



SOME HOME TRUTHS ABOUT A STIFF NECK

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Some will say it comes with age, others will tell you that it can happen to anyone, at any time in life. No matter; when it hurts, it hurts big time. I am talking of the neck. If you are like me, (and I hope in this regard no one is!) you might have experienced exactly how painful a stiff neck can be. You will wake up in the middle of the night, or it can sometimes happen during the day; there is a sudden excruciating pain that words are powerless to describe. I am not talking of a simple pain in the neck (a title many a parent will bestow upon their offspring, bless them). No, this takes pain to a whole new level, one that encompasses your entirety. You can't just stand up and take a few pills; you can't stand, period! Every fiber of your mind is throbbing incessantly. The pain radiates from the neck and soon even your breathing seems affected. I have periodically been the recipient of this affliction, and have tried numerous ways to extricate myself from its grasp. I have had expert doctors crunching my bones, others offering painkillers that soon lose their potency, you name it and I've tried it. Yet, well as age creeps up and the joints seem to wreak their vengeance for the decades of just sitting and shuckeling, it sometimes felt that there would be no light beyond the shroud of painfulness. Boruch Hashem I can offer one path of respite from all this pain. With the gentle guidance of the world's greatest keep fit expert, my sorely missed Rebbetzin A'H, I learned that if you just take a deep breath, sit down, and slowly, very slowly allow your head to move down, then to the side, you will experience a miracle. Because as you move you will feel the grasp of the pain abating; within minutes all that harrowing anguish will be just a fading memory. The secret is that you have to relax enough to let your tense muscles calm down. When first struck, you become even tenser. This merely exacerbates your pain, so the only way out of this cycle is to relax those muscles. Breathing in slowly and moving very calmly all helps to restore one to the status quo. Personally, I also add a heating pad, just for a sense of warming comforting. You can soon sing a brocha to Hashem for releasing you out from the tension that had just moments before enveloped your whole being.

Such tension is endemic in our world; we have so much on our minds, and as age creeps up, our bodies begin to rebel. I share these medical asides because we are all in the throes of Pesach preparations, a sure-fire recipe for tension! However, there is more to it than a quick fix to any stiff neck.

Pesach is about removing the spiritual walls we build around us. We often fill our space with so much pain and difficulty that we can't seem to flee from the anguish. The Egyptian redemption didn't occur in a one-

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off vacuum of time; it's happening today as well. Every neshomah experiences moments of bondage; and if we keep our focus, we can find personal deliverance.

The first step is to calm down and catch one's breath. There is a cacophony of noise that sometimes monopolises our minds. We can't think straight, the pain of our circumstances seems overpowering. The bills are coming through the door, the kids are having problems in school and we can't seem to find the right friends. All this builds up, we lose the words to articulate our situation and often as not, we fear to burden those we love. The intensity of the pain grabs our soul, and there is a searing sense of hurt that rushes over us.

Then we are given a gift from Hashem, a moment in time which offers us hope. Pesach is such a huge bequest from on high, we just need to realise it. Sometimes in the chaos that passes for Yom Tov preparations we lose sight of what it's all about. Take a deep breath, hold on to the warmth of Hashem's comforting love, and allow yourself to truly realise you are in His hands.

When I was a Bochur I had the merit to spend every Pesach at the table of the Bobover Rebbe HaRav Shloma Ztl. His every move in those days before the Sedorim offered one a passport out of the confines of one's personal Egypt. His ability to bring life to each nuance of Yom Tov preparations is legendary. As we baked Matzos Erev Yom Tov you could actually sense how spiritual hope was being breathed into our hearts. The singing and the intense pace were instrumental in freeing us from the confines of the everyday problems with which were beset. I often watched his son, The Rebbe Rav Naftali Ztl, as he swept into Yom Tov. His was a huge neshomah, one that we will never begin to understand. Single handedly he carried the entire burden of what was then a fledgling community soaked in debt and untold problems. His daily experience was filled with the worry of how the Mosdos would survive, and each day brought new and huge dilemmas. Yet his was a service to Hashem that was beyond any normal understanding. It seemed that with each added problem his spiritual strength became more profound. What would have crushed any other person seemed to just gently rest on his slight but holy shoulders. It wasn't that he didn't realise the enormity of what he carried, but he saw it all as Hashem's special task that was granted him after the horrors of the Holocaust. Part of his preparation for Pesach was the facilitation of the selling of Chometz. People from all strata of the community would come to make him their agent in this halachic task. I was amongst those throngs of individuals; and later, even as a Rav of a community I would turn to him to act for me in this way. I always felt that visiting him so close to Yom Tov was integral to the observance of the festival. His sweet smile was always there for me, and his advice cherished. In those days I was involved in running a yeshiva that was the first to offer special education for Heimishe adolescent boys and our debts were huge. I always felt that just by selling my chometz through Rav Naftali I unloaded the worry that came with my position. His voice just made one feel better, and after all, his burdens dwarfed mine. Alas, I no longer have his calming brochas to help me through these stiff-necked times, but I have his memory. It is from such holy souls that we can learn so much.

The Torah speaks of Hashem calling us "a stiff-necked people." This can mean that we are sometimes so racked with pain that we can't lift our heads to see what possibilities await us. Our Tzadikim give us an eternal lesson, that with calm hope the discomfort can disappear.

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