Jewish Tribune – Shemos

**Meaningful Work**

In LBC (Life Before Covid), my wife and I have been privileged to host an array of guests over the years. Many were directed to us from organisations such as JLE. Imagine the following scenario.

The phone rings an hour before Shabbos. Can we host two university students for Shabbos? (I often think of what my dear father ע"ה used to say with a twinkle in his eye, when we asked if another friend could stay over: “Jeremy – another meshuggener won’t make a difference!)

The young men arrive ten minutes before Shabbos. Enough time for them to have a quick coffee and piece of cake and off we go to shul. After a wonderful evening of delicious food, song and fascinating conversation it is already midnight and we realise we haven’t even prepared the room for our last-minute guests. I ask them to give me a hand and we spend the next 15 minutes schlepping folding beds from the basement to the spare bedroom in the loft. We make the beds and as I wish them good Shabbos and good night, one of the boys puts his hand to the light-switch, I instinctively say “no, you can’t do that”.

“Why not?” he asks innocently.

“It’s a מלאכה - forbidden work on Shabbos”.

The young man is incredulous. With sweat still dripping from his forehead, he is perplexed. “We are allowed to carry folding beds and mattresses up and down several flights of stairs but cannot flick a switch?!”

How would you answer him?

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 this unnecessary work. In describing the persecution in Mitzrayim, this week’s parsha also uses this word: "ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך".

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 storehouses 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 monotonous work was achieving something. He was creating flour which would be used to 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 submitted was that their jobs were 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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