**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Shemot tells of the Israelite midwives’ bold defiance of Pharaoh’s command that they kill all newborn males among *Benei Yisrael*. We then read, “It happened that when the midwives feared God [and refused to obey Pharaoh’s order], He made homes for them” (1:21). Ibn Ezra (*Peirush Ha-katzar*) explains this to mean that they were blessed with large families, whereas Rashi, based on the Gemara (Sota 11b), writes that they were rewarded with the privilege of having the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* descend from them.

An entirely different approach to this verse is taken by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who explains the phrase “*va-ya’as lahem batim*” (“He made for them homes”) as referring not specifically to the midwives, but to all *Benei Yisrael*. The verse is emphasizing that as a result of the midwives’ fear of God, which surpassed their fear of Pharaoh and thus led them to defy his edict, the nation built many large families and its population rapidly grew. The nation’s growth is thus credited to the midwives’ heroism.

A creative insight into this phrase is suggested by Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his *Mei Ha-shilo’ach*. He writes that the fundamental difference between the fear of a human being and the fear of the Almighty is that the former causes anxiety, whereas the latter leads to serenity and peace of mind. This concept, the Izhbitzer Rebbe writes, is alluded to in the Torah’s description of the midwives’ reward. Since they feared God and not Pharaoh, they were given “*batim*” (“homes”), which the Rebbe explains as an allusion to the experience of comfort and serenity which a home is meant to provide. While we might have assumed that the midwives lived in constant fear and dread of Pharaoh, in truth, they enjoyed “homes” – a sense of security and peace of mind.

This passage in *Mei Ha-shilo’ach* teaches that contrary to what we might intuitively think, living with religious consciousness can, and should, be more joyful and serene than life without it. Without faith, we live in fear of the whims and flaws of other people. But when we “fear” God, submitting to His absolute authority and recognizing our absolute dependence on His governance, we live with the comfort of knowing that we are His faithful servants who are under His care.

Sunday

The Hebrew word “*teiva*” is used in two contexts in the Torah, both in reference to a structure that floated on the water. The first is the ark through which Noach and his family were rescued from the flood, and the second is the basket in which Moshe’s mother, Yokheved, hid him when he was an infant and which she then placed in the river to save him from Pharaoh’s decree that all newborn boys should be killed.

A number of similarities exist between the two “*teivot*.” Both are described as having been lined with sealing material (Bereishit 6:14, Shemot 2:3), and both served to rescue somebody, or a group of people, from a decree of destruction involving water. The crucial difference between the two stories, however, relates to the source of the initiative to rescue the person or persons. In Noach’s case, the initiative came solely from God, who informed Noach about the impending disaster and instructed him to build a *teiva* in order to be rescued. In Moshe’s case, however, God did not reveal to anyone the idea to try to save Moshe in a *teiva*. This was his mother’s initiative, prompted by her insistent desire to protect her beautiful child from Pharaoh’s officers who came to kill him. And, even in the ark, Noach survived only through God’s supernatural protection (“*va-yisgor Hashem ba’ado*” – Bereishit 7:16), whereas Moshe floated in his *teiva* under the watchful eye of not only Providence, but also of his devoted sister, Miriam, who stood along the riverbank to see what would happen to Moshe (Shemot 2:4).

[Rav Amnon Bazak](https://www.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/posts/940250082778181) noted how this difference between these two stories of “*teivot*” represents the broader point of contrast between them. The story of the flood is the story of humanity’s failure to confront evil. The world became overrun by violence and corruption, and the lone man who retained his morality was unable, or at least unwilling, to work towards change. God had no choice but to directly intervene to rescue the world by supernaturally eradicating all living creatures and sparing the only man who did not deserve to perish. The story told in the beginning of Parashat Shemot, by contrast, is one of heroic defiance and firm resolve to combat cruelty. The Torah tells us about those members of the nation who refused to resign themselves to the evil perpetrated by the Egyptian kingdom against *Benei Yisrael*. The midwives continued delivering healthy babies even after they were ordered to kill the boys; Moshe’s mother refused to watch her son be taken by Pharaoh’s officers to his death; and when Moshe grew older, he refused to stand idly by as his brethren were whipped. Of course, *Benei Yisrael* could not have escaped from Egypt’s tyranny without God’s supernatural intervention. But the need for a miraculous process of redemption only underscores the heroism of those who refused to surrender or despair, and continued believing in the power of good to defeat the power of evil. As opposed to the period of Noach, who was or felt helpless to resist the evil around him, there were those among *Benei Yisrael* who refused to back down and insisted on confronting, rather than accepting, the cruelty and oppression to which they were subjected.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells the famous story of Moshe’s rescue from Pharaoh’s decree requiring that all newborn Israelite boys be killed. His mother placed him in a basket in the river, where he was eventually found and saved by Pharaoh’s daughter. The Torah relates that when the princess opened the basket, she saw “*na’ar bokheh*” – a child crying (Shemot 2:6).

