



What is Slavery?

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Pharaoh succeeded. He brought the Children of Israel into a state of slavery. The opening of Parashat Va'Era focuses on one particular consequence of this: the loss of the ability to listen.

Parashat Va'Era begins with God speaking to Moshe:

שמות ו:ב,ה-ח

²וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'... ⁵גַּם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־נַאֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל... ⁶לָכֵן אֶמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה' וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעַבְדָּתָם וְגֹאֲלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם... ⁷וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם... ⁸וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ...

Exodus 6:2,5-8

²God spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am God... ⁵I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel... ⁶Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am God, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I will rescue you from their labor; I will redeem you...

⁷I will take you to be My people... ⁸I will bring you into the land..."

Yet when Moshe conveys God's words to the Israelites, their response is not encouragement or renewed hope, but an inability to listen.



...וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֹר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה:⁹

⁹...**But they did not listen** to Moshe because of shortness of spirit and hard labor.

These words describe the reality in which Israel finds itself—their inner world, their state of mind, and the narrowing of their human capacity. The phrase has been understood in different ways, and commentators offer various interpretations of its meaning. I will discuss three of them.

I. Enslaved people have no ability to pay attention

One interpretive approach focuses on patience and attention. The reality of slavery leaves a person with no inner space, no moments of respite, no breathing room—physically or metaphorically. There is no time or energy to listen, no capacity to give attention to anything beyond the exhausting reality of servitude.

The Malbim¹ claims that the combination of hard labor and shortness of spirit rendered the enslaved people **incapable** of listening:

מלבי"ם שמות ו:ט

מי שיש לו עבודה קשה והוא ארך רוח, יכול להבליג על יגונו ולהטות אזן לנחמה ולבשורה טובה, אבל הם היה להם עבודה קשה ורוחם הנכאה היה קצר מהכיל ולסבול, לכן לא נכנסו דברי משה באזניהם.

Malbim on Exodus 6:9

One who is short-spirited but not burdened with hard labor, or one who bears hard labor but is long-spirited, can restrain grief and incline the ear toward comfort and good news.

¹ R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhel Wisser (Russia, 19th c.).

But they suffered from hard labor, and their crushed spirit was too overwhelmed;
therefore **Moshe's words did not enter their ears.**

The Ramban² explains the **mechanism** of this inability to listen as the result of the Egyptians' cruel supervision of Israel's labor:

רמב"ן שמות ו:ט

וְעִבְדָּהּ קָשָׁה – הוּא הַדּוּחָק שֶׁהָיָה הַנוֹגְשִׁים אֲצִיּוֹת בָּהֶם וְלֹא יִתְּנוּם לִשְׁמֹעַ דְּבַר וּלְחַשׁוֹב בּוֹ.

Ramban on Shemot 6:9

“And hard labor” refers to the pressure exerted by the taskmasters, who were constantly driving them and would not allow them to hear a word or reflect upon it.

In this reading, slavery produces a reality in which it is difficult if not impossible for its victims to listen.

II. Fear in the face of death

The next camp of interpretation focuses less on the physical conditions preventing listening, but the psychological. For example, the Hizkuni³ (on Exodus 6:9) explains their lack of listening as a result of fear. In the Hizkuni's view, their lack of listening is not a failure of attention, but a paralysis—cognitive and existential—born of fear.

² R. Nahman ben Moshe (Catalonia, 13th c.).

³ R. Hizkiyah ben Manoah (France, 13th c.).



Rabbeinu Behaye⁴ adds a deeply sensitive dimension to the psychological state of the Israelites. The enslaved people had not lost their faith; rather, their suffering gave rise to a longing for death, and it was against this backdrop that they could not hear Moshe's words.

רבינו בחיי שמות ו:ט

ולא שמעו אל משה – לא מטעם שלא יבטחו בה' ובמשה עבדו, רק מקוצר רוח ומעבודה קשה, כאדם המשתוקק שימות בצער אשר הוא בו והוא מואס חייו.

Rabbeinu Behaye on Exodus 6:9

“They did not listen to Moshe”—not because they did not trust God or Moshe His servant, but because of shortness of spirit and hard labor, **like a person who longs to die in the midst of his suffering and despises his own life.**

On the one hand, fear; on the other, a desire for death. Together, these bring a person to a state in which they cannot hear—and perhaps even to a point of refusing to hear.⁵

III. Slaves have no “tomorrow”

A third line of interpretation focuses not on their physical or psychological condition, but their relationship with time. When Moshe speaks to Israel, he presents them with a vision, not only

⁴ R. Behaye ben Asher (Spain, 13th-14th c.).

⁵ The Ramban articulates the terrible tension in which the enslaved Israelites found themselves: between the fear of dying and the fear of continuing to live this way; between the inability to endure the reality of overwhelming suffering and the fear that their taskmasters would kill them. As he writes: “‘Because of shortness of spirit and hard labor’—not because they did not believe in God or in His prophet, but because they did not incline their ear to his words due to shortness of spirit, like a person whose soul is crushed by his toil and who no longer wishes to live even a moment in his suffering, even if he knows relief will come afterward. And this shortness of spirit also refers to their fear that Pharaoh would kill them by the sword, as their overseers had warned Moshe.” Fear of death and fear of not dying—together these produce a paralysis that prevents listening and may even lead a person to refuse to hear. The enslaved Israelites moved within a constricted consciousness, suspended between a struggle for survival and profound despair.

that God will take Israel out of slavery, but that God will make them God's people and bring them into the Land of Israel.

A *midrash* in Shemot Rabbah sharpens and clarifies this vision:

שמות רבה ו:ד

"וְהֵבֵאתִי אֲתֶכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יָדִי" - אַעֲשֶׂה לָהֶן מָה שֶׁאֲמַרְתִּי לָהֶן לְאַבְוֹתֵיהֶן שֶׁאֲתֵן לָהֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְיֵהְיוּ יוֹרְשִׁין אוֹתָהּ בְּזִכּוֹתָן

Shemot Rabbah 6:4

"I will bring you into the Land which I raised My hand [to give]"—I will fulfill for them what I promised their ancestors, that I would give them the Land.

The picture Moshe paints is not merely one of an end to present suffering, but of a new way of life—fundamentally different and entirely transformed. Yet **the enslaved Israelites are unable to hear such a broad vision**. As slaves, they are confined to the present moment, to the immediate reality and nothing more. They may be able to hope that the slavery will end, but to imagine a wholly new and different reality—that is overwhelming.

Slavery produces a state of "they did not listen." It is a form of labor that trains a person to see and hear only the work itself, to experience it as the total reality, with no alternative and no possibility of reaching anything beyond it. It creates a consciousness of an endless present, without exit or horizon. Slaves lack the patience to hear about the possibility of another reality (or perhaps they lack the capacity), they are in a state of fear—fear of death, or fear that the present unbearable reality is endless. They can not hear that things could be different.

The *parashah* teaches us that if we encounter people who can't hear, people who seem to have stopped hoping for change, who, from shortness of spirit, no longer find the energy of body and soul to dream of a different reality, to dream of liberation. Then there may be an element of slavery in their lives. It is worth asking whether there is something we are doing that contributes to placing them in such a reality, and in any case working toward their liberation.

And this has relevance to us as well: the reality many of us live today—a reality of pressure, burnout, and anxiety—can similarly lead to numbness, despair, and the abandonment of hope and the dream of change. In light of the verses of Parashat Va'Era, such a condition can be understood as a form of slavery. The Torah urges us to shake off the numbness and the collapse of hope that accompany enslavement, and to become receptive once again, and able to hear the possibility of change and to insist that things can be different.

