

**Big Talk vs. Small Talk: A Meaningful Path to Mindfulness**  
**Parshat BeShalach 5776**  
**Rabbi Dovid Zirkind**

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The New York Times recently started a podcast series called “Modern Love” – focused on the dynamics and disappointments of contemporary relationships. A recent post was recorded by an actuary from Boston named Tim Boomer, who found himself single after a five year relationship with a woman he truly loved. After years of heartfelt conversations about hopes and dreams, Boomer describes what it was like for him to be back alone and out on the town:

*“Next to me at the bar was a couple on their first date. I could tell because their conversation reminded me of those awkward exchanges you have with co-workers’ spouses at Christmas parties. They opened with a discussion about their commutes to the bar. They both lived within a 10-minute bus ride, and they managed to stretch out this topic for 30 minutes. Next up, the weather: In Boston it rains sometimes, and they had both noticed this. An hour in, they turned to the really deep stuff. One was a teacher, and the other knew a teacher. How could they be destined for anything other than true love?”*

Cynicism aside, Boomer begins a journey to end the ‘small talk’ in favor of what he calls ‘big talk’; making the most of meeting new people, trying to really understand who they are. He asks:

*“Why can’t we... ask each other profound questions right from the start? Replace mindless chatter about commuting times with a conversation about our weightiest beliefs and most potent fears? Questions that reveal who we are and where we want to go?”*

II

I often joke that Parshat BeShalach encapsulates the entirety of the Jewish story. The bookends of our Parsha are miraculous salvations (like Yam Suf) and the ever present threat of genocidal anti-Semitism (the war with Amalek). In between, we find a few variations on the same theme, Jews complaining about food. First it’s the water, then the bread, the meat, and then more water trouble.

Broadly speaking, when we aren't at our best and we aren't at our worst, our trivial selves are quite the disappointment.

(כב) וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַּר־שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת־יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם :  
(כג) וַיָּבֹאוּ מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשַׁתֵּת מַיִם מִמָּרָה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עֲלֵינוּ קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מָרָה : (כד) וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־  
מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר מַה־נִּשְׁתָּה:

**22. Moshe led Israel from Yam Suf, and they traveled to the desert *Shor*. They continued three days in the desert and found no water. 23. They arrived in Marah, but could not drink the waters of Marah for they were bitter. Therefore they named [the place] Marah. 24. The nation complained on Moshe saying: "what shall we drink?"**

Rather than take this story at face value, Chazal offer a surprising re-reading of this story:

דורשי רשומות אמרו: אין מים אלא תורה, שנאמר: "הוי כל צמא לכו למים". כיון שהלכו שלשת ימים בלא תורה גלאו...

**The scholars explain: Water here refers to Torah. As it states: "All those who are thirsty seek water." It was because they traveled three days without Torah that they complained.**

(מסכת בבא קמא דף פב עמוד א)

In a desert short on water supply and rampant with reasonable fear of the unknown, Chazal suggest the source of the people's angst was not a three day shortage of water, but three days without Torah. And so, argues the Talmud, Moshe's innovation of Torah reading on Mondays and Thursdays was the antidote to this void.

The Torah Temimah points out that the stories of Beshalach happened before Har Sinai. There was no Torah to be had, certainly no public laining. But what Chazal presumably mean, is that Moshe Rabbeinu realized the cure to the nations complaints was not a lesson in gratitude or a commitment to more consistent miraculous sustance, but a change in subject matter. In fact, in his rebuke of the people Moshe never attacks their forgetfulness or their sense that G-d can't provide water. He simply begins a conversation about ethics, discipline and health.

(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִנָּשַׁר בְּעֵינָיו תַּעֲשֶׂה וְהִאֲזַנְתָּ לְמִצְוֹתָיו וְשָׁמַרְתָּ כָּל־חֻקָּיו  
כָּל־הַמְחֻלָּה אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי בַּמִּצְוֹתִים לֹא־אֲשִׁים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה רַב־אֱלֹהֶיךָ: ס

**26. He said: "If you shall surely listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d and follow what is correct in His eyes, listen to His voice, guard His commandments, all the illnesses of Egypt will be withheld from you, for I am Hashem your Healer.**

Fran Lebowitz, a noted author and fashion icon, once mocked a quote of Elanor Roosevelt, saying:

*"Great people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, and small people talk about wine."*

That's what Parshat BeShalach is all about; turning small people into great people by moving from small talk to big ideas. The antidote to their longing for water was a shift in focus rather than diet.

### III

Long before there was FITBIT, a group of researches were studying happiness and they outfitted a group of 80 college students with audio recorders, to track, not their steps, but their conversations. Days later they studied the results, measuring deep meaningful conversations and shallow ones. Not too surprisingly they found that most conversations were pretty shallow, but the people who had the most meaningful chats with friends were also the most likely to rate themselves as being happier.

Mehl and Vazir, the authors of the study conclude saying:

**"our findings suggest that people find their lives more worth living when examined--at least when examined together."**

Every so often I find myself dining at a wedding, talking about what I might cook for Shabbos, or coming to shul in the snow to talk about the snow more so than talking about shul. Parshat B'Shalach is a push to turn small talk into big talk, to use the platforms we already have to talk about the things in life we really hope to achieve.

