

We Do Not Know

Nine plagues have devastated Egypt. Pharaoh finally consents. He offers Moses to leave—the adults together with his children. He just demands that the cattle remain behind in Egypt. Moses responds:

גַּם מִקֶּנֶנוּ יִלָּךְ עִמָּנוּ לֹא תִשָּׂאֵר פָּרֶסֶה כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ נִקַּח. וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה גַּם אַתָּה תִתֵּן בְּיָדֵנוּ זִבְחִים וְעֹלֹת וְעֲשִׂינוּ לָהּ אֱלֹקֵינוּ: חֲזַק ה' אֶת לֵב פִּרְעֹה וְלֹא אָבָה לְשַׁלְחָם לְעֶבֶד אֶת ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְאַנְחֵנוּ לֹא נִדַּע מָה נַעֲבֹד אֶת ה' עַד בֹּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה. וַי

“You too shall give sacrifices and burnt offerings into our hands, and we will make them for the Lord our G-d. And also our cattle will go with us; not a [single] hoof will remain, for we will take from it to worship the Lord our G-d, and we do not know how we will worship G-d until we arrive there.

“G-d strengthened Pharaoh's heart, and he was unwilling to let them out.”

Moses is making a strange argument. We need all of our cattle with us, he tells Pharaoh, because we are unsure how we will worship G-d until we arrive at our destination of worship. Perhaps G-d will ask for more cattle.[\[1\]](#)

What does this mean? Did Moses mean these words literally? If not, why did he say them? And why did Pharaoh not tell him to ask G-d how much cattle they need? And why, after these words of Moses, did Pharaoh suddenly have a change of heart yet again and decided to remain obstinate? Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Altar, the first Rebbe of Ger,[\[2\]](#) known as the Chidushei HaRim, offers an interesting interpretation. Moses' words "we do not know how we will worship G-d until we arrive there" were meant for Pharaoh but also for every Jew in every generation until the end of time. "We do not know how we will worship G-d until we arrive there" means that there is no way we can be aware of what really consists of serving G-d "until we arrive there"—until we will be privy to see the full picture of history and the full meaning of our lives here on earth.

It is often tempting to define how we think G-d wants us to serve Him. We create an image of G-d wants from us. But in truth, "we do not know how we will worship G-d until we arrive there." We never can fully know what G-d wants from us; how He wants me to serve Him. Sometimes, our lives situations need to open us to the possibility that G-d expects something very different from each of us.

Similarly, we often discredit our small actions and minor victories. We view them as insignificant and "news not fit to print." We think that a significant action is one publicized on the websites, newspapers, Facebook and Twitter. We live in a society where greatness is measured by the appreciation and acknowledgments of others, where fame is both glamorous and desirable, and where deeds have to be reported by newspapers to be deemed noble.

But that is not always the case: what seems to us as trivial and small, may one day appear as awesome and incredibly impactful. "We do not know how we will worship G-d until we arrive there." When "we arrive there," the world to come, or the future world of Moshiach, we may see things very differently. What may have seemed to me as a futile struggle may turn out to be my deepest calling.[\[3\]](#) Service of G-d happens first in the intimate chambers of the human heart. When I control myself from cursing, or losing my temper and hollering, it may never be reported in the news, but nonetheless it is a true act of serving G-d.

A Jew from Jerusalem, Rabbi Chaim Sholom Deitch, shared that when he was young he remembered Karliner Chassidim from Jerusalem who after walking down the street and controlling their eyes from temptation, would enter into the synagogue and go a little dance to celebrate their moral victory.

It is a lost art today. We do not appreciate our minor victories. Either I am a world-hero or a loser. But that is not true. You refine an emotion in your heart, you curtail a negative instinct, you break a bad habit, you subdue your ego, you do a favor to another person, you do not pursue an addiction, you stay away from a promiscuous relationship, you say a blessing or a chapter of Psalms with mindfulness—these are the stuff of Divine service that capture the dignity and purpose of human existence.

Take the story of Joseph. He was a youngster working in an Egyptian home. His master's wife tried to seduce him but he steadfastly refused her. We may look at the story and say, "OK, we all have such experiences where we must withstand seduction and temptation. Some of us fail and some of us succeed." Yet the Torah turns this into a central story in Genesis. As a result, after a long series of events, he becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt and saves Egypt and the Jewish family from famine. In the imagination of Judaism it is an act like that of Joseph's which contains extraordinary power, majesty and significance. Had the Torah not told the story, we may have dismissed it as not very important. But in G-d's book, it is one of the most important stories of ancient Jewish history.