

PARSHAS SHEMOS

תשפ"א

Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all Jewish male newborns and leave the female infants to live. But the midwives refused to obey these orders. Why? Because they had fear of Hashem. They let all the babies live.

There could have been many reasons why the midwives would refuse Pharaoh. There were ethical considerations – not killing innocent babies. There was the future of the Jewish People which was in jeopardy, etc. But the posuk tells us only one thing kept them from obeying Pharaoh's order – fear of Hashem. The posuk is telling us that of all the factors one can focus on in order to stand up to a test, the key one is fear of Hashem.

When you have a powerful king who can kill you on the spot, all these other considerations – ethics, Jewish survival, can easily melt under pressure. The only one that will stand firm through everything is fear of Hashem.

At the Akeidah, Avrohom was given his most difficult test – to slaughter his own son. Avrohom excelled in love of Hashem. His love of Hashem was the driving force behind his ability to spread the idea of the existence of Hashem to the world. But what was the factor which got Avrohom through the Akeidah successfully? His fear of Hashem. After the Akeidah is over, Hashem says now He knows that Avrohom fears Hashem.

Fear of Hashem is the underlying ability for a person to withstand temptation. Love of Hashem, ethical concerns or historical consequences will fall by the wayside. Only fear of Hashem will carry him through when his back is up against the wall and he is being sorely tested.

Hashem repaid the midwives measure for measure. Because of their fear of Hashem, these women saved a whole generation of Jewish children. So in return, Hashem blessed Yocheved and Miriam with beautiful descendants: Houses of Levi'im – Moshe Rabbeinu; Houses of Kohanim – Aharon Hakohen; and the line of malchus beis Dovid.

On the other hand, when Hashem sends us misfortunes and troubles, it is also measure for measure. Hashem is actually doing a great service by doing this. Through these troubles we can reflect on the underlying causes – to see which behavior of ours is causing a parallel reaction from Hashem and we can know what to work on and correct. Hashem's din is precise. In the exact area that we fail will be punishment.

To deserve to be the mother of Moshe and Aharon, and of malchus beis Dovid, one needs an incredible merit. It was because they enabled every Jewish mother to have descendants. Hashem rewarded them specifically in this area. But the posuk also tells us that because these Hebrew midwives acted out of fear of Hashem, they received such a reward. If they had only been motivated by the other considerations and emotions, they would not have been rewarded to this extent. Emotions are fleeting and fickle. They can change in an instant. You cannot build your service of Hashem on the basis of emotions.

When Avrohom and Soroh moved to Gerar, Soroh is immediately kidnapped by Avimelech with the intention to rape her. Hashem appeared to him and threatened to kill him for abducting Soroh who is a married woman. What is strange is that immediately in response, Avimelech professes total innocence. He says he is a complete tzaddik because he hasn't yet approached her – even though he has just abducted a woman and was fully prepared to violate her! What's even

worse, Avimelech then comes to Avrohom the next morning will all kinds of complaints of being lied to and betrayed. But how can he accuse Avrohom of being unethical when he just kidnapped a woman and was about to rape her?

Avrohom responded with one of the most fundamental pesukim in all of Chumash, which teaches us one of the most fundamental lessons we can ever learn in life. Avrohom explained that it is because he knew that there was no fear of Hashem in this place that he had to hide the fact that Soroh was his wife. Had he revealed this connection to Soroh, they would have killed him in order to take Soroh.

You can devise all kinds of moral laws and ethical principles. But, without absolutes, there is nothing that will stand up to the baser drives of human nature. Avimelech is the king of Gerar. He makes the laws. He can say today that abduction is wrong, and when a pressing need comes along and he wants to have a woman, the law will somehow change and permit it. Only if there is fear of Hashem and respect for His absolute rules of morality, can you realize that you can't play around with the rules.

Imagine if one German shot another German in the streets of Berlin in the year 1943. No doubt he would be arrested and tried in court and condemned for murder. After all, this is a civilized society with laws and moral standards! But these same Germans were slaughtering thousands of people on a daily basis! This shows us that people can philosophize and rationalize anything and everything. If your morality is man-made and not absolute, then it can change and it doesn't matter.

This past summer, all over the United States, people went berserk rioting, looting, destroying property, burning down businesses, etc. – all because the police killed someone. But if there is a Trump supporter in a crowd, then it's suddenly perfectly alright to murder him.

The Torah says: Do Not Kill. It is an absolute. Avrohom says to Avimelech, if your laws are not absolute, I have a need to fear for my life.

