, as the Parshah (12:33) tells us, “They said, ‘We’re all dying!’”

The Jews were frantic, as the Parshah (14:5) tells us, “For the nation had fled.”

And the Midrash Mechilta tells us even G-d, so to speak, was “frantic”—He was preoccupied with taking the Jewish Nation out of Egypt.

We might explain all of this as follows:

The Jews were afraid that the Egyptians might regret letting them go and decide to stop them. The Egyptians, for their part, were afraid that the Jews might regret leaving and not want to leave Egypt. And G-d, for His part, was afraid that both of them would regret. That’s why the Exodus was in such a mad, hurried rush.

Take Your Time

But rushing is not always the best idea. As the expression goes, “Haste makes waste.” We once had a Holocaust survivor come and tell his story of survival to our kids here. He related how he had been in Auschwitz towards the end of the war, and how in the last days, the Germans gathered a group of Jews and marched them a long distance from the camp. They then ordered the Jews to dig a large pit—and then shot them, letting their bodies fall into the pit that they themselves had just dug.

In those days, Auschwitz also held non-Jewish prisoners. A Polish prisoner, put in charge of the Jewish prisoners, told a group of young Jews, including our survivor: “Tomorrow, when the German officer comes in the morning and asks, ‘Who here is Jewish? Don’t answer him.’” Everyone understood why.

When the German officer shouted out for all the Jews in the group to step out of

the lines to the side, no one budged. He again screamed in German for all the Jews to step aside. Again, no reaction. So he asked, "What? You don't understand German?!"

He then turned to one lad who looked Jewish and asked him, "Are YOU Jewish?!" The boy began to tremble out of fear and said, "Yes." So the German told him, "Tell your friends to step out of line!" Still shaking, the boy called out in Yiddish, "Kids, step out!" But still, no one moved.

At that very moment, planes appeared in the skies above Auschwitz. The Germans ran. And the Jews ran back to their barracks. One half-hour later, the tanks of the Russian army arrived. Those few moments had literally saved their lives.

He also related that Russian soldiers then came with lots of food, and the prisoners of the mixed-nationality camp ran and fell upon the food. Many of them died because of that. I asked him later, "How many really died because of that?" and he said, "many many!"

Commitment Takes Time

There's another major problem with rushing. When we do something too quickly, it doesn't last. For example, if a person starts a new diet too quickly, you can be sure he won't last more than two weeks. In like manner, if a person exercises too much - too fast, you can be sure he won't last too long. If you want it to last, you need to start slow.

As the Midrash tells us, since the Exodus from Egypt was in a rush, it didn't last, and the Jews had to go back to exile in Bavel. The redemption that followed did not last either, and the Jews ended up in the Greek exile, in which the Holy Land was under Greek domination, and so on and so forth. This is why the Final Redemption is described by Isaiah (22:14) as, "For you shall not depart in haste and in flight you shall not go."

It's the same thing in Judaism. If someone starts keeping a lot of mitzvos at once, there's the danger that it'll break him and he'll eventually give it all up. The same applies to individual mitzvos: If a person really wants to feel the spiritual part of the mitzvah, he needs to do it slowly.

This is why Chasidim have the custom of praying slowly on Shabbos, for example. In most other synagogues, they daven quickly on Shabbos—everyone's hungry. But Chasidim throughout the generations have always prayed for extended periods, taking the time to really think about what they were saying and really feel that they were forging bonds with the Creator—that they were talking with somebody there upstairs.

Years ago, in my yeshivah in the village of Kfar Chabad, Israel, they would prepare two giant pots of cholent. One of them was meant for the majority of the students who would finish their prayers on Shabbos afternoon at 12:30 p.m. However, the second pot of cholent would remain untouched. That one would be reserved for those students who prayed at length, and they would remove that pot from the stove only at 3:00 p.m. It was a special "bonus" for those who were prepared to overcome their inclinations and suppress their hunger so that they could daven a little longer.

If anyone here wants to daven a little longer, by all means! Our synagogue will always be open, the lights will always be on and the heat will always be working. However, there's one thing I can't promise you: cholent. That's why I don't advise you to stay here until 3:00. But one thing you sure can do is to pick one part of the davening that you like and not rush through it. Take the time to think about the words. Contemplate them. Turn them into a meditation. Think about G-d.

This way, you'll ensure that your prayers will be deeper and more meaningful—and don't worry: you'll still make it to the Kiddush before the cholent finishes.