After Moses and Aaron first attempt to negotiate with Pharaoh for the release of the Israelites from slavery, Pharaoh places even heavier work upon them. G-d then tells Moses to reassure the people that they will be redeemed and brought to the Promised Land. But the people can’t absorb this message.

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקֹּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה׃

But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.

Most commentators understand the phrase מִקֹּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה to mean something along the lines of “from impatience of spirit and harsh labor.” Ramban, a medieval Spanish commentator also known as Nachmanides, understands the “impatience of spirit” to be their fear that Pharaoh would put them to death and the “harsh labor” to be the pressure from the taskmasters who hurried them in their daily work, giving them no chance to hear and consider Moses’s words of comfort. Ramban clarifies that it wasn’t lack of faith – they didn’t even stop to listen. They suffered from a combination of mental and physical distress that made them unable to see that things would get better.

All of us can think of moments when we’ve been so bogged down by the stresses and distresses of our lives that we couldn’t think about anything else. קוצר רוח literally translates as shortness of spirit – we might say that our spirits become crushed. We get overwhelmed and burnt out and our vision narrows.

What can we do? The continuation of the story gives a powerful hint. After Moses’s message goes unheard, the narrative shifts to Moses’s negotiations with Pharaoh and the plagues. Only with the final plague do the Israelites reenter the story and immediately follow Moses’s instructions to prepare the Paschal sacrifice. What changed? Maybe nothing and just with time the Israelites were able absorb Moses’s message of hope. Or perhaps the plagues themselves distracted the Egyptians and gave the Israelites enough breathing room so that they could finally hear the message. The same is true for us. Sometimes we need a little time or space to breathe in order to step back and see the bigger picture.