

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

The opening chapters of Exodus plunge us into the midst of epic events. Almost at a stroke the Israelites are transformed from protected minority to slaves. Moses passes from prince of Egypt to Midianite shepherd to leader of the Israelites through a history-changing encounter at the Burning Bush. Yet it is one small, often overlooked episode that deserves to be seen as a turning-point in the history of humanity. Its heroines are two remarkable women, Shifra and Puah.

We do not know who they were. The Torah gives us no further information about them other than that they were midwives, instructed by Pharaoh: 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live' (Ex. 1:16). The Hebrew description of the two women as *hameyaldot ha'ivriyot* is ambiguous. It could mean "the Hebrew midwives"; so most translations and commentators read it. But it could equally mean, "the midwives to the Hebrews," in which case they may have been Egyptian. That is how Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, II.9.2), Abarbanel and Samuel David Luzzatto understand it, arguing that it is simply implausible to suppose that Hebrew women would have been party to an act of genocide against their own people.

What we do know, however, is that they refused to carry out the order: "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the King of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (Ex. 1:17).

This is the first recorded instance in history of civil disobedience: refusing to obey an order, given by the most powerful man in the most powerful empire of the ancient world, simply because it was immoral, unethical, inhuman.

The Torah suggests that they did so without fuss or drama. Summoned by Pharaoh to explain their behaviour, they simply replied: "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth

before the midwives arrive" (Ex. 1:19). To this, Pharaoh had no reply. The matter-of-factness of the entire incident reminds us of one of the most salient findings about the courage of those who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. They had little in common except for the fact that they saw nothing remarkable in what they did. (See James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, pp. 35-39, and the literature cited there.) Often the mark of real moral heroes is that they do not see themselves as moral heroes. They do what they do because that is what a human being is supposed to do. That is probably the meaning of the statement that they "feared God." It is the Torah's generic description of those who have a moral sense. (See, for example, Gen. 20:11.)

It took more than three thousand years for what the midwives did to become enshrined in international law. In 1946, the Nazi war criminals on trial at Nuremberg all offered the defence that they were merely obeying orders, given by a duly constituted and democratically elected government. Under the doctrine of national sovereignty every government has the right to issue its own laws and order its own affairs. It took a new legal concept, namely a 'crime against humanity', to establish the guilt of the architects and administrators of genocide.

The Nuremberg principle gave legal substance to what the midwives instinctively understood: that there are some orders that should not be obeyed, because they are immoral. Moral law transcends and may override the law of the state. As the Talmud puts it: "If there is a conflict between the words of the Master [God] and the words of a disciple [a human being], the words of the Master must prevail" (*Kiddushin* 42b).

The Nuremberg trials were not the first occasion on which the story of the midwives had a significant impact on history. Throughout the Middle Ages the Church, knowing that knowledge is power and therefore preferring to keep it exclusively in the hands of the priesthood, had forbidden vernacular translations of the Bible. In the course of the sixteenth century, three developments changed this irrevocably. First was the Reformation, with its maxim *Sola scriptura*, "By Scripture alone," placing the Bible centre-stage in the religious life.

Second was the invention, in the mid-fifteenth century, of printing. Lutherans were convinced that this was Divine Providence. God had sent the printing press so that the doctrines of the Reformed church could be

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spread worldwide.

Third was the fact that some people, regardless of the ban, had translated the Bible anyway. John Wycliffe and his followers had done so in the fourteenth century, but the most influential rebel was William Tyndale whose translation of the New Testament, begun in 1525, became the first printed Bible in English. He paid for this with his life.

When Queen Mary I took the Church of England back to Catholicism, many English Protestants fled to Calvin's Geneva, where they produced a new translation, based on Tyndale, called the Geneva Bible. Produced in a small, affordable edition, it was smuggled into England in large numbers. Able to read the Bible by themselves for the first time, people soon discovered that it was, as far as monarchy is concerned, a highly seditious document.

It tells of how God told Samuel that in seeking to appoint a King, the Israelites were rejecting Him as their only Sovereign. It describes graphically how the Prophets were unafraid to challenge Kings, which they did with the authority of God Himself. And it told the story of the midwives who refused to carry out Pharaoh's order. On this, in a marginal note, the Geneva Bible endorses their refusal, criticising only the fact that, in explaining their behaviour, they told a lie. The note says, "Their disobedience herein was lawful, but their dissembling evil."

