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“Difficult Labor” of Egypt - The Root of Exertion

In *Parashas Shemos*, the Torah writes, “*And they embittered their lives with difficult labor, with mortar and bricks*”. The exile in Egypt was one of *avodah koshoh*, of “difficult labor”, which causes *ameilus*, exertion.

Our very life on this world is really a life of exertion. The verse testifies, “*A man is born to toil*”, and the Gemara wonders: Is this referring to exertion in physical work or exertion in Torah? The Gemara concludes that we are born for exertion in Torah. Life on This World contains exertion and hard work. When one merits it, he merits that his main exertion on This World is in Torah. If he is less meritorious, his main exertion on This World will be with physical work – “*By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.*”

Exertion is defined as anything that bothers us and strains us. In deeper terms, all exertion results whenever there is *he'elam*, the “concealment”, of This World. The words “*he'elam*” (concealment) and “*amal*” (exertion) bear the same root letters. The more concealment there is, the more exertion there will be.

There is a well-known teaching of our Sages that the “world” is called “*olam*” from the word “*he'elam*” (concealment), and man’s task on this world is to have *amal*\exertion and remove the *he'elam*\concealment. The reason why we must have exertion on this world is so that we can remove the barriers that conceals the light of the spiritual – namely, the holy Torah, and Hashem’s Presence. This is the underlying core of our exertion that we have as we are on This World.

Exertion: Going Against Our Nature

In other terms, Chazal teach that the “difficult labor” of Egypt was the fact that it was *avodas perach*, “cruel labor”, for the men were given women’s labor, and the women were given men’s labor; they were given work that went against their nature. Whenever a person does something that against his nature, it is *ameilus*\exertion.

There is a simple kind of *ameilus*, when a person does something that requires hard work, even if it is suitable to his nature to do the job; and there is also *ameilus* when a person does something that is against his nature. The more that something opposes a person’s nature, the greater the exertion. The labor in Egypt went totally against the natures of the Jewish men and women, so it was a very difficult

form of *ameilus*.

To have a clearer understanding of it, Bilaam said of the Jewish people, "*Sin cannot be viewed in Yaakov, and exertion cannot be seen in Yisrael; Hashem his G-d is with him.*" What is the "exertion of Yisrael" which cannot be seen? Rashi explains that "exertion" here refers to sin, for "there is no exertion except with sin." Why is exertion called "sin"?

Man is comprised of a body and a soul. When the soul desires something, and if the body were to join with the soul in its mission, the body would feel exertion. The same is true vice versa: if the body wants something, the soul has exertion when a person pursues the desires of the body.

So there are two ways to understand *ameilus*\exertion. A person who is blocked from the light of the spiritual will feel exertion when he tries to attain something spiritual, because it goes against his *revealed nature* at this moment. By contrast, someone who lives spiritually, who lives with his *neshamah* and the holy Torah, and with Hashem's Presence – when he does something spiritual, this is flowing with his *revealed nature*, and when he does something materialistic, he feels exertion at this.

The more a person speaks words of Torah, when "his mouth does not cease from Torah", he feels less exertion to speak words of Torah, because it becomes more natural to him, and in turn, to engage in physical work feels like exertion for him, because he has become further from the very idea of physical work. The same is true vice versa: the more a person is connected to this materialistic world, the harder it is for him to speak words of Torah and to have mental exertion in Torah. It will feel difficult for him.

Let us repeat that even when a person does something which is natural for him to do, if he puts in a lot of work into it, it will also feel like exertion. But there are things which, by their very nature, are acts of exertion for a person. Even if it is a relatively easy task to accomplish, it will feel like exertion, as long as it is an act that goes against his nature. These are the two kinds of exertion: Doing something which takes a lot of work to do, and doing something which is against one's nature.