Imagine, the shift of Tim Boomer. Using time on the train to talk to our co-workers about values; time at Kiddush to talk about helping our neighbors in need or the time in shul talking to G-d about our deepest fears and greatest hopes.

If all we talk about are the drinks, the Torah tells us they won't be sweet enough. But in a life of happiness and purpose, the food we eat is just one small piece of sense of fulfillment, easily achieved.

## **Eavesdropping on Happiness: Well-being is Related to Having Less Small Talk and More Substantive Conversations**

Matthias R. Mehl and Simine Vazire (2010)

- We report findings from a naturalistic observation study that investigated whether happy and unhappy people differ in the amount of small talk and substantive conversations they have.
- Seventy-nine undergraduates (47 females) wore the EAR for four days (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). The EAR recorded for 30 seconds every 12.5 minutes, providing 23,689 waking recordings (M = 300 per participant). For each recording, coders identified whether a participant was alone, talking with others, and whether a conversation was small talk or substantive.
- Together, the findings demonstrate that the happy life is social rather than solitary and conversationally deep rather than superficial.
- Remarking on Socrates' dictum, "the unexamined life is not worth living," Daniel Dennett wrote, "the overly examined life is nothing to write home about either." (1984, p. 87). While we hesitate to enter such delicate philosophical disputes, our findings suggest that people find their lives more worth living when examined--at least when examined together.

***"Great people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, and small people talk about wine."***

- Fran Lebowitz (author, public speaker)

### **The End of Small Talk**

**NYTIMES, Modern Love. Tim Boomer, January 14, 2016**

- Next to me at the bar was a couple on their first date. I could tell because their conversation reminded me of those awkward exchanges you have with co-workers' spouses at Christmas parties. They opened with a discussion about their commutes to the bar. They both lived within a 10-minute bus ride, and they managed to stretch out this topic for 30 minutes. Next up, the weather: In Boston it rains sometimes, and they had both noticed this. An hour in, they turned to the really deep stuff. One was a teacher, and the other knew a teacher. How could they be destined for anything other than true love?
- With this in mind, I decided to approach my re-entry to dating with a no-small-talk policy. Not that I would insist we talk only about heartfelt subjects; ideally, there would also be plenty of flirtatious joking and witty banter. I simply wanted to eliminate the dull droning on about facts and figures — whether it's snowing or raining, how cold it is, what we do for work, how long it takes to get to work, where we went to school — all those things that we think we have to talk about with someone new but that tell us little about who the person really is.

Why can't we replace small talk with big talk and ask each other profound questions right from the start? Replace mindless chatter about commuting times with a conversation about our weightiest beliefs and most potent fears? Questions that reveal who we are and where we want to go?

### **שמות פרשת בשלח פרק טו**

- (כב) וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַּר־שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת־יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם:
- (כג) וַיָּבֹאוּ מִרְתֵּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתֹּת מִיַּם מִמֶּרְהָ כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־שְׁמָהּ מֶרֶה:
- (כד) וַיֵּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מַה־נִּשְׁתָּה:
- (כה) וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־יְקֹנָק וַיֹּרְהוּ יְקֹנָק עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שֵׁם שֵׁם לוֹ חֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשֵׁם נֶסֶהוּ:
- (כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל יְקֹנָק אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהַיִּשָּׁר בְּעֵינָיו תַּעֲשֶׂה וְהֶאֱזַנְתָּ לְמִצְוֹתַי וְשָׁמַרְתָּ כָּל־חֻקָּיו כָּל־הַמַּחְלָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא־אֲשִׁים עֲלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹנָק רִפְאָךְ: 0

### **תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא קמא דף פב עמוד א**

והא מעיקרא הוה מיתקנא! דתניא: "וילכו שלשת ימים במדבר ולא מצאו מים" - דורשי רשומות אמרו: אין מים אלא תורה, שנאמר: "הוי כל צמא לכו למים". **כיון שהלכו שלשת ימים בלא תורה נלאו**, עמדו נביאים שביניהם ותיקנו להם שיהו קורין בשבת ומפסיקין באחד בשבת, וקורין בשני ומפסיקין שלישי ורביעי, וקורין בחמישי ומפסיקין ערב שבת, כדי שלא ילינו ג' ימים בלא תורה!

### **תורה תמימה הערות שמות פרק טו**

וכן קשה לפי מש"כ התוס' כאן בטעם התיקון לקרות דוקא בב' וה' משום דאיתא במדרש שמשה עלה לקבל לוחות האחרונים ביום החמישי וירד ביום השני ונתרצה לו הקב"ה, ולכן הוו ימי רצון ולכן תקנו לקרות בימים אלה, והנה פסוק זה נאמר קודם קבלת לוחות אחרונים וקודם לוחות ראשונים ואף קודם מתן תורה, ואיך יתכן שיכנונו אז לכונה זו, ועוד יש מה להעיר בזה וסמכנו על המעיין.