King James understood clearly the dire implication of that one sentence. It meant that a King could be disobeyed on the authority of God Himself: a clear and categorical refutation of the idea of the Divine right of Kings. (See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*.) Eventually, unable to stop the spread of Bibles in translation, King James decided to commission his own version which appeared in 1611. But by then the damage had been done and the seeds of what became the English revolution had been planted. Throughout the seventeenth century, by far the most influential force in English politics was the Hebrew Bible as understood by the Puritans, and it was the Pilgrim Fathers who took this faith with them on their journey to what would eventually become the United States of America.

A century and a half later, it was the work of another English radical, Thomas Paine, that made a decisive impact on the American revolution. His pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was published in America in January 1776 and became an instant best seller, selling 100,000 copies almost immediately. Its impact was huge, and because of it he became known as "the father of the American Revolution." Despite the fact that Paine was an atheist, the opening pages of *Common Sense*, justifying rebellion against a tyrannical King, are entirely based on citations from the Hebrew Bible. In the same spirit, that summer Benjamin Franklin drew, as his design for the Great Seal of America, a picture of

the Egyptians (i.e. the English) drowning in the Red Sea (i.e. the Atlantic), with the caption, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." Thomas Jefferson was so struck by the sentence that he recommended it to be used on the Great Seal of Virginia, and later incorporated it in his personal seal.

The story of the midwives belongs to a larger vision implicit throughout the Torah and Tanach as a whole: that right is sovereign over might, and that even God Himself can be called to account in the name of justice, as He expressly mandates Abraham to do. Sovereignty ultimately belongs to God, so any human act or order that transgresses the will of God is by that fact alone *ultra vires*. These revolutionary ideas are intrinsic to the biblical vision of politics and the use of power.

In the end, though, it was the courage of two remarkable women that created the precedent later taken up by the American writer Thoreau in his classic essay *Civil Disobedience* (1849) that in turn inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in the twentieth century. Their story also ends with a lovely touch. The text says: "So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them houses" (Ex. 1:20-21).

Luzzatto interpreted this last phrase to mean that He gave them families of their own. Often, he wrote, midwives are women who are unable to have children. In this case, God blessed Shifra and Puah by giving them children, as he had done for Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

This too is a not unimportant point. The closest Greek literature comes to the idea of civil disobedience is the story of Antigone who insisted on giving her brother Polynices a burial despite the fact that King Creon had refused to permit it, regarding him as a traitor to Thebes. Sophocles' *Antigone* is a tragedy: the heroine must die because of her loyalty to her brother and her disobedience to the King. By contrast, the Hebrew Bible is not a tragedy. In fact biblical Hebrew has no word meaning "tragedy" in the Greek sense. Good is rewarded, not punished, because the universe, God's work of art, is a world in which moral behaviour is blessed and evil, briefly in the ascendant, is ultimately defeated.

Shifra and Puah are two of the great heroines of world literature, the first to teach humanity the moral limits of power. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l © 5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

**Shabbat Shalom**

"**A**nd Pharaoh commanded his entire nation saying, every male baby born must be thrown

into the Nile, while every female baby shall be allowed to live.” (Exodus 1:22) In decreeing the destruction of the Israelites in Egypt, why does Pharaoh distinguish between the genders? Apparently afraid to keep the Israelite men alive lest they wage a rebellion against him, Pharaoh is confident that the Israelite women will not pose a threat, as they will presumably marry Egyptian men and assimilate into Egyptian society.

This strategy underscores Pharaoh’s ignorance – or denial – of the pivotal role women play in the development of a nation, and stands in stark contrast to the perspective of our Sages [Midrash Yalkut Shimoni], who declare that it was “in the merit of the righteous Israelite women that the Jewish People were redeemed from Egypt”.

The Talmud [Shabbat 118b] teaches, “I always call my wife ‘my home,’ since the real bulwark of the home is the woman of the house. As the Jewish nation emerged from a family, and family units are the bedrock of every society, it is clearly the women who are of supreme importance.

