**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Shemot (2:1) tells of the marriage of Moshe’s parents, who are later identified as Amram and Yokheved. The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (12a) comments that the Torah here actually refers to Amram and Yokheved’s remarriage. Amram had decided to divorce Yokheved after Pharaoh decreed that every newborn Israelite boy should die, figuring there was no longer any purpose in building families. The Gemara tells that Amram was an influential religious leader, and thus after he divorced Yokheved, many others followed suit and divorced. Miriam, Amram’s daughter, boldly criticized her father for his drastic measure, charging, “Your decree is worse than Pharaoh’s – for Pharaoh decreed only upon the boys, but you decreed upon the males and the females.” She further noted that by preventing children from being born, Amram was preventing souls from entering this world and entering the afterlife. Amram accepted his daughter’s protest and remarried Yokheved, whereupon the other couples likewise reunited.

We might wonder why Amram at first decided to divorce and then changed his mind. Did he truly never consider his daughter’s arguments? Could he have been oblivious to the fact that he was causing the end of all reproduction among *Benei Yisrael*?

One explanation, perhaps, is that Amram did not anticipate the widespread effects of his personal decision. From the Gemara’s account it appears that Amram did not instruct or advise people to divorce, but simply made this personal decision for himself, feeling emotionally unable to continue building a family. However, due to his influence, many others followed his example and divorced. Miriam thus brought to his attention the fact that his decision was not just affecting their family, but rather threatened the nation’s entire future. This is something that Amram had not considered when making his private, personal decision, and once Miriam alerted him to the grave repercussions of this drastic measure, he changed his mind.

If so, then this incident reminds us that often our private, personal decisions can have a widespread effect. As Jews, we live not only as individuals, but also as part of communities and part of the Jewish Nation. This “membership” offers us many benefits, but also imposes upon us many responsibilities, including the responsibility of influence. The decisions we make, the way we conduct our personal affairs, has an impact upon others, to one extent or another. The story of Amram alerts us to the need to carefully consider the possible ripple effects of our actions and decisions, and to ensure to set a positive example for the people around us to emulate.

Sunday

According to a famous Midrashic tradition, noted by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Shemot (5:4), the tribe of Levi was not enslaved by the Egyptians. Although Pharaoh imposed slave labor upon the rest of the nation, he chose to exclude the tribe of Levi from this decree. This explains why Moshe and Aharon, who were *Leviyim*, walked about freely without being forced to perform labor.

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz, in his [*Tiferet Yehonatan* (to Shemot 6:14)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=40122&st=&pgnum=91), suggests a novel explanation for why Pharaoh decided not to include the tribe of Levi in the enslavement decree. He writes that Pharaoh’s astrologers – who, *Chazal* teach, had made a number of predictions regarding the future savior of *Benei Yisrael* – foresaw that the leader who would eventually arise to free the slaves would emerge from the tribe of Levi. Pharaoh sought to prevent the emergence of a savior by absolving this tribe of the burden of enslavement. It was inconceivable, Pharaoh figured, that somebody who did not feel the pain of slavery could arise to rescue them. A person who did not suffer the humiliation and agony of bondage could not possibly muster the energy and passion needed to instigate an uprising. Pharaoh was certain he could outsmart *Benei Yisrael*’s destiny by freeing all prospective leaders from the torment of slavery, so that they would not care enough to lead their people to freedom.

Of course, Pharaoh was wrong. Moshe, already as a young man, genuinely empathized with the plight of the slaves and felt their pain (Rashi, 2:11). He indeed felt the physical suffering and emotional torment of persecution despite being excluded from the oppression. Pharaoh underestimated the power of empathy and the extent of *Benei Yisrael*’s care and concern for one another. A prospective Jewish leader is, indeed, somebody who can truly feel another’s pain despite not experiencing that person’s situation of hardship. We are, in fact, able – and expected – to empathize with our fellow Jews’ suffering, and to make sacrifices and exert immense efforts to alleviate it.

(Based on [an article](http://www.cjnews.com/perspectives/opinions/wired-feel-others-pain) by Rabbi Ira Ebbin)

Monday

The Torah in Sefer Shemot tells of how Pharaoh’s daughter discovered Moshe in the river as she bathed. We read that when she opened the basket in which Moshe had been hidden, she found a “*na’ar bokheh*” (“a lad crying” – 2:6). Rashi, citing the Gemara (Sota 12b), notes that the Torah refers to Moshe, a three-month-old infant, with the term “*na’ar*,” which is generally used in reference to a teen or young adult. The use of this term here, the Gemara explains, indicates that Moshe’s voice resembled that of a young adult, even while he was an infant.

How might we understand this Talmudic teaching, that Moshe’s voice as he cried in his basket resembled the voice of an adult?

