

Va-ayra – Thought Life - Sermon # 2
Delivered on January 12, 2013 by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

This week we are continuing our three-part series entitled, “Control Your Thought Life, Shape Your Destiny.” This sermon series coincides with the beginning of the Book of Exodus, and that is no accident. You see, many people might not realize it, but the whole story of the Exodus is about Gd trying to convince the People of Israel that they are *capable* of an Exodus; that they don’t have to be slaves in their hearts just because Pharaoh enslaved their bodies; that they really can get past thinking about themselves as weak and powerless - as victims of fate. The whole point of the story: the plagues, the seder, the miracles done for them, is to change the way they think about themselves. Their success (and ultimately their failure) is a reflection of the way they think; the way they see themselves, their inner narrative – that’s what this story is all about. And the reason we, as a congregation, are spending time on this topic is because the same is true for you – so much of your life and your future are shaped by the way you think about who you are – your inner voice writes the program of what you can hope to achieve.

The Torah makes it really clear that these rag tag slaves are destined to do great things – Gd tells them how it is going to turn out. All Moses has to do is convince Pharaoh. But it’s not that simple... We think this story is just about Moses trying to convince Pharaoh that the future is bright for the Jewish People – we think *that’s* the fight. But you know what? That’s the easy part. In the end, Pharaoh is the easiest one to convince! Moses is actually fighting on three fronts. Sure, one front is his fight with Pharaoh. But more importantly - he first has to convince himself that he has what it takes – he’s got to change his own inner narrative, his own inner voice. And clearly Moses thinks that he does NOT have it. Even when he was a Prince of Egypt he was full of self-doubt. Remember when he kills the Egyptian? The son of Pharaoh could have said, “Yeah, I did it, so what!?” Or, he could have said, “In your face! That will teach you to pick on the Jews!” But what does he say to himself? What is he thinking? The Torah TELLS us this for a reason. He says, “Damn, the thing is known – I’m gonna get killed!” So he runs away!

And when, at the Burning Bush, Gd tells him, “Yes, you DO have what it takes,” Moses still says – choose someone else. Why? Because inside he thinks he is a weak person. His most important battle is with the voice in his own heart.

Then there’s the battle he has to fight with his own people. As the Torah portion says, the Israelites would not listen to him because they suffered from Kotzer Ruach – (a great phrase!) which means “Crushed Ruach”. Literally, it means they had the wind knocked out of them. But they had crushed Ruach, as in “spirits”, too. They just could not see any hope, any way up and out. Sure Gd told them they had what it took to win, but they couldn’t talk about themselves in that way. They were like: “Well, what do you expect... We’re slaves, we’re losers, we’re victims...” *That’s* why Gd had to harden Pharaoh’s heart, because it was easy to convince Pharaoh that Gd had the power to change lives. He gave in early. But the Jewish People, they were the ones who needed convincing. They had to change the way they thought about themselves. That’s what this whole story is all about. And it’s the keystone of our People’s story because it is so important in shaping your own destiny, your own future, your own today.

Proverbs Chapter 4 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” They saw the heart was the source of the inner voice. In other words, if you want to have a healthy life – physically, spiritually and emotionally - you have to pay attention, you have to think about what you are thinking about. Some people don’t pay any attention to their thoughts. You need to think about what you think about. If you start feeling depressed, think about what you have been thinking about and it won’t take you too long to figure out why all your emotions are sinking. If you are all upset, think about what you are thinking about because you can upset yourself or you can make yourself happy. You can think your way into a good day or you can think your way into an awful day. You can be miserable with your own thoughts or you can cheer yourself up with your own thoughts. The whole point of this story we read today was that Pharaoh wanted the people to think there was nothing they could do about it, but the story, the Torah come to teach us that there is always

something we can do – there is something that you can do about your level of happiness and joy and peace – there is something you can do to have a better life and it all begins in the battlefield of the mind. If you don't learn how to think right then your life is going to be beyond your control all the time.

And all of us at one time or another suffer from that “Kotzer Ruach”, that crushed spirit. You know that feeling: overwhelmed, anxious, stressed out. Like life is coming at you and you don't know how to keep up. That's especially the time that you need to be thinking about what you're thinking about. What are the patterns of thought, the downward spirals that are pulling you down? Chances are you play those reels again and again. Well, you don't have to do that. But the first thing you need to do is to listen carefully to the way you are thinking – to be mindful of that inner voice and realize that you, and only you, have the power to shape it.

But there's a next step you can and should take. A famous mystical text called the Zohar tells us that the reason why it's called Kotzer Ruach is that it is the spirit of Gd that was crushed in the slaves. That word Ruach is the spirit of Gd that was blown into the nostrils of the very first man, and has been put into every person since. And I know there are people here who struggle with making sense of Gd – who may not believe in Gd. But the point of this whole story is that whether you believe in Gd or not, Gd believes in you. And when you start thinking about that, when you start telling yourself that you have what it takes on the inside, when that inner voice starts speaking of success and courage; when you get the mental discipline to stop running the negative reels and replace them with a positive voice – when you find that extra gear that you did not even know you had, that's what we around here like to call Gd. That's what makes this place, this moment, this faith, this way of life so awesome for those who grasp on to it.

And it all begins by listening, by thinking about what you are thinking about. You've got to find that quiet place. That's why we take the time for silent prayer. We first listen to our voices out loud and then we turn inward in private prayer so that we can focus on what we are focused on...