Pharaoh was blind to this. Apparently, he had no tradition of matriarchs such as Sarah and Rebecca, who directed the destiny of a national mission. For him, women were the weaker gender who were there to be used and taken advantage of. This is why Pharaoh attempts to utilize the Hebrew midwives to do his dirty work of actually murdering the male babies on the birth stools. To his surprise, the women rebelled: “And the midwives feared the Lord, so they did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do; they kept the male babies alive” (ibid. 1:17).

Taking it one step further, the Talmud [Sotah 11b] identifies the Israelite midwives as Yocheved (the mother of Moses and Aaron) and Miriam, their sister. The Midrash continues that Amram, their husband and father, respectively, was the head of the Israelite court. Upon learning of Pharaoh’s decree to destroy all male babies, he ruled that Israelite couples divorce, in order to cease reproduction. After all, why should people continue normal married life, only to have their baby sons killed?

Miriam chides her father: “Your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh! He made a decree only against male babies, but you are making a decree against female babies, as well.” Amram, persuaded by his daughter’s rebuke, remarries Yocheved, who conceives and gives birth to Moses, savior of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Miriam is actually following in a fine family tradition of fortitude and optimism. Her grandmothers, the mothers of Amram and Yocheved, gave birth to children during the bleakest days of oppression. Despite the slavery and carnage all around, one mother gives her son the name Amram, which means “exalted nation”; the other mother gives her daughter the name Yocheved, which means “glory to God.” Such was their

confidence in the potential of the Jewish People and their faith in the Source of their people’s greatness.

These two women were able to look beyond the dreadful state to which the Israelites had fallen in Egypt; their sights were held high, upon the stars of the heavens which God promised Abraham would symbolize his progeny and the Covenant of the Pieces which guaranteed the Hebrews a glorious future in the Land of Israel. These two proud grandmothers from the tribe of Levi merited grandchildren such as Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Pharaoh begins to learn his lesson when Moses asks for a three-day journey in the desert; Pharaoh wants to know who will go. Moses insists: “Our youth and our old people will go, our sons and our daughters will go – our entire households will go, our women as well as our men” [ibid. 10:8]. A wiser Pharaoh will now only allow the men to leave; he now understands that he has most to fear from the women!

And so it is no wonder that Passover, the festival of our freedom, is celebrated in the Torah with “a lamb for each house,” with the women included in the paschal sacrificial meal by name no less than the men. In our time, we find this idea expressed in the observances of the Passover Seder (the drinking of the four cups of wine, the eating of matza, and the telling of the story of the exodus, etc.), which are binding on women no less than men.

A post-script

One of my strongest childhood memories take place at a Seder at the home of my maternal grandparents. The entire family, including the seven married children of my grandparents, as well as their children, comprised well over fifty participants. My grandfather led the entire gathering in the reading of the Haggadah word for word; when anyone had a question about any of the passages, he or she was encouraged to ask. My grandfather would then always defer to my grandmother to give the answer, because he greatly respected the fact that she had learned Talmud with her father, the Dayan (rabbinical court judge) Rav Shlomo Kowalsky. Indeed, during the Seder, when my grandmother would go into the kitchen to check on the pots of food, my grandfather would stop the Haggadah reading until my grandmother re-joined us at the table, and only then would the Seder continue.

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**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**N**othing human is ever permanent. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is human nature itself, which, seemingly, has never changed from the days of the Garden of Eden until today. So, we should not be surprised by the narrative of the Torah in this week’s portion.

The Jewish people have been in Egypt for

centuries. They have lived off the fat of the Land in Goshen. They were highly respected, apparently affluent, and thought themselves to be secure in their land of exile. The memory of their leader Joseph, who was the savior of Egypt, still lingered in their minds, and also in the minds of the general Egyptian public. But Joseph was gone already for centuries, and as the Jewish people multiplied and continued to succeed within the Egyptian population its government, through the Pharaoh, began to look askance at them. They were no longer fellow citizens or loyal subjects, but, rather, were now seen as a dangerous and insidious minority that, because of its birthright and success, could endanger Egyptian society.

There now arose a new era, different from the centuries that preceded it. When the Talmud teaches us that there arose a new Pharaoh, one of the opinions is that a new attitude towards the Jews, one of suspicion and jealousy was apparent. The Jews were now seen as being an internal enemy, a disloyal section of society, an existential threat to the pharaohs of Egypt specifically, and to Egyptian society generally.

