

Breaking the Habits That Enslave Us
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When I was growing up both of my parents smoked. Though my father was more of a social smoker, my mother was a hard addict. My father probably smoked a pack a week, while my mother clearly smoked multiple packs. Just to put this in historical perspective, this was same time when it was becoming clear that smoking was bad for you. The initial studies about smoking's link to cancer were being published and the surgeon general was issuing warnings. There was a tremendous amount of talk about the concerns over second hand smoke. So, my brothers and I banded together to get my parents to stop smoking. We asked, we pleaded and we begged, but to no avail. Then we resorted to foul play. We started hiding their ashtrays, putting water in their ashtrays and faking coughing attacks - and they did make an effort to quit. This would last for a little while. My mother would make charts and log the number of cigarettes she would smoke each day, while my father took the tactic of just smoking half a cigarette, but soon they would return to their old smoking habits. So, after this attempt failed we started to hide their cigarettes, but they always found them. Then we did the unthinkable. We broke their cigarettes. For some reason this put my father over the edge and he went crazy. He seemed to tolerate the childish games, but destruction of property was another thing entirely. They put up with our antics - but only to a point. As it turned out, my father was more than just a causal smoker. Additionally, it turns out that addiction to cigarettes is real and ought not be trifled with. As a child, it's hard to imagine the incredible power of an addictive habit. It's not just a hankering, it can be overwhelming and, for the non-smoker, it's hard to imagine the force of it. No matter how much the case is made that smoking has detrimental effects, the addicted smoker can't just apply a patch, suck on a lollipop like Kojak or chew a certain type of gum. The best way to stop smoking is to never start. No one would knowingly pick up a bad habit - but we all do. Sometimes we get bad habits from people around us, sometimes we inherit them or sometimes they lay dormant until the right circumstances bring these bad habits out. Sometimes we need someone to point the bad habit out and we all have habits that we would like to get rid of.

Last week we began a new book of the Torah, a book whose title points us to its message. It is the book of Exodus and it offers us a chance to find freedom. It is the narrative of our exodus from Egypt and when applied to our own lives, offers us a roadmap for freedom from those aspects of our lives that have enslaved us. If the book of Genesis is about our ancestors and the birth of family, then we could say that Exodus is about the birth of a nation. So much of nation building and the lessons of it can be applied to the individual and building of self. Exodus is both about nation-hood and person-hood. So, we simply need to look a little deeper to find its embedded message.

The plagues come and amidst the third plague of *Kinim*, vermin Moses asks Pharaoh not for complete freedom for his people, rather Moses asks for just three days. He says, "Let me take them out for three days and we'll come back." "Three days," Moses says, "just to offer a few sacrifices and then we'll come right back." Initially Pharaoh agrees, asking Moses to offer a sacrifice for him - anything for a little relief from the bugs. Then Pharaoh says something that

Ibn Ezra picks up as significant. Pharaoh says, “*rak harchaik lo tarchiku*,” just don’t go too far. Stay close - and Ibn Ezra says that was point of the exercise. “*Tzirchim anu l’harchik me’ha’mitzrim*” – we need to create a little distance. We need to get away and get some perspective. You know the feeling. We all need to get away. So many have just returned from vacation, having needed some much needed time away. We return ready to take on the new challenges before us, but like many of us, the return and the invigoration is often short lived. The story in the torah is no different. The moment the insects that drove Pharaoh to consider the short leave of the Hebrews receded, Pharaoh withdraws his concession.

So, we learn two really important lessons. One, if change is going to happen in our lives, we have to first taste a life that is different. Two, if change is going to take root, it has to be given a chance. Moses says, “I need to give my people a chance to taste freedom,” – we need enough time for that change to have an effect. I know that when I do get away, I need a few days to unwind and there is a direct correlation between how much time I will be away and how long it takes me to unwind. If I’m going away for just twenty-four hours, usually the hour or two ride to get there is enough – but if I’m going away for ten days, it might take me a little longer. The Jews were leaving Egypt forever, so they first had to taste it and it had to be long enough that they could imagine a new life. Moses knew it and certainly Pharaoh grew to know it and that is why he recants. Three days seems to be the threshold. That is why our rabbis delineate the first three days of shiva as the most significant. Our rabbis say, “Life without a loved one seems impossible,” so they say don’t think about your entire future, just make it through the next three days. Then we’ll tackle the next four days. Once shiva is under your belts, then try thirty days. Brilliantly they say, there is no such thing as cold turkey.