An insightful explanation of the Gemara’s comment was offered by Rav Yisrael Alter of Ger, the *Beit Yisrael* (as cited by the Tolna Rebbe). He suggested that the Gemara means to say that all the tears Moshe would ever shed during his life were shed during his infancy. During his younger years, he cried the tears that would normally be shed in adulthood. The significance of this description, the *Beit Yisrael* explained, is that a leader cannot “weep.” Although he must certainly empathize with people’s suffering and feel their pain, he must remain emotionally sturdy. The rigors and demands of leadership do not allow for emotional fragility. When others cry, the leader must remain strong and provide encouragement, inspiration and practical guidance. When others are too distraught to think clearly and rationally, the leader must bring sound, sensible and calculated solutions. This, the *Beit Yisrael* suggested, is the meaning of the Gemara’s unusual description of Moshe’s cries as an infant. He completed his lifetime of weeping during his younger years, as it were, such that he did not need to cry as an adult. By the time he became the leader and teacher of *Benei Yisrael*, he had the emotional strength and fortitude to provide effective leadership even in times of crisis and anguish.

The standard described by the *Beit Yisrael* might, understandably, strike us as unreasonable, or at least out of reach for the vast majority of people, and we might even question his theory in light of the fact that Yosef, a very successful leader, wept on numerous occasions. Nevertheless, this insight points to the need to remain strong during trying times. We must not break down whenever adversity strikes, and must instead make an effort to remain calm and clear-headed, and make sound, rational decisions during times of hardship.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Shemot of Pharaoh’s harsh response to Moshe and Aharon when they first appeared before him to demand permission for *Benei Yisrael* to leave Egypt. Pharaoh reacted by significantly intensifying *Benei Yisrael*’s workload, forcing them to fetch their own straw with which to produce bricks.

This new decree was enacted for the purpose of denying *Benei Yisrael* the opportunity to harbor thoughts of leaving, as Pharaoh himself announced: “The labor shall be intensified upon the people and they shall engage in it rather than involve themselves in matters of falsehood” (5:9). Rashi explains this to mean that the people would be unable to give any time or attention to the idea of leaving Egypt to bring sacrifices to God, as Moshe had demanded. Several Midrashic sources (including the *Tanchuma*, 7:6) explain a bit differently, that *Benei Yisrael* had scrolls which they would joyfully read and study each Shabbat in Egypt. The extra workload was imposed in order to deny them this delight which kept their spirits up and gave them hope amid the anguish of bondage. According to both interpretations, Pharaoh intensified the slaves’ pressure so they would have neither the time nor the peace of mind to rejuvenate and dream of a happier future.

Rav Mendel of Rimonov added further insight into Pharaoh’s plan, noting that the king ordered his men, “*Lo tosifun la-teit teven la-am*” – “You shall no longer continue giving the people straw” (5:7). The word “*tosifun*,” Rav Mendel of Rimonov observed, can be read as a derivative of the verb *a.s.f.* – “gather,” or “assemble.” Pharaoh’s intent, or part of his intent, was to prevent *Benei Yisrael* from gathering and assembling together. He astutely recognized the power exerted by the positive energy of groups. When *Benei Yisrael* assembled to discuss their plight and reflect on their hopes for the future, they received encouragement, inspiration and reassurance – precisely the feelings that Pharaoh set out to eliminate from *Benei Yisrael*’s hearts. Indeed, the Torah describes how *Benei Yisrael* “scattered about” throughout Egypt in their frantic quest for straw (“*va-yafetz ha-am*” – 5:12). This description might allude to the discontinuation of gatherings, and indicates that Pharaoh’s edict achieved his desired goal of breaking *Benei Yisrael*’s spirits by breeding feelings of isolation and loneliness, as the people could no longer join together to build their hope and optimism.

This Chassidic reading of the verses reminds us of the collective power of a group, which far exceeds the sum total of all its individual parts. When we come together in joy, harmony and unity, we are far better equipped to meet the challenges that we face and triumph over adversity. As Pharaoh correctly understood, our joining together with our fellow Jews has the ability to keep our spirits high even in trying times, and enables us to succeed and prosper regardless of the circumstances.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot (4:20) tells that after God appeared to Moshe and instructed him to return to Egypt from Midyan, Moshe placed his wife and sons on a donkey and rode to Egypt. The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (9a) cites this as one of the verses that were modified in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah commissioned by King Ptolemy. The seventy sages who produced the translation decided to alter several words and phrases in the translation that could lend themselves to theological challenges by the Greeks, and among these is the Torah’s description of Moshe returning to Egypt on a donkey. They translated this verse to mean that Moshe rode on some unnamed animal (“the carrier of people”), rather than as specifying a donkey. The reason for the change, as Rashi explains, is because the scholars feared that the Greeks would ridicule the Jews and ask, “Did your teacher Moshe not have a horse or camel?” The Greeks would have found it strange that Moshe, the prophet and lawgiver of the Jews, was not provided with a more dignified means of transportation than a donkey, and so the translators changed the word “donkey” in this verse to a more generic term.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his [*Netivei Chayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=42862&st=&pgnum=65&hilite=), observes that this concern seems difficult to understand. After all, Moshe at this point was not yet the accepted leader of *Benei Yisrael*. He was a fugitive in Midyan, who was now going to Egypt to lead the people as God had commanded, but he was still largely unknown, and certainly was not a man of prominence. Why would anyone criticize or ridicule our tradition for telling of a leader who rode a donkey before rising to his position of distinction?