The Midrash seems to indicate that the Jews were not sensitive enough to realize how dangerous the change of attitude towards them was, in the general Egyptian society. When Pharaoh requested volunteers to come forth to help him in his great building projects, we are taught that the Jews came en masse to help build those symbols of might and wealth of ancient Egypt. The Pharaoh then, and undoubtedly with the help and acquiescence of much of Egyptian society, removed from the Jews their voluntary status, until suddenly they found themselves slaves and servants of Egypt, and no longer merely sojourners in the country.

And there were Jews who were willing to cooperate with the governmental authorities in policing the Jewish slave society. Eventually, these Jews also found themselves to be the victims of the Pharaoh and his cruel decree. It is no wonder that so many Jews – according to various opinions of the rabbis of Talmud and Midrash – never were able to extricate themselves from Egypt, even when Moshe successfully led the Jewish people out of Egyptian bondage, and out of Egypt itself.

There is, undoubtedly, a pattern that the Torah introduces which will apply to all later exiles of the Jewish people throughout the world. The end of an era always occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, illogically, and shockingly. The story of the end European Jewry that occurred almost a century ago is a sobering reminder of this pattern of exile. Jews should be wise enough to realize that ignoring the lessons of history is a truly fatal course in life. ©2021 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## Beginning of Anti-Semitism

**P**arashat Shemot deals with the subjugation of one nation by another. Paraoh is the first to express reasons for this, and he opened the door for generations of anti-Semites by his arguments against the Jews. Paraoh outlined both his reasons for distrusting the Jews and his plan for dealing with the “threat” that they would cause his nation: “A new King arose over Egypt who did not know of Yosef. And Paraoh said to his nation, ‘The nation of the Children of Israel is greater and stronger than us. Let us deal wisely (cunningly) with it lest it increase, and it will be that when a war is declared against us also it will join with our enemies and will fight against us and it will go out from the land.’ And they placed over it (the nation) tax collectors in order to make it suffer in its tasks and it (the nation) built storage cities, Pithom and Ramses.”

There is a difference of opinion among the great Rav and Shmuel as to whether this was truly a new king or the same king who only changed his decrees. The Torah tells us that this was immediately after Yosef, his brothers, and that generation had passed. Egypt was a mixture of castes, subjugated by one caste until another caste rose to power. HaRav Shamshon Rafael Hirsch explains that a change of power could not have occurred until after Yosef’s death, as Yosef’s wisdom had saved Egypt, unified the people, and solidified the rule of his Paraoh. He posits that this new Paraoh could have been the leader of an invading tribe who conquered the various Egyptian tribes when they became disunited after Yosef’s generation had died. This would explain not knowing Yosef and his fears of being overthrown by a nation within his territory. The king also sought to unify the people under his rule by creating a “problem” which the people could solve together. That problem was this “quickly-growing” outsider nation.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin presents several different approaches to the Rav and Shmuel disagreement. According to some sources, Yosef continued as a leader of Egypt for forty years, but “he died like Yosef, the Righteous, and not like one of the kings of Egypt.” As the ruler, Yosef’s sons, Ephraim and Menasheh should have ruled next, but a new king usurped their power. This new king then used his cunning to create hatred of those whose power he had stolen. But, “even if we say that the king did not steal the throne from Yosef’s sons, he had plans to begin political anti-Semitism, because that is the way that all new “kings” use to unify the people, namely using hatred of those who are different, namely the Jews.”

We see that the first word Paraoh uses is the most threatening. He refers to the B’nei Yisrael as am,

a nation or people. Paraoth is the first person in the Torah to refer to the B'nei Yisrael as a nation. In many ways this is a compliment, one which the Jews would probably not have ascribed to themselves. As members of the B'nei Yisrael, they probably noticed their own divisiveness. Each tribe was concerned with its own leadership and power. There was interaction between the tribes, but it is likely that there was no central leadership. Yet Paraoth understood, maybe better than the tribes themselves, that they would become unified were a threat to be made to any one of them. A nation indicates separation, distinctiveness. The B'nei Yisrael were different than the indigenous population in their dress and the names that they gave their children. These traits were the things that saved them from utter destruction. "Nation" indicates unity of goals, even with serious infighting over the methods to achieve those goals.