We know that every one of our New Year’s resolutions must be achievable. In order for these resolutions to be achievable, we must break them down into measurable, attainable goals. This starts in small pieces and little steps. That is why, in a few weeks when we read the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments, God tells Moses to ready the Jewish people and he says, “Tell them to prepare for three days.” Does Moses believe that in three days the entire nation will be ready for a life of Torah? No! However, it’s a beginning. Are these stiff-necked people, a people that only want to return to the slavery of Egypt, going to be able to remake itself in three days? NO! We know it will take an entire generation for our nation to be born. We know it doesn’t happen over night – but three days *sheloshet yimei hagbalah*, three days to begin the process of being born. The same is true of us. If we are going to transform ourselves, if we are going to make any positive changes in who we are, we must begin with small steps, little pieces and short periods of time.

There are two more helpful insights from this week’s reading. One insight is at the very beginning of the reading and one at the very end. At the beginning of the portion, the Torah tells us that Moses is 80 years old (7:7). In many ways, the portion begins with this point, as if to suggest that change is hard no matter what your age is, but it’s never impossible. We are often told Moses’ age. Each time it’s mentioned, it sets up a challenge for us to measure up to Moses. When we say, “We pray that person lives to 120.” it’s because Moses lived that long. Terah had died at the age of 205, Abraham at 175 and Isaac at 180, but Moses seems to be the model to emulate and, this age of eighty is a challenge as well. That is to say, if Moses started a new

career, and undertook new challenges at 80, imagine what we can do at our age. It's never too late.

Additionally, at the very end of the portion lies another critical lesson, which is mentioned amidst the seventh plague, hail, and it's a bizarre bit of information. Chapter 9 verse 32 says, "Now the flax and barley were ruined because the barley was already in the ear and the flax was in bud, but the wheat and the emmer were not hurt for they ripen late." There is no question that the plagues brought damage, some of it repairable and some of it irreparable. We know that animals died and property was lost. We know people were scared because of the fear of a plague. It's possible the text was showing that sometimes the damage, which is done, couldn't be undone. The alcoholic who gets his drinking under control can sometimes slow the results of years of drinking, but in some cases the injury already done to the liver is beyond repair. Today the drugs abound for high cholesterol, but in some cases the damage is too great. Years of poor eating habits make it impossible to reverse the damage.

However, there is more to this sentence. The Torah makes it clear that the young produce survived while the older produce was destroyed. "Now the flax and barley were ruined because the barley was already in the ear and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the emmer were not hurt for they ripen late." The flax and barley had reached maturity, while the wheat and emmer were protected in their undeveloped state. It's as if the Torah is teaching us that while we are in formation, as long as we are still growing, as long as we are still learning, as long as we are still open to change – then all is possible. However, once we feel we've reached full development, that there is nothing left to do, nothing left to learn, nothing left to change about ourselves, then all is lost.

The book of Exodus has always been understood to be a book about a growing belief in God. Miracles and supernatural events abound in order to convince Moses, Pharaoh and the Jewish people, that there is a force greater than themselves. The book of Exodus is about a growing belief in God – but it also about a growing belief in self. In our ability to survive outside slavery, it's about being resourceful in a place that seems to be devoid of resources. This week's reading says look upward to God and look inward to self, realizing the team of God and self is a victorious team. Belief in self and God in the aggregate, produces certain success, no matter what the challenge – and the Torah teaches you are never too old. If Moses could do it, then so can you. It's never too soon to begin, as long as you believe there is more to learn and that there are still accomplishments left to realize. Finally, it all starts with tasting a life that is different. You don't have to accomplish everything all at once, but you do have to achieve a measurable objective and that taste of success will propel forward.

My parents eventually did quit smoking, but it wasn't until we had grown up and left the house. The comment they made when they finally quit smoking was that their taste buds seems to be working better. Foods had more flavor and smells seemed more vivid. They went to a spa out west, changed their lifestyle and came back smoke free. It wasn't something that we could get them to do and it wasn't something we could do for them. It was something they had to do for themselves. They had to go somewhere else, change their environment and get a sense for a life without cigarettes. They had no idea that their senses had been dulled. They just had to taste a life free of cigarettes. We too need to taste a life without those parts of us we don't like. This is

the season of resolutions. The gyms are talking about it, the psychologists are talking about it and whether or not we believe this to be the New Year or not, we are all thinking about it. Try three days of laughing, not getting angry. Try just three days without the negativity. Try three days of thinking about yourself in a positive light. Try three days of positive, joyful living. Trust me, once you taste it – you will want to live it.