The depth of "*Man is born to toil*" is therefore because a person has to keep putting effort into his Torah and mitzvos, with doing Hashem's will, and to keep improving upon his spiritual accomplishments. That is one kind of exertion – he has to keep continuing and adding onto whatever he has done so far. But the deeper aspect of one's exertion is that he has to keep going against his nature. This part is the main aspect of one's *avodah* here on this world.

In the exile of Egypt, the concept of *ameilus*\exertion was revealed in the side of impurity, with *avodas perach*, where the men were given women's labor and the women were given men's labor. But in the side of holiness, *ameilus* is the main part of one's *avodah* on this world to serve Hashem – for the main aspect of one's *avodah* on this world is to go against his nature.

Exertion In Torah: Going Against Our Nature

Chazal explain that the verse "*Man is born to toil*" is referring to exertion in Torah, and not in physical work. The simple understanding of this is because a person has exertion in involving himself in Torah study, so that Torah study shouldn't cease from his mouth. But the deeper understanding of these words of Chazal is because there are really two aspects of exertion in Torah study, as follows.

One part of the exertion is to involve oneself with Torah, by speaking of it constantly. But another part of the exertion, as the Vilna Gaon writes about, is to feel some suffering from learning Torah – as opposed to fasting and other forms of physical suffering. The Vilna Gaon says that a person suffers when he has to restrain himself from idle chatter, and to instead only speak words of Torah. For all of

a person's life, one must go through this form of suffering.

And so, exertion in Torah requires one to go against one's nature.

There are two different ways of how a person can view something that opposes his nature. Either he will belittle it, so that he can spare himself the pain of facing it, and in that way, he "gets rid" of his opposition. This is like Amalek, which is rooted in the word *ama*\exertion, whose prime evil characteristic is *leitzanus*, mockery; Amalek fights anything that opposes it through *leitzanus*. That is the evil way to deal with the issue of *ama*\exertion. The true way to face *ama*\exertion is to go against one's nature.

That is what life is about: constantly going against our nature. The Vilna Gaon says that if a person doesn't try to break his worst *middah*, his life has no purpose to it.

Contradictions: Our Very Makeup

Hashem created us in a way that we are always facing contradictions. Things are always opposing us, and there are also contradictions within ourselves. Our very existence on this world is a body and a soul; our soul comes from Heaven and our body comes from this earth, and the body and soul contradict each other.

Not only do our body and soul contradict each other, but our very makeup is built of contradictions. The body-soul contradiction is the root of all our contradictions, but there are many more branching contradictions that result from this. Our soul contains many contradictory forces within it. One detail in the soul opposes another detail of the soul.

The simple example of contradictory forces is man and woman. Man is told to leave his parents and cleave to his wife, who is called *eizer k'negdo*, a helpmate to oppose him. Creation is designed in a way that we must contend with contradicting forces. This is what lies at the core of *ameilus*, in the depths of the soul.

Getting To Know Your Inner Contradictions

One must know clearly that Hashem has designed us with many contradicting forces. One must get to know the many contradictions in him and then "work out the contradictions" - in order to remove them - and then he makes peace with his own inner "enemies", his inner contradictions. When he makes peace between these inner "enemies" - his inner contradictory forces - those "enemies" then become turned into his "friends", in the sense **that he gains more self-completion from this.**

The Root of Inner Contradictions - The Yetzer Hora

The beginning verse of *Parshas Ki Seitze* is, "When you shall go out to war against your enemies", and Chazal teach that this is referring to going out to "war" with the *yetzer hora* (the evil inclination).

The *Chovos HaLevovos*[\[1\]](#) writes in very clear terms of how the *yetzer hora* is man's worst enemy, who resides like a parasite inside him, enmeshed with his very spirit; who advises him to do evil and who has only agenda: to destroy the person. "Know that he is your greatest enemy", the *Chovos HaLevovos* says. Reb Yisrael Salanter elaborates that there are two kinds of *yetzer hora* - an external force and an internal force. The external *yetzer hora* is the evil influences of the surroundings, whereas the internal *yetzer hora* is the nature in a person to do evil.