By describing the B'nei Yisrael as a "nation" which is greater and more powerful than Egypt, Paraoth had set fear among his own nation and justified his actions against the problem. Paraoth said that the B'nei Yisrael were greater and more powerful, yet they probably comprised only a small percentage of the population. But the Egyptians were certain to have seen the large birthrate among the B'nei Yisrael and begun to fear its consequences. Paraoth played on that fear and recommended a way to limit that birthrate. He assigned tax collectors to impoverish the B'nei Yisrael so that they would have to work for Paraoth as indentured servants. This was the same method that Yosef had used during the famine to establish Paraoth as the owner of Egypt. He instructed these same taxmen to make the B'nei Yisrael suffer in their tasks. Paraoth's intention was to make the Jews too tired to procreate. He was not successful.

The next complaint that Paraoth applies to the B'nei Yisrael is that of a Fifth Column. "An outside enemy will attack us and the B'nei Yisrael will join with them in the war, fight against the Egyptians, and then leave the land." Our rabbis tell us that Paraoth's words are slightly twisted because he could not bear to say the real fear that the Jews would expel the Egyptians from their land. One might think that a Fifth Column is formed by a group that is dissatisfied with the conditions in its current environment. But this is not necessarily so. A Fifth Column can be any group that identifies and affiliates with the other side in a war. They may feel oppression at the hand of the current government or they may sense a chance to overthrow that government and gain power. Though neither of these conditions applied to the Jews at this time, Paraoth was able to play on the fears of his people and suggest that the B'nei Yisrael represented a real threat to his nation.

Paraoth was afraid of unity, growth, and difference which might lead to rebellion. The Jew must

use these same fears as his strength. The Jew must remain different, not necessarily in dress and appearance, but in deeds and ideals. Jews have always been a culture of caring and concern for others while maintaining a high standard of personal morality. This makes the Jew more unique, but must not be discarded to become part of "society". The Jew must demonstrate his standards in every action and society will learn from them. The most important message from Paraoth was that the Jews must be unified in spite of their differences. When the Jews are unified, Hashem notices their needs and protects them from others. The Jew must fill his entire being with Ahavat Yisrael, love of his fellow Jew. When this is a "reality", the Jew cannot be defeated. Paraoth did not realize that his own complaints would give the Jew the knowledge of how to defeat him. May all Jews realize the importance of Paraoth's message. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Raising a Hand to Strike

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"A"nd Moshe said to the wicked one (*rasha*), "Why do you strike your fellow?" (*Shemot* 2:13). The word translated "strike" (*takeh*) is technically in the future tense. From this our Sages derive that one who simply raises his hand against his neighbor is referred to as a *rasha* (a wicked person), even before actually striking him.

The prohibition of injuring another is biblical, derived from the verse: "He may be given up to forty lashes **but not more**" (*Devarim* 25:3). As is the case for all biblical prohibitions (*lavin*), a transgressor is liable to *malkot* (lashes) for transgressing, unless he is already subject to a financial penalty. Therefore, if someone causes an injury to another and the damage done is minimal (less than a *perutah*), he is liable to *malkot*. We might therefore conclude that someone who simply raises his hand against his neighbor (causing no damage and earning himself no financial liability) should incur the punishment of lashes. Why then is such a transgressor only referred to as a *rasha* but not lashed?

It is possible that the prooftext cited above is not the real source of the prohibition. Instead, it may be that the prohibition is rabbinic, with the biblical text simply serving as an *asmachta* (support). Even though according to this understanding the transgression of raising one's hand against a neighbor is only rabbinic, someone who does so is referred to as a *rasha*. This status may disqualify him to serve as a witness, and may mean that his oath is not relied upon. Alternatively, it is possible that calling him a *rasha* does not disqualify him as a witness. It may simply mean that we are permitted to refer to him as a *rasha*, which is what Moshe did.

There is another significance to a person being considered a *rasha*. The person whom he is threatening is permitted to report him to the ruling authorities, Jewish or non-Jewish, and he is not considered a *moser* (an informer who turns in a fellow Jew to the authorities in defiance of Jewish law). Furthermore, the person being threatened is permitted to attack his attacker – not physically (as he has not yet been struck) but verbally, by name-calling. For example, he may call the threatening person a *mamzer* (a child born of an adulterous or incestuous union), even though doing so may cause his attacker more harm than the attacker would have caused him had he landed his threatened blow. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**W**ho were the midwives asked by Pharaoh to kill the newborn Jewish males? (Exodus 1:15, 16).