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (12b) cites a debate among the *Tanna’im* regarding the Torah’s use of the word “*na’ar*” in this context. This word generally refers to a “lad” – an adolescent – and not an infant, and thus its usage in this verse led Rabbi Yehuda to conclude that Moshe’s voice as an infant resembled that of an adolescent. Pharaoh’s daughter is described as having discovered a “*na’ar*” crying because Moshe’s voice was that of an older boy.Rabbi Nechemya objected to this interpretation, retorting, “If so, then you have turned Moshe into a blemished person!” Unable to accept such a notion, Rabbi Nechemya explained the term “*na’ar*” to mean that Moshe’s mother made a “*chupat na’arim*” – something resembling a canopy that is used for a wedding, recognizing that she would likely never see him get married.

Rashi explains Rabbi Nechemya’s argument as claiming that according to Rabbi Yehuda, Moshe had the halakhic status of *ba’al mum* (blemished person) with respect to the service of the *Leviyim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The *Leviyim* were assigned the role of singing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and an unusual voice constituted a “blemish” which disqualified a *Levi* from serving this role. Rabbi Nechemya could not countenance the possibility that Moshe, the most distinguished member of the tribe of Levi, would have a blemish that would disqualify him for the *Leviyim*’s role.

A number of writers (including Rav Yitzchak Sorotzkin, in his *Gevurat Yitzchak* commentary to Masekhet Sota) noted that the point of disagreement between these two *Tanna’im* may be understood in light of the Rambam’s formulation of the law disqualifying a *Levi* who cannot sing properly. In Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash (3:8), the Rambam writes that unlike *kohanim*, who become disqualified for their roles in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* if they develop a physical defect, *Leviyim* are not disqualified on account of physical defects. The Rambam writes that a *Levi* is disqualified only “when his voice is tainted due to old age” (“*ke-she’yitkalkeil kolo mei-rov ha-zikna*”). The clear implication of the Rambam’s ruling is that a *Levi* with vocal defects is allowed to sing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, as it is only the effects of old age on a *Levi*’s voice that disqualify him for this role.

According to the Rambam, then, a young person with an unusual voice is not considered a *ba’al mum* with respect to the *Leviyim*’s singing. Possibly, this was the position taken by Rabbi Yehuda, who was not troubled by the prospect of Moshe having a peculiar voice. He felt perfectly at ease interpreting the verse to mean that Moshe as an infant had the voice of a young adult, because an unusual voice does not constitute a “defect” for a *Levi* unless it is caused by old age. Rabbi Nechemya likely disputed this presumption, and maintained that any unusual voice disqualifies a *Levi*, and for this reason he rejected the possibility that Moshe had an unusual voice.

Rashi, in his commentary to this verse, cites Rabbi Yehuda’s interpretation, that Moshe’s voice as an infant resembled that of a grown lad. Already the Ramban questions why Rashi disregarded Rabbi Nechemya’s contention. The answer, perhaps, is that Rashi, like Rambam, accepted the view that only a voice tainted by old age disqualifies a *Levi* from singing, and not another kind of vocal abnormality. Therefore, Moshe was not considered “blemished” as a result of his unusual voice.

Tuesday

God spoke to Moshe for the first time in the famous vision of the burning bush. While tending to the flocks of his father-in-law, Yitro, Moshe’s attention was piqued by the unusual sight of a thorn bush that had caught fire but was not consumed (Shemot 3:2). He started approaching the burning bush to see why it was not consumed, until God spoke to him and instructed him not to approach any closer, and to remove his shoes in deference to the sanctity of the site (3:5). God then assigned Moshe the mission to return to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh release *Benei Yisrael*.