When a person lives superficially, he is not aware of his spiritual situation, and he won't feel the contradictory forces within himself. But the more a person lives internally and truthfully, the more he

is aware to the soul and to the various natures contained in it, which Hashem has designed it with. (Some of these natures only came as a result of the sin of Adam, but those possibilities were also enabled by Hashem).

When a person lives inwardly and truthfully, he recognizes his soul, its natures, the human weaknesses, and he uncovers all of the contradictory forces within himself. For each aspect of the soul he discovers in himself, he notices another force that contradicts it, and how much he needs to exert himself to work out these contradictions.

Contradictions In Our Torah Learning & Seeing The Contradictions Of Life

The main exertion on this world is in Torah, and the depth of this is because the Torah contains all possible angles of understanding.

Chazal teach that the “bricks” and “mortar” of the difficult labor in Egypt, which are called “*choimer*” and “*levainim*”, are referring to the concept of “*kal v’chomer*” (fortiori argument) – an aspect of Torah study. Most of the time when we are learning Torah, we are encountering contradictions. There are contradictions in the Gemara, in the words of the *Rishonim*, and in the *Acharonim*. There are verses in the Torah that contradict each other, until a third verse comes and proves the real meaning. There are contradictions between two *Mishnayos* and two *Beraisos*, and the Gemara has to differentiate between the cases, in order to answer the contradictions. The entire *Shas* is full of contradictions.

This is the way exertion in Torah looks like. If one is learning Torah all day, that means he is constantly uncovering contradictions and trying to work them out. When learning *Tosafos*, most of the time there are contradictions that need to be worked out. It is entirely built on contradictions.

The lesson of this is to show us that life contains many contradictions, and that we need to work them out. When one lives superficially and he doesn’t view his Torah learning as a way to view life, he doesn’t get the lesson. He thinks that contradictions are only for the Gemara, and when he closes the Gemara and he goes out into the world, he is not aware that life itself is all about contradictions. But if a person takes his learning to heart, he is aware that life itself is a constant state of encountering contradictions.

The Torah provides a person with a way of thinking, of how to view life: we are constantly encountering contradictions. One can only gain this view on life from Torah learning when he is having exertion in Torah, together with purity and holiness. He can become aware that the Torah he is learning is the Torah that was given to Moshe at Sinai, which illuminates all of a person’s life. Torah is not just an intellectual pursuit which remains purely in one’s mind, but a part of how we need to think, a part of how to view life, and a thought process which needs to go from our intellect and into the depths of our heart.

Discovering The Internal Contradictions

When one is deeply aware of this perspective, as he comes across contradictions when learning Gemara in-depth, he notices contradictions within himself as well. This is the true meaning of a person whose Torah penetrates into the heart. There are other ways as well of how Torah can penetrate into one’s heart, and this is just one of the ways - but it is a very fundamental one.

When the light of Torah penetrates one’s heart, he uncovers the contradictions in his heart. Man is entirely an existence of contradictory forces. It’s not a question of how many contradictions there are - rather, the entire soul is in a state of contradiction. We need to find those contradictions and then work them out.

There is a verse, *"Go my nation, into your rooms"*, and Chazal teach that there are "rooms" of Torah, where one can keep going further within, uncovering more and more secrets of Torah. These are the *"chadrei halev"*, "rooms in the heart", and the deeper one goes into his heart, the "more the Torah reveals her secrets." The word for "secret" is *"seiser"*, which is also the root of the word *"stirah"*, "contradiction". This hints to us that the depths of Torah are to find the contradictions in it, where one discovers that each aspect of Torah is contradicted by a different aspect.