Their identity is critical because they deserve a tremendous amount of credit. At great personal risk, they “did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the boys” (Exodus 1:17).

Rashi insists that the midwives were Jewish women. They were Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses, respectively (Sotah 11b). Rashi understands the term *meyaldot ha'ivriyot* literally, as the Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1:15).

Sforno disagrees. He insists that the midwives were actually gentiles, understanding *meyaldot ha'ivriyot* as the midwives of the Hebrews.

What stands out as almost shocking in Rashi's interpretation is the actual request: Pharaoh asks Jews to murder other Jews, believing they would commit heinous crimes against their own people. Tragically, this phenomenon has occurred at certain times in history – tyrants successfully convinced Jews to turn against their own people.

On the other hand, what stands out in Sforno's interpretation is the response. In the end, the gentile midwives, at great personal risk, were prepared to save Jews. This has also occurred in history – the willingness of gentiles to stand up to authority and intervene on behalf of Jews.

Rashi, living during the Crusades, could never imagine that gentiles would stand up against the Pharaoh and save Jews.

Sforno similarly mirrors the time in which he lived. As part of Renaissance Italy in the fifteenth century, he was a universalist. He believed that gentiles would stand up and risk their lives to help Jews.

Without this watershed moment in our history of standing up in the face of evil, there might have been no nation of Israel. Yet there is no consensus as to the identity of these heroines.

In this world where heroism sadly is defined as

sinking the winning shot, having the most money, or singing the most popular music, we must remember this important lesson. Most of the time, we don't know who the true heroes are. Many who deserve honor remain forever unknown.

It is God alone Who really knows. ©2021 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

**"P**haraoh's daughter went down to bathe in the Nile... and she sent her maid and she fetched [the basket containing Moshe.]" (Shmos 2:5)

No sooner had Moshe been placed in the rushes of the river than his salvation arrived, in the form of a very unlikely protagonist, Pharaoh's own daughter! The Torah says that she came to bathe at that moment, and as her maids walked along the bank, she saw the basket, surmised its human contents, and took it. She would proceed to save this child and raise him in the palace. He would return there years later as Hashem's messenger to take the Jews from Egypt.

What makes this story more amazing is what the Gemara tells us was the true purpose of her visit. This was no simple bath. According to R' Yochanan, quoting R' Shimon bar Yochai (Sotah 12b), she went down to “purify herself from her father's idolatry.” This was to be the immersion for her conversion.

But what the Torah doesn't tell us, nor does R' Yochanan, is WHY she decided to convert. What was the catalyst for her decision to abandon the *avoda zara* that so pervaded Egypt?

The Be'er Mayim Chaim points out that the reason she specifically went to the river to convert was because Hashem enabled her to find purification through the very thing which had been the sin, the worship of the Nile as a deity. This is similar to Rachav's being saved by a scarlet rope which had previously been her way of soliciting immoral business. Perhaps this is how R' Shimon bar Yochai knew the princess's visit to the water was for the purpose of repudiating *Avoda Zara*.

The connection to Moshe's being placed into the water may also give us a clue to her motivation. Not only was the Nile considered a god, but Pharaoh had declared himself a god, going so far as to say, “Mine is the Nile and I created it!” His narcissism enabled Pharaoh to feel no pangs of guilt about throwing children into the Nile to be drowned if it served his purposes. This may well have been the final straw for his daughter.

The meforshim offer various explanations of why it says *Bisya* (her name) went to bathe “ON the river,” rather than “IN the river.” Perhaps the word ‘al

was used to say she went "ABOUT or BECAUSE OF the river." When Pharaoh decreed that babies be thrown into the Nile, his daughter decided she'd had enough of his self-worship. The verbiage of the Gemara even calls it, "Gilulei Aviha, her father's idolatry," which could refer to his own demand to be treated as a deity. She now decided to wash her hands of it figuratively and literally. When there, Hashem gave her the opportunity to save Moshe.