Many commentators, including Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, explain the vision of the burning bush as symbolic of *Benei Yisrael*’s condition in Egypt. Although *Benei Yisrael* were subjected to the fierce oppression of the Egyptians – symbolized by the raging fire – they would not be “consumed,” and continued to survive and reproduce.

A different symbolic interpretation of this vision is suggested by Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk, in his *Noam Elimelekh*. He writes that the fire in this prophecy represents the fire of religious zeal and fervor, which, it is hoped, will consume the “thorns” in our characters – our negative traits and tendencies. Our “fire,” our passion for spirituality, should, ideally, have the effect of eliminating traits such as arrogance, lust, selfishness and laziness. Moshe’s bewilderment upon beholding this vision, Rav Elimelech writes, represents the reality that religious passion does not succeed in consuming all the “thorns.” As much as we try to eradicate our negative qualities, they will never be entirely consumed. Some “thorns” always remain in our characters.

God’s message to Moshe, “*Al tikrav halom*” (“Do not come near here”), Rav Elimelech writes, teaches that we should not expect the thorns to be entirely consumed in our world. In the future, redeemed world, it will indeed be possible for our passion and fervor to eliminate all negative tendencies. For now, however, we must recognize our limits even as we continue to fuel the flames of our religious devotion in an effort to elevate and improve ourselves, and we must not be discouraged when we see “thorns” on our characters which remain intact and are not consumed.

Thus, whereas the conventional reading views the vision of the bush as symbolic of the enemy nations’ inability to fully achieve their goal, of “consuming” *Am Yisrael*, Rav Elimelech’s reading views it as symbolic of *Am Yisrael*’sinability to fully achieve its goal, of “consuming” evil and vice. At the very outset of our nation’s mission, as God issues the initial call for *Benei Yisrael* to assume its role of represent God to the world, we are told that we should not anticipate total success. We are to try to the very best of our ability to eliminate the “thorns” from within ourselves and from the world, but at the same time recognize that they will not be consumed entirely. We must invest maximum effort to improve ourselves and the world, and never be discouraged by our limited capabilities and the reality that some “thorns” will always remain.

Wednesday

The Torah introduces the story of God’s revelation to Moshe at the burning bush, in which He instructed Moshe to lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom from Egyptian bondage, by telling that God heard *Benei Yisrael*’s cries. This brief introduction concludes, “God saw the Israelites, and God knew” (2:25).

Different explanations have been offered for the ambiguous phrase, “*va-yeida Elokim*” (“God knew’). Rav Saadya Gaon and Rabbenu Chananel explain the verb “*va-yeida*” in this verse to mean mercy and compassion. The concept underlying this interpretation, it would seem, is that compassion is about “knowing” – truly understanding another person’s plight and knowing what he is going through. Generally, even as we recognize a person’s hardship, we fail to “know” his condition, his struggles and his pain. Compassion requires thorough and precise “knowledge” of another person’s condition, and thus the verb “*va-yeida*” here refers to pity and empathy.

Rashi explains along somewhat similar lines, writing that God “paid attention to them, and did not ignore them.” According to Rashi, “*va-yeida*” refers to God’s being mindful, as it were, of *Benei Yisrael*’s suffering, to the fact that their plight was always at the forefront of His “consciousness,” so-to-speak, and He was thus determined to rescue them.

Ibn Ezra explains “*va-yeida Elokim*” to mean that God saw what others could not. Namely, He took note even of the suffering *Benei Yisrael* endured in private, away from public view. The Egyptians tormented *Benei Yisrael* both publicly, in the mud pits and at the constructions sites, where they were forced to perform backbreaking labor, but also in hiding. God knew the full extent of *Benei Yisrael*’s pain, as He was able to see the oppression that occurred out of public view.

An insightful explanation of this phrase is offered by Seforno, who writes that “*va-yeida Elokim*” relates to the previous verse, which tells that God heard *Benei Yisrael*’s cries. The Torah now adds that God saw the sincerity of the people’s prayers and cries. As He sees what is in people’s minds and hearts, God recognized that their pleas were heartfelt, and not just mere lip service. *Benei Yisrael* beseeched God with all their heart and soul, and God “knew” the sincerity of their pleas and thus accepted their prayers.

