

# DEEP BREATHS



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAEIRA  
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

One of the first and most central interventions to help manage difficult emotions is deep breathing. When we feel intense emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or anger, our bodies tend to react physiologically by taking shorter and shallower breaths. By counteracting those quick and narrow breaths with a deeper breath, we increase the supply of oxygen to our brains, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, and signaling to our bodies that we can calm down. As strange as this might sound, deep breathing often requires training and practice. Many people take deep breaths with their upper chest, which can actually increase breathing rate and cause hyperventilation. An effective deep breath is known as diaphragmatic or belly breathing because it is done by focusing the breath below the rib cage, with the stomach moving, rather than the chest.

Toward the end of *Parshat Shemot*, we are informed that after *Bnei Yisrael* saw the signs that Moshe performed and were informed that G-d took note of their hardships, they were convinced and believed in the redemption to come (*Shemot* 4:30-31). Yet, in the beginning of *Parshat Vaeira* when Moshe elaborates on the message of redemption, *Bnei Yisrael* do not listen “*mi-kotzer ruach u-mei-avodah kasha*” – “from shortness of breath and from the hard work” (*Shemot* 6:8). Many commentators understand these to be two distinct reasons for not listening (see *Ohr HaChaim*): it was difficult to pay attention because of all the physical labor (*avoda kasha*), but there was an additional psychological component of being short of breath (*kotzer ruach*) that contributed to the inability to listen. What was this psychological impediment?

If we survey the commentators, we can identify three distinct emotions that may have inhibited their ability to listen. The *Midrash (Pesikta Zutarta)* suggests that *Bnei Yisrael* were angry and that led them to subvert their original correct approach which was to believe in the redemption. While the *Midrash* does not state explicitly what they were angry about, perhaps it was because *Bnei Yisrael* were promised redemption and then nothing subsequently changed. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk suggests that they couldn't process the message of hope because they were depressed. This is alluded to as well in the commentary of Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi who suggests that *Bnei Yisrael* were not psychologically prepared or receptive to messages of comfort because they were devoid of any hope. Rabbeinu Bechayei goes so far as to suggest that they were fed up with life and lost the will to live. A third group of commentators focus on fear and anxiety as hindering the message of hope. For instance, Ramban suggests that *Bnei Yisrael* were afraid that Paroah or the officers would kill them. Maharal adds that besides the actual physical difficulty of the labor, they were also worried about the fact that the work was so difficult.

Regardless of whether one of the approaches is correct or if there is truth to all three, it is fascinating that they are all rooted in the term *kotzer ruach*. The metaphor used to encapsulate emotional distress—whether anger, depression, or anxiety—is shortness of breath. Without critiquing our ancestors' reaction in Egypt, perhaps we can learn a message for our own lower-level “*avoda kasha*” experiences. When we are confronted with difficulties and react with the shortness of breath of an unhealthy emotion, let us take a step back and take some deep breaths. If we can manage our anger, depression, or anxiety, perhaps we will have enough headspace to listen to the messages of hope and redemption.

**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI  
SCHIFFMAN**

[www.PsychedforTorah.com](http://www.PsychedforTorah.com)  
[PsychedforTorah@gmail.com](mailto:PsychedforTorah@gmail.com)  
[@PsychedforTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedforTorah)

