Jewish Tribune – Pesach

**Hard Work?**

The phone rings one hour before Shabbos. Can we host two university students, both secular Jews, who are passing through town?

As ever, my wife graciously smiles and agrees, and before we know it, our two guests arrive with just enough time for a quick coffee and piece of cake before we head off to shul.

After a wonderful Friday night meal of engaging conversation, zemiros and delicious food, it is already gone midnight, and we realise we haven’t even set up our guests’ beds yet.

I take them up on their offer to help and the three of us go the basement and schlepp the folding beds up the spare bedroom in the loft. Up and down several flights of stairs with mattresses, sheets, duvets and pillows.

With sweat pouring off my forehead, I wish them good Shabbos and as I am about to go downstairs, one of the young men reaches for the light switch. Instinctively, I say “No! It’s Shabbos”.

Innocently, he looks at me and says: “Really? I can’t switch on a light?”

I tell him that it involves prohibited labour on Shabbos.

Now my guest is incredulous. “Hang on a second. Taking mattresses up three flights of stairs is allowed but flicking a switch labour?”

How would you answer this searching young man?

Towards the end of פרשת בהר, we are commanded not to subjugate a Jew who has sold himself as a slave: “לא תרדה בו בפרך”. Rashi explains this to mean that we are not allowed to order him to perform difficult tasks that have no purpose. For example, we should not ask him to boil water when there is no need for it.

Interestingly, the Torah uses the word “בפרך” to describe the hard work we should not unnecessarily ask him to perform.

Over Pesach, we are reminded of the possuk in the beginning of Shemos: "ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל ב**פרך**".

What is the difference between מלאכה and עבודת פרך?

מלאכה is constructive, creative work. Indeed, this is the term used to describe the work forbidden to perform on Shabbos. Schlepping a spare bed down from the loft for an unexpected guest is allowed on Shabbos but switching on a light is not. The former may be hard work, but it is not a מלאכה. In contrast, עבודת פרך is futile work. That is what פרעה gave כלל ישראל to do; soul destroying, meaningless work. Building pyramids on quicksand.

Amazingly, Tosfos in Pesochim (117b) says that the א"ת ב"ש gematria of the word פרך is 39. I.e. the antithesis of עבודת פרך is constructive, creative work - the 39 מלאכות.

The story is told of a prisoner sentenced to hard labour in Siberia who was given the lonely and back breaking task of sitting alone in a room and turning a heavy handle. The prisoner was told that he was sitting next door a flour mill and that he was crushing grain. At least the gruelling, monotonous work was achieving something. He was creating flour which would bake bread.

After years of dutifully performing this work, the cruel guard showed the prisoner the other side of the wall where he had been sitting for all this time. There was nothing there! There was no mill. There was no grain. It was all a horrific lie. The prisoner had been turning a handle for no reason. All his hard work had been in vain! The prisoner collapsed in disbelief and heartache.

Some years ago, Lucy Kellaway, an award-winning journalist at the Financial Times, tried her hand at being the paper’s “agony aunt”. She wrote that the most popular problem that readers submit is that their jobs are meaningless. “Lawyers, bankers, fund managers and all sorts of people with grand jobs write in the same complaint: the money may be good but where is the meaning?”.

Perhaps we can now better understand the cruelty of our slavery in Mitzrayim. Futile work is soul destroying, it is emotional torture. This is also the root of the prohibition of ."לא תרדה בו בפרך"If a Jew has the indignity of selling himself into slavery, do not add to his misery by giving him meaningless work.

May we all merit to be involved in activities that are meaningful and ennobling.

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