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parashah  
beshallach  
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God said to Moshe, “Why do you cry out to Me?” (Shemos 14:15)

TRY TO IMAGINE what it was like. After 210 years, and against all odds, the Jewish people had broken through the previous impenetrable borders of Egypt, and gone free. They had celebrated that freedom with the first ever (recorded) Pesach Seder the night before, and had been paid handsomely for all their years of servitude by their previous captors.

Once downtrodden and impoverished, the Jewish nation left Mitzrayim, as the Torah testifies, “b’yad ramah,” with “an exalted hand.” It must have been just too hard to believe after all they had gone through until that time.

It was even harder to believe once they realized that the dream had yet to be completely fulfilled. On the contrary, they had been pursued by a very angry, very strong,

and very well equipped Egyptian army all the way to the Red Sea. Then, suddenly, it appeared that their newfound freedom had vanished, and their choice had become either death by sword, or death by drowning.

While the rest of the nation panicked and froze, Moshe Rabbeinu went to work, and did what he did best: pray. He turned to God, knowing that they had been led to this point in the first place in order to teach the nation to trust in God and God alone. So, Moshe Rabbeinu poured his heart out to the Creator on behalf of his endangered nation, because that's what Jews are ALWAYS supposed to do when they're in trouble.

Well, at least that is what one might have thought until God said:

“Why do you cry out to Me?” (Shemos 14:15)

Why do I cry out to You? Uh, because that is what we're SUPPOSED to do when in trouble ... because, that is the way we ask You for help ... because ...

Well, it turns out that there is a time for prayer, and a time for action, and never the twain shall meet. When it is time to act, it is not the time to pray. But, when it IS the time to pray, it is certainly NOT the time to act. On the contrary, even something as holy as learning Torah is a mistake at that time, and the learning stops being for God, and for the person instead, and double no-no.

The Talmud says that tefillah is one of the four things that require strengthening:

Our Rabbis taught: Four things require strengthening ... [and one of these is] PRAYER ... (Brochos 32b)

The question is, what does this mean? How does one “strengthen” prayer? By praying longer? Perhaps. The Talmud extols the virtues of that as well (Brochos 32b), and mentions how rabbis from earlier periods would take one hour to prepare for prayer, one hour to pray, and one hour after prayer to transition back to their everyday reality—THREE TIMES A DAY!

“How did they get anything else done?” the Talmud asks. It answers that, because of their devotion to prayer, they were miraculously successful in both their learning and business. It’s as if God told them, “If you’re going to devote so much time to talking to Me, then I’ve got your back, spiritually AND materially,” as the Talmud said earlier:

Rabin bar Rav Adda in the name of Rebi Yitzchak says: “If a man normally goes to synagogue regularly and one day does not go, The Holy One, Blessed is He, inquires about him, as it says: ‘Who is among you that fear God, that obey the voice of His servant, and now walk in darkness and has no light (Yeshayahu 50:10)’ —if he is absent because of some religious purpose, he will have light, but if he is absent because of a worldly purpose, he shall have no light. Why—‘Let him trust in the Name of God’ —because he ought to have trusted in the name of God, but he did not trust. (Brochos 6b)

Aside from some of the other differences between our generation and the generation of the rabbis of the Talmud, THEY believed they were ACTUALLY talking to God. THEY believed that when they prayed, God was ACTUALLY in front of them, listening to EVERY word they were saying. I

think the difference is obvious to everyone, but let's speak it out anyhow.

There are many examples of this idea, but this is one that many can relate to.

It is not uncommon for many couples after many years to become so used to one another, and secure in their relationship, that when one spouse talks to the other, they only listen with one ear. They may even answer while reading or focusing on something else, assuming that they are not being offensive.

But that's not the way it was when they first dated. Just the opposite: everything else became secondary, even important stuff. The interaction between the two of them at that early and insecure stage of the relationship was so wonderful and crucial, that each person was always careful to never show a lack of interest. Time certainly was not an issue, other than it went too fast and ended evenings earlier than the two of them would have wanted.

That's how dovening is supposed to be, and then some. You're not spending time with a potential spouse. You're spending time with Someone Who only has to stop thinking of you to make you go away, Someone Who not only keeps you breathing, but feeds and clothes you, and those whom you care about. When you pray, you are talking to the Master of the Universe, the small physical universe you can see, and the many other levels of existence you can't.