In a generally similar vein, *Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel* explains this verse to mean that God “knew” of the people’s repentance. Although the people did not outwardly appear to undergo any process of repentance and change, internally, and in the privacy of their homes, the people indeed underwent this process. Only God knew of the invisible changes unfolding among *Benei Yisrael*, and thus the Torah tells, “*va-yeida Elokim*,” that God lovingly accepted the people’s unseen repentance. Even though their repentance marked only the initial stirrings of change, and did not fundamentally transform their conduct, nevertheless, even these first steps were valuable and precious in the eyes of the Almighty, who responded by triggering the process of redemption.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells that *Benei Yisrael* cried out in pain and anguish when they were enslaved in Egypt, and “God saw the Israelites, and God knew” (2:25).

The Midrash offers numerous interpretations of this verse, including the following enigmatic explanation cited in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: “He saw that they would in the future say, ‘This is your god, O Israel,’ and God knew that they would in the future declare, ‘We will do’ before ‘We will hear’” (*Shemot Rabba* 1:36). In other words, according to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, the phrase “God saw” refers to God’s foreseeing the sin of the golden calf, when the people pointed to the idol and declared, “This is your god, O Israel” (Shemot 32:4), whereas “and God knew” refers to the time of the Revelation at Sinai, *Benei Yisrael*’s finest moment, when they proclaimed their unconditional commitment to the Torah: “We will do and we will hear” (Shemot 24:7).

Rav Yitzchak Stollman, in his *Minchat Yitzchak*, explains the distinction drawn here by the Midrash between “seeing” and “knowing.” Seeing a person’s conduct does not mean that we “know” what kind of person he or she is. The way people appear is not necessarily the way they truly are. As *Benei Yisrael* cried out to God, He “saw” their problematic condition, that they were steeped in Egyptian idolatry and capable of worshipping idols. However, God looked beyond their external appearance, and “knew” their true essence. He recognized that they were, at their core, unconditionally devoted to Him, as expressed in their proclamation of “*Na’aseh ve-nishma*” (“We will do and we will hear”). Thus, according to this view in the Midrash, the Torah is telling us that God took note of the sharp distinction between who *Benei Yisrael* appeared to be and who they truly were. He understood that while they seemed sinful, they were, in truth, fundamentally committed to Him.

This insight should perhaps remind us to recognize the distinction between how people appear and how they really are. Many different factors lead people to act as they do, and more often than not, we are entirely aware of most or all of these factors. Just as we want God to not just “see” our conduct, but to “know” us, to understand our weaknesses, our challenges and our struggles, and to judge us favorably, so should we endeavor to “know” people, rather than rush to judge them critically based on their outward appearance.

Friday

The Torah tells in the beginning of Parashat Shemot (1:11) that the enslavement of *Benei Yisrael* began when the Egyptians forced them to build two cities – Pitom and Ra’amses.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Iyov, 4) tells an unusual story about the origins of these cities. Pitom and Ra’amases had previously stood, the Midrash relates, but were destroyed at the time when Yosef’s brothers brought the youngest brother, Binyamin, to Egypt. Yosef ordered his butler to hide his goblet in Binyamin’s bag so he could be charged with theft, and then, when Binyamin was caught, Yosef demanded that Binyamin remain in Egypt as his slave. Yehuda then pleaded with Yosef to allow Binyamin to return to Canaan, and offered to serve as a slave in Binyamin’s place. The Midrash relates that as Yehuda pleaded his case with Yosef, he was joined in Egypt by his nephew – Chushim, the son of Dan – and together they “roared” in anger. The force of their shout caused the large cities of Pitom and Ra’amses to collapse. “And for this reason,” the Midrash concludes, “it was decreed upon Yisrael that they would have to build them.”

How might we understand the message conveyed by this story? Why would *Benei Yisrael* be responsible to rebuild the cities destroyed by Yehuda and Chushim’s “roar”?

One possible explanation is that the Midrash here simply intends to warn of the dangers and consequences of anger. It seeks to teach us that “roaring” – erupting in rage, even when one’s grievance is valid, as in Yehuda’s case – causes only destruction. When we shout and scream in response to a wrong committed against us, we sow havoc that we ourselves will eventually need to fix. In the story told by the Midrash, Yehuda and Chushim may have believed they did something worthwhile and advanced their cause by destroying cities with their angry outburst, but in the end, it was their own descendants who needed to rebuild them. Allegorically, this represents the self-damaging nature of the “destruction” we sow with our “roars” of anger. The Midrash here urges us to exercise reason and self-control when our patience is tested, to react calmly and rationally, rather than erupting in a destructive fit of rage.

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