

Imagine a deck of cards broken up into 4 colors, each of those colors then has a different symbol, and then each of those differently symbolized and colored cards also has a different number on it. You are then told that you have to classify cards according to some unknown pattern. The only feedback is whether the classification is correct or not. Meaning, you are not given the rules, only the demand that they need to be put in some unnamed order.

You can classify cards according to the color of its symbols, the shape of the symbols, or the number of the shapes on each card. The classification rule changes every 10 cards. Once the participant has figured out the rule, the tester will then start to shake their head “no” when a new pattern is introduced.

The task, known as the Wisconsin Sorting Card Test, was developed in the 1940s by neuropsychologists and it measures how well people can adapt to change.

Today being January 1st, the day of resolutions got me thinking about change. This is the time of year that we like to talk about taking on new tasks, practices, or habits, introducing all sorts of change into our lives. Often, once that change happens, we gripe about it. Our whole lives are series of these changes, some incremental, some large scale, and that's where the sorting test comes to teach us something.

When we introduce ourselves to a new situation, it's as if the pattern has switched from the Wisconsin Card Sort. Off to college for the first time, here's your new pattern. Just retired from your law firm, try this pattern, which doesn't match any of the previous decks you've mastered. For the younger folks, who can't quite express it, imagine what it's like to master the early childhood experience only then to be thrust into the big world of Kindergarten. Our whole lives are basically different versions of this game, and usually, it takes us a long while to figure things out because the pattern is always morphing! Once we do figure it out, the pattern may shift again.

We all play this game, most of the time without realizing that the person next to us is knee-deep in their own version. Especially in our current climate, how often have you tried to figure out how to apply a new set of rules and regulations, only days after having mastered the earlier ones? Or just the pattern of life becoming routine and then suddenly, it shifts, your expectations don't match what is happening. It's been really tough! As messy and kind of annoying as that is, there is also something comforting and unifying in knowing that we're all in this together. The other reason this resonated was that it helped answer a question I always have when reading the beginning of Parshat Va'era.

If we recall what we've read so far in Exodus, the Israelites are in great distress. Suffering under the yoke of their evil taskmasters, they are performing back breaking labor, which is especially difficult, as they had lived in relative peace and prosperity for a long time in Egypt. It has been an abrupt change in their lives that put them in slavery, but you would think they would be waiting with baited breath for their redeemer.

When we get to the beginning of this Parshah, Moshe gets a long, impassioned and beautiful plea about how God will redeem, save, take, and deliver them out of Egypt. You can picture Moses going back to the Israelites with his head high, chest puffed out, feeling good. He's ready to be the big man on Egyptian soil.

But then, in an oddly laconic matter, we're not given access to what is said between him and the Israelites. All we are told is "But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, **their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.**"

It is astonishing that they don't listen to Moses. That they have no interest in hearing these words. One has to imagine the potential relief that a newly minted but already worked over slave would hear in the words that the Lord, the great mover of mountains, was getting ready to come down from the heavens and perform one of the great miracles of that day and age, to beat the Egyptian Gods and destroy Pharaoh. Alas, they don't hear that. All they see is life is about to change abruptly as it's a change from slavery to freedom, it still overwhelms their systems. Why does that happen?

To glean an answer, we can look to the two reasons two reasons given for their lack of heeding Moses:

Kotzer Ruah-crushed spirits and the other *Avodah*

Kashah-hard labor.

Ramban, Nachmanides, says the following on the hard labor aspect of this:

“This is the pressure that the taskmasters would enforce upon them that would prevent them from listening and thinking.”

I believe what the Ramban’s homing in on here is the instability and pressure that we feel in a new situation. It’s not just that it tires you physically. Physical labor can be counterbalanced with rest and calm. Truthfully, the enslaver needs its slaves to be in relatively good physical shape so even if they were tired, they allowed them to rest.

What was particularly damaging about this change in their life was that it hindered their ability to listen and think. They lost their mental and emotional faculties to process. It dulled them to their emotional cores. Going into this newness of freedom then was incredibly frightening. Sound familiar?