One who reaches this place of finding contradictions in Torah, from exertion in Torah and after the Torah has penetrated his heart, and he searches for truth - he begins to recognize the inner meaning of *"What does Hashem ask of you?"*

At the superficial level, a person is simply aware that he has bad *middos*, and some behaviors he needs to change, etc. But when one merits to get more inward, there he sees the hidden, secluded places of the heart, where there are contradictions, of which it is written, *"In the hidden depths, my soul weeps"* - the many contradictions that exist in the depths of the soul. When one is aware of it, he cries over his situation, for there are so many contradictions in him, and he sees how his entire soul needs to be improved. When one cries about this, he feels a very great yearning, an inner calling, to serve Hashem.

The more a person recognizes his inner contradictions, and he searches for truth, he will want to work out all of these contradictions. After taking care of the contradictions, he will find Hashem's Presence in his heart. One who doesn't find the inner contradictions in himself is not able to come to the place of deep weeping in the soul over his situation, and Hashem's Presence in his heart will be hidden and concealed from him.

When one has internalized these words, and he learns Torah properly (and if he merits it, he learns with some intention of *lishmah*), and the light of Torah penetrates into his heart, and the contradictions he comes across in his learning are also showing him the contradictions in his own heart, herein lays the depth of *bechirah* (free will), of choosing to work hard on this world, in the exertion of Torah. *"Man is born to toil"* - one needs to constantly have exertion in working out his inner contradictions, by going against his nature (until he eventually reaches a more inner place in the soul, which is the original state of *yashrus* (uprightness) that Hashem created man with).

Practically Speaking

Practically speaking, in order to actualize these concepts, the first thing a person needs to do is to learn Torah properly.

After passing through that first stage, with assistance from Heaven, a person can then begin to feel the inner contradictions in him. He can know them on an intellectual level as well as on a palpable level, with "understanding of the heart." One should see a clear picture of the inner contradictions that are found in his heart. Just like a person finds contradictions when he learns Gemara, so does he need to find contradictions in his own soul. Then he is closer to reaching his purpose on this world.

If a person searches for truth, he should become very aware of his inner contradictions. He should try taking a pen and paper and writing down all of the inner contradictions he notices in himself. He should also try to 'work out' those contradictions, just like he does when he learns Gemara. In this way, one takes apart the *yetzer hora* that is enmeshed in his spirit, as the *Chovos HaLevovos* writes; he can keep uncovering deeper and more subtle contradictions in himself. This reveals Hashem's Presence in the heart.

No person is the same as another, and therefore not every person has the same inner contradictions

that another will have. The common denominator between all people is that every force in the soul is contradicted by another force. At first a person should try to discover the general contradictions inside him, which are easier to discern, and then to go against his nature in those areas, in order to fight these contradictions. Eventually a person should discover more subtle contradictions inside him, and then fight those contradictions.

This is what it means to choose to have true exertion in Torah – to illuminate one’s entire soul with the same spiritual light of exertion in Torah. This deep choice that one can make is to choose to work hard on this world - to choose to work hard by exerting oneself in Torah, in doing the mitzvos, and in doing Hashem’s will.

Understandably, exertion is not the entire picture of life. There is also *menuchah* (serenity) which we need, and this is the deeper part of our soul, which is like Shabbos, where we abstain from any work.^[2] But we also have the “six days of the week”, exertion, which we also need to contend with for all our life – for “*Man is born to toil.*”

In Conclusion

When one chooses exertion like this, he will have constant spiritual growth in his own soul, and as he conquers his own inner contradictions as he goes along, he attains more and more “*yashrus*” (“straightening” of the mind), as he resolves all of these inner contradictions, through constantly going against his nature to improve himself.

When he keeps going in this way, he will find his personal “*Mesillas Yescharim*” (path of the upright), the inner place in the soul of “*yashrus*”, which Hashem created man with, as written in the verse, “*G-d made man upright.*” He will then find his own “*orach meishar*”, his own “upright path”, and slowly, he will be able to reach the very light of the Torah.

These words are the root of one’s inner task, for those who search for Hashem.

^[1] *Chovos HaLevovos: Shaar Yichud HaMaaseh: 5*

^[2] See The ***Weekly Shmuess_012_Vayishlach- Serenity Amidst The War of Life***