Apparently, Rav Elazary writes, these Sages felt responsible to ensure not to allow their detractors room to even ridicule them on the basis of misinterpretations. They wanted to avoid all possible sources of contempt and scorn for Torah, and therefore they did not want their translation to give the mistaken impression that Moshe was not equipped with proper means of transportation, even if this impression is disproved by a careful reading of the text.

Rav Elazary points to this incident as an example of just how far we need to go to ensure not to create a *chilul Hashem*. We must avoid appearances of improper and unbecoming conduct even if the appearance is misleading. If superficially something seems inappropriate, then it must be avoided even if with a bit of inquiry one would recognize that the act in question was entirely legitimate. When the honor of God, Torah and the Jewish Nation is at stake, we need to go as far as we can to avoid mistaken impressions that we approve of ignoble conduct.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Shemot of Moshe’s unlikely rescue from the river as an infant by none other than the princess of Egypt, Pharaoh’s daughter, who discovered the basket in which Moshe’s mother had hid him. Pharaoh’s daughter adopted the baby, whom she named Moshe “*ki min ha-mayim meshitihu*” – “because I drew him from the water” (2:10).

Many writers and *darshanim* have raised the question as to why Moshe received a name which commemorates a seemingly tangential aspect of his extraordinary life. Even if we recognize the value in giving Moshe a name that commemorates his miraculous survival as an infant, we might still wonder why the specific act of the princess “drawing” him from the water deserves to be memorialized. Why is this particular element of Moshe’s story so significant that it was worthy of being celebrated through his name?

It has been suggested that indeed, Moshe’s life was very much about “drawing from the river,” transcending natural trends and tendencies and charting a different course. As an infant, when he was drawn from the river, he was, in essence, drawn away from the dreadful fate that otherwise awaited him. The “current” of the time would have brought him to an early death, but he was “drawn” away to survival. As a young man in Pharaoh’s palace, he found himself in a “current” that led to royalty, but he drew himself away to empathize with the plight of the Hebrew slaves. Once God appointed Moshe leader of *Benei Yisrael*, he led the process of extricating the nation from the “current” of perpetual slavery. Moshe then brought us the Torah, which teaches us of the need to draw ourselves out of the “current” of our natural drives and instincts, to proactively direct our lives towards the higher, sublime goal of serving our Creator. Torah life, to a large extent, is about transcending human impulse and exerting control over ourselves and our behavior, rather than passively floating along the “current” of our inclinations.

Thus, the theme of “*meshitihu*” indeed features very prominently inMoshe’s life, and in his message. His life story and mission teach us to conduct our lives with direction and purpose, to have the courage to oppose evil trends, and to have faith in God’s ability to reverse any “current” which threatens to lead us the wrong way.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot introduces the story of Moshe’s birth by telling of his parents’ marriage: “A Levite man went ahead and married Levi’s daughter” (2:1). A number of commentators raised the question as to the Torah’s intent in telling us that this man – later identified as Amram – “went ahead” (“*va-yeilekh*”). Ibn Ezra explains this term to mean that Yokheved – Moshe’s mother – lived in a different city than Amram, and thus Amram needed to “go” to a different town to marry her. However, as the Ramban noted, it seems difficult to understand why the Torah found it necessary to inform us of this point.

The Ramban therefore suggests a different explanation, postulating that the word “*va-yeilekh*” and other forms of the verb *h.l.kh.* (“go”) can sometimes be used in reference to a “*mizdareiz*” – literally, somebody who acts with zeal and passion. It is used in reference to Amram’s marriage to Yokheved, the Ramban explains, because Amram made the decision to marry in defiance of Pharaoh’s decree to kill all male Israelite infants.

The Ramban cites several other examples of this usage of the verb *h.l.kh.* in Tanakh, and these examples help clarify his intent. He first notes the Torah’s brief account of Reuven sleeping with his stepmother, Bilha: “Reuven went ahead [*va-yeilekh*] and slept with Bilha…” (Bereishit 35:22). The Ramban’s second example is Yehuda’s suggestion to his brothers that they sell Yosef as a slave: “Let us go ahead [*lekhu*] and sell him to the Ishmaelites…” (Bereishit 37:27). He also cites a verse from the opening chapter of Sefer Hoshea (1:3), which tells of Hoshea’s marriage to a harlot in fulfillment of God’s unusual command: “He went ahead [*va-yeilekh*]and wed Gomer, the daughter of Divlayim.” The common denominator between these verses is that they describe a bold and unusual action. In two instances – the stories of Reuven and Yehuda – the action was sinful, whereas in the third, it was explicitly commanded by God. Nevertheless, these are all extraordinary and startling incidents. It would seem, then, that when the Ramban speaks of the verb *h.l.kh.* as expressing the quality of “*mizdareiz*,” he refers to the emotion and passion that drives somebody to act in an unconventional manner. This could be passionate hatred, as in the case of the sale of Yosef, or the passionate devotion to the divine word, as in the case of Hoshea. Regardless of the kind of emotion being described, the verb *h.l.kh.* is used in reference to one who performs an unusual and audacious act that could only result from strong feelings of one sort or another