She took it, going against the advice of her maids (who were struck down by the angel Gavriel) and either stretched out her own hand miraculously far, or she sent the lone maid she'd kept with her as befit her station, showing that she'd negated her own ego, as much as her father had inflated his. This act was her reward for taking a stand against what Pharaoh stood for, even she was the only one who knew it.

*When R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv z"l, the great sage and posek, recovered from one of his last surgeries, well into his 90's, he commented to a rabbi that he felt a tremendous debt of gratitude to the entire Jewish People.*

*"I know it is because of their prayers that I merited a successful operation, and I need to repay them somehow. But how can I repay everyone?" The Rav nodded sympathetically.*

*"What I can do, though," continued the gadol, with determination in his voice, "is get up earlier to learn Torah, for when one learns Torah, that helps everyone!"* © 2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

### **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**A**s 2021 draws to a close we should, once again, reflect on all of the opportunities and challenges that this year delivered. We also have to focus on that which we need to be appreciative of and address the things on which we still need to work.

In many ways, 2021 was a vast improvement over the traumatic year of 2020. Still, 2021 delivered many challenges of its own as well as a continuation of some of the difficulties and suffering initiated in 2020.

This week I was struck by the realization that, in general, suffering is truly a very personal experience. To be sure, some pain, such as the loss of a loved one or chronic physical pain, can be universally understood as something that causes misery.

However, there are various types of personal distress that are difficult for others to understand and may even border on hilarity to an outsider. In a rather startling post on a Miami Beach community WhatsApp chat, a woman seemed to be on the brink of total emotional collapse because her family's nanny was returning to her native country (it's not like the nanny was absconding with the woman's children -- although in this particular case that might have provided some relief).

Similarly, I remember watching (with great amusement) as my two-year-old granddaughter had an absolute meltdown because her mother had the audacity to give her a piece of bread with the crust still on. It reminded me of the woman who tweeted, "Please pray for my son's recovery. I just hugged him in front of his friends at the bus stop." Clearly, there is an element to personal suffering that is what we make of it.

Perhaps the paradigm of personal suffering is found in the Bible's book of Iyov or "Job." As the Bible informs us, Job is a wholly righteous man who is suddenly faced with the most horrific personal tragedies: the unanticipated and total loss of his immense wealth, the sudden death of his many children (they all died when a house collapsed on them), the seeming abandonment by his wife, and terrible physical maladies.

The book of Job contains forty-two chapters, of which only the first two really deal with his travails. The vast majority of the book is comprised of philosophical discussions; some between the Almighty and Satan, but mostly between Job and his friends who come to console and counsel him.

There are many things we learn from the book of Job, including some of the Jewish customs of mourning such as the symbolic tearing of one's clothes when a first degree relative passes and the custom that those coming to console the mourners are silent until the mourner speaks to them first.

The book of Job is often mistakenly characterized (or perhaps oversimplified) as the Bible's answer to the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" (The answer being, "We don't know.")

Aside from this interpretation not being particularly helpful, it misses the main point of the story, which is how a person is supposed to deal with personal tragedies.

However, the Talmud has a completely different take on why Job suffered the way he did, and it directly relates to this week's Torah portion.

"Behold! The nation of Israel is more numerous and stronger than we. Come, let us outsmart it [...]" (Exodus 1:8-9).

Pharaoh, faced with a burgeoning Jewish people, cements his place in the history of infamy by becoming the first rabid antisemite. The Talmud (Sotah 11a) tells us that Pharaoh had three advisers: Jethro (Yitro in Hebrew), Job, and Bilaam. When Pharaoh was deciding how to approach his "Jewish problem" he sought the opinion of each of his three advisers.

Bilaam, the grandson of Lavan (according to some opinions he actually was Lavan), was an evil man and relished the prospect of eradicating the Jewish people. It was he who advised Pharaoh to enslave the Jews, destroy their identity, and later to kill the male babies.

Job was a righteous man who was opposed to

any plan to destroy the Jewish nation. Yet, rather than display his true feelings on the issue, he refrained from offering any opinion. Perhaps he knew that his objections would be met with resistance. Perhaps he rationalized that he could do more to help the plight of the Jewish people at a later date by remaining in his position as advisor. Either way, he decided not to oppose or accept Bilaam's proposal, but remained silent.