On the *Kotzer Ruah* line, being crushed of spirit, Italian commentator known as Sforno says the reason they didn't listen to Moses was because it did not appear believable to their present state of mind, so their hearts could not assimilate such a promise.

As much as the hard work beat down their listening and thinking skills, this shortness of spirit caused them to not be able to believe anymore. Freedom-Is that even possible? In their old lives, before the slavery, this would've been an easy equation to solve but now, the change of what comes next seem more burdensome than freeing.

These two teachings capture the struggle the Israelites were facing. This shift that Moses was suggesting was so radical that they didn't know how to operate. Slavery was a severe enemy as a pattern but at least they understood how it worked. Now this former adopted son of the house of Pharaoh who was an enemy of the state was telling them, "hey, let's go escape through this wild desert with this God."

When they were presented with the next set of cards, they couldn't even function. They heard, literally, Moses' words. But, it didn't enter their brains, their hearts, or their souls.

This is what changes in life can do to us. We find ourselves in wildly new situations and our faculties can get thrown for a serious loop. We feel burdened by the newness of the fresh situation. It affects how we listen and think among the people around us. It causes us to become short of spirit and not be able to see the world around us. The way you used to operate that was working so well for a while is now not quite functioning in the same way.

Yet, one question still remains about the Israelites: even if they were worked to the bone which caused their ability to comprehend and listen to be diminished, and had lost their ability to believe, from their dampened spirits, shouldn't the allure of freedom re-calibrate that? There's something so basic and primal about being on your own. To this question, I quote the following Midrash¹:

Is there actually a person who hears good news and isn't happy?! For example, "your child was born," or "you're being freed from slavery," and a person hearing that wouldn't be happy? If that is so, why did it say "and they didn't listen to Moses?" Actually, it was very hard for them to separate from the idol worship of Egypt..

¹Mekhilta de'Rabbi Yishmael 12:6

This teaching incredulously wonders how can a slave hear they're going to be freed and not jump for joy? The answer is that when the thing that was in your past, that which you're about to leave behind, is still a little enticing, it makes the unknown future that much murkier. Even in slavery, there were aspects of the culture and religion that were alluring to them, that brought them pleasure, because in part it fed their craving for stability.

Think about something you hold on to in your life that maybe isn't the best decision. Why is it that you hold on to that? I would bet that in some way it's because it feels safe, known, and comfortable. You know how the rules work in that "thing." You know how to order the cards of that Wisconsin Card Sort.

This tension we face with change is the very reason why God must bring down the plagues in the manner God does later. As much as the plagues were meant to punish Pharaoh and those complicit Egyptians, they were also for the Israelites. It wasn't only just for them to see their God's power.

Remember, when they first heard what was to happen, they didn't really believe it. Slavery and their past had dulled them. They needed this miraculous show of God's might to shake them from their unchanging slumbers.

As challenging as it is, we all must learn to rework ourselves to respond to change better. In some ways, the very thing that felled the Israelites are the skills we can work on.

First off, we must hone our listening and thinking skills, taking in the newness, understanding what's happening, and not running away at the first sign of discomfort. That then will allow you to believe, not necessarily that the situation will be easier, but that YOU can get through it. You will remember that you've accomplished this before in your previous card game. We can also let others in. Talking to other people about the anxiety we feel is only helpful. When you feel less alone, the *kotzer ruach* and *avodah kashah* are less burdensome because the load is shared. Finally, we can try to worry less about how others are acting and more about how we're reacting. So much of our own descent comes from the power we give others' actions to affect us. You can ultimately only control yourself.

In the coming year, may we find the right balance between tradition and change. May we attune ourselves to recognize the things that God puts before us that allow us to shed something from our past and jump into the unknown newness of life. May we continue to play many games of the Wisconsin Card Sort and in the middle, when the rules shift, don't panic, breathe and remember that soon enough you'll figure it out.

Happy New Year and Shabbat Shalom,

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