Hashem told Moshe Rabbeinu to represent Him to Pharaoh using the name 'the G-d of the Ivrim.' But Moshe Rabbeinu says to Pharaoh that he is coming in the name of Y-K-V-K, the G-d of Klal Yisroel. Pharaoh responds, I don't know who this G-d Y-K-V-K is and I won't release Klal Yisroel.

Rashi explains that Pharaoh had a book with all the approved avodo zoro and the G-d Y-K-V-K doesn't appear in this book. I only know about Ivrim. I do not recognize Yisroel which is a higher-level nation descended from the shivtei Koh who serve Hashem.

So Moshe Rabbeinu switches to the G-d of the Ivrim as Hashem originally instructed.

What is all this back and forth about?

Moshe is coming to Pharaoh to tell him: you have your gods and your culture, just like other nations have their gods and their culture. Everything in your world is very relativistic. Each nation chooses a god who best serves their specific, local needs. But that is not who we are. We believe in one supreme G-d who has one set of absolutes for all people. Pharaoh says I don't understand this concept. I only recognize Ivrim who have a god like all the others who serve their needs. I don't recognize a people who subject themselves to the will of their G-d and abide by what He decides is right instead of the other way around.

At kabbolas haTorah, Chazal told us that Hashem first went to all the nations of the world and asked them if they will accept it. Each nation asked Hashem what is written in it. Hashem told them not to murder, not to steal, not to commit adultery, etc. Each one responded, sorry – we can't accept it – those things are an integral part of our culture and we can't give them up!

Then Hashem came to Klal Yisroel and they said 'naaseh ve'nishmah'. Every other nation first decided how they wanted to live their lives and they tailor-made their religion and their morality to conform to what they decided. Klal Yisroel say it's the other way around. There is one Hashem and one set of absolutes and we submit ourselves to His demands. This is what we are all about.

Moshe demanded that Klal Yisroel be allowed to go to worship Hashem in the desert, and Pharaoh accuses them of being lazy and wanting to find an excuse to have a vacation.

Pharaoh then decreed that the Jews had to work even harder than before to distract them from preoccupation in their 'divrei sheker'. There is a very important midrash which explains Pharaoh's strategy.

A slave is someone who doesn't have an independent identity. The fact that the Jews wanted to leave their masters to worship their G-d means they hadn't been broken yet. They still had their own identity separate from their masters'. How did they have this? The midrash explains that when Klal Yisroel came down to Egypt, they brought with them megillos – the Torah of the Ovos and their whole approach to life. Klal Yisroel only worked six days a week and studied those megillos on Shabbos when they weren't working.

Pharaoh understood the success of the Jewish people. He realized that he didn't succeed in breaking the Jewish people because he hadn't taken over their minds. They were still mentally occupied with the lessons of the Ovos which they studied whenever they had free time. Pharaoh realized that if their minds are in the Torah of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, they don't belong to him – they belonged to the Ovos and they want to serve Hashem and leave Egypt. They don't

belong to him!

So the answer is to make sure they don't have any leisure time to study those megillos. Then I will control them completely.

What a person does during his leisure time tells you a lot about where that person is mentally. When you take a break from working, what do you do? That defines your real interests in life. Do you play sports? Work out? Watch movies? Or learn Torah?

We are a different nation. Perhaps the most critical thing I have said is this midrash. What do you do with your time off? Someday, everyone will have to eventually find an occupation for parnossoh and then you will be faced with a choice of what to do with your time off. That defines a person to a great degree – where your mind is, and what type of person you are. Pharaoh understood that this was the key to Klal Yisroel's success in retaining their unique identity.

250 years ago, Jews in Eastern Europe worked very hard. But at night, they went to shul. They joined a chevrah Shas, or a chevrah Mishnayos, or a chevrah Ein Yaakov. The difference between a Jew and non-Jew was what they did after the workday was over. The non-Jew went to a bar and got drunk. The Jew went the beis midrash to learn. This defined who they were. There was no television or movies. After all the hard day's work, you show your identity by what you chose to do on your off time.

We now live in a very different world. When we have a Shabbos off, what do we do? Get drunk? Go here or there? Of course people need time to relax. But then you are faced with a question: what do you do to relax? This very often defines who the person is.

We left Egypt to become a different nation. This is exactly what Moshe told Pharaoh. It is not the Ivrim who are leaving Egypt. Yisroel is leaving – and not to get freedom from slavery. It is to serve Hashem. It is only a temporary break from servitude.

Every posuk in Chumash is telling very deep lessons about how to lead our lives. We have to take them seriously.