Jethro, on the other hand, objected to Pharaoh's characterization of the Jews as a "problem" and rejected the idea of exterminating the Jewish people. Jethro's protests angered Pharaoh and he had to flee Egypt in order to save his life.

The Talmud goes on to say that each of the three advisers was rewarded or punished according to his deed. Bilaam, who encouraged the execution of thousands of innocent Jews, was later killed by the very people he sought to exterminate (see Numbers 31:8).

Job, who remained silent in the face of Jewish oppression, was afflicted with a life of tremendous emotional pain (he lost all his possessions, children, and wife) and physical suffering (his body became covered in boils to the point where he wouldn't leave his house).

Jethro, who fled because of his opposition to Pharaoh, sacrificing his position of leadership and life of comfort and wealth in Egypt, eventually became the father-in-law of Moshe and his descendants became prominent judicial leaders of the Children of Israel.

A very basic tenet of Judaism is that God repays a person measure for measure. Therefore, we can clearly understand the reward and punishment of Jethro and Bilaam respectively.

However, why was Job's punishment so severe? After all, Job did not support the decree of persecution against the Jewish people. Job's only sin was remaining silent. Why then did he have to suffer such a harsh life, one where tragedy was continually followed by calamity and affliction?

The Talmud is teaching us that Job's silence was a far greater transgression because his reaction to Pharaoh was the unwitting cause to the Jewish nation's suffering in Egypt. How so?

In every generation there are madmen who have no qualms about murdering entire civilizations to achieve their warped goals. What keeps them in check? Mainstream society saying this is not okay, that the ends do not justify the means. Civil and moral people saying that they will not tolerate such behavior is what causes these sociopaths to retreat to the shadows.

Similarly, Adolf Hitler -- yemach shemo (may his name be blotted out) -- came to absolute power when his many years of vitriolic propaganda was fully embraced by German society. Regarding the Jews, he began by characterizing them as evil, then subhuman,

then vermin that needed to be exterminated. At which point, something that would have been unimaginable just a decade or two prior, suddenly became an imperative mandate.

The Holocaust didn't occur in a vacuum -- German citizens were well aware of what was happening. In fact, the real reason it transpired was because the German people accepted it as a tolerable solution to a madman's "Jewish problem." Eli Wiesel, noted author, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, and a Holocaust survivor once said, "Ask not, 'Where was God during the Holocaust?' but rather, 'Where was man?'"

This is also what happened in Egypt. Pharaoh realized that if the righteous Job wouldn't take a stand against the enslavement and destruction of the Jewish nation, then it was an acceptable plan. The responsibility for the creation of evil does not simply lie with the madman who conceives it; the society that accepts it as viable approach is infinitely more accountable.

Job's silence was the precursor to every society that is silent and accepting in the face of unspeakable evil. They become the unwitting cause of true malevolence. That was why he was punished so severely. Ultimately, God has a plan and whether or not we are privy to His reasons or can rationalize the suffering is really not the point.

The takeaway from all suffering is that we must act. For others, we must be there to console and counsel. For ourselves, we must try to understand the lesson God is teaching us. We may never reach a complete understanding, but the obligation is to try. Just as in meditation or riding a stationary bicycle: it's not the destination that's important -- it's the process that's good for you. ©2021 Rabbi Y. Zweig and torah.org

### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

"**H**ashem saw that he turned aside to see, and Elokim called out to him..." (3:4) R' Ovadiah Seforno z"l (1470-1550; Italy) explains: Moshe "turned aside to see"--to reflect on the phenomenon. "And Elokim called out to him"--as our Sages say, "One who comes to purify himself receives Divine assistance." Similarly, we read (Shmot 19:3), "[First,] Moshe ascended to Elokim, and [then] Hashem called to him from the mountain."

R' Dovid Kviat z"l (1920-2009; Rosh Yeshiva in the Mir Yeshiva and rabbi in Brooklyn NY) observes: Hashem "created" Moshe specifically in order to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. Even so, if Moshe had not taken some initiative, he never would have been given that mission. Likewise, without his initiative, he would not have been called to ascend Har Sinai to receive the Torah. (Succas Dovid [English edition] p.17) ©2021 S. Katz and torah.org