We may know all of that, but we don't think about it. That's why the "Chassidei Rishonim," the early pious ones took an hour to prepare for tefillah, to recall all of this and put it into their hearts. They knew God was there, and they believed He listened. They had to make sure that THEY were real with all of it, so that when they finally ac-

tually prayed, it was the ultimate spiritual experience it could be.

And they took an hour after prayer to make sure the experience was real to them. When a young couple parts for the night, they only physically leave one another. The aftereffect continues all the way home, and usually until the next time they see each other. Powerful experiences leave powerful impressions, and require “debriefing” to come down from them.

When a person can casually come to tefillah at the last second, race through it, and run out after, something is VERY wrong with their relationship to God. It doesn't matter how fast and clear they can say the words, or how well they can comprehend them. Those factors don't seem to come into play on shidduchim or when making important business deals.

The section of Talmud mentioned above says that prayer is more powerful than good deeds, and more important than the sacrifices, which it replaced. It is the highest of heights, and yet people walk all over it (Brochos 4b). It's one of the greatest gifts man has ever received. The only one better is the ability to appreciate why this is so.

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# connecting the dots

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IT IS AN automatic assumption, though not necessarily a conscious one, that because we live with ourselves full-time, we know everything about us that we need to know.

The older we get, the more this is so. By mid-age, we pretty much know what we like and who we like. We know what gets our attention and what shuts it down. It's as if we have hit "cruising speed" and just sit back and enjoy the "sights" as they come up.

Fortunately for me, I learned otherwise at an early age. I say "fortunately" because NOW I can appreciate it. But, back then I thought it was a disaster, and was jealous of others who had not experienced what I had. I thought the problem had been with me, but in retrospect, I see the problem was, is, with them.

To make a long story a lot shorter, I was enrolled in university to become an architect. It was a dream come true from childhood, or so I had thought for decades. My father was an interior designer, and I was deemed his heir apparent from a very early age because of some natural ability to draw and visualize things.

I had become so accustomed to my predetermined destiny that I had failed to notice other aspects of me that were becoming increasingly more dominant as I grew older. It wasn't that I lost my love of architecture. I still have it. It was that my drive for meaning outgrew it, and what I was doing at the time just didn't, couldn't, fulfill it.

This began to create internal friction that was easily recognizable, but not easily understandable. And though I tried to suppress it long enough to get through school, it was just too powerful. I was unable to lie to myself and believe there was meaning in what I was doing where it didn't really exist.

As is always the case with Hashgochah Pratis, events around me impacted my process, and served to crystalize something I was becoming acutely aware of with each passing week: My current way of life was no longer the one of choice.

Unfortunately, at that time, I didn't know what was. I had been raised a traditional Jew, but my sum total of Jewish knowledge completely excluded a religious life as an option. COMPLETELY. What I had known about Judaism growing up just did not talk to me AT ALL.

So, I thought and I searched and I thought and I searched, which must have been some kind of merit for me to stumble into Torah Judaism, a story of its own. But, in that process of thinking and searching, I literally took myself apart, assumption-by-assumption, until I got a better picture of who I really was AT HEART.

Interestingly enough, some things that were me as a child were even more me as an adult. At early ages, we tend to only be who we really are, until life starts to mess with us and compel us to be things that we're not. How

many people today are wearing artificial personalities that they actually believe are their own?

Billions.

One thing I have seen over the years is that the people who have gone through personal crises tend to be the ones who also know themselves the best. Clearly, crises force us to look inside and see who we really are, and if done properly, it can yield game-changing insights for the rest of the person's life.

Unfortunately, some people who go that direction get misled along the way. I know one person who knows himself really well, and yet is so incredibly confused. He's a bright guy, but he only has the secular world in which to use his self-knowledge, and that's a closed loop. Western society is not for the introspective person, which is so many traditionally have gone east for their direction.

Fortunately for me, I stumbled into Torah. Literally. I had the right teacher at the right time to help me transition to a world I had long ago given up on. But, after accessing Torah knowledge, I realized why little else ever really spoke to me until that time. Intuitively (thanks to that angel in the womb) I knew that all other knowledge fell short of telling us what life is REALLY about, and how BEST to use it.

It is disconcerting how many people don't even know this, even after learning Torah. It is surprising how many people have not taken the time to get to the root of their beliefs, and come to terms about their assumptions about life. That's how they can do "wrong" things as if they are "right," or at least okay.

That's it for now. Next week, b"H, I will explain what all of this has to do with getting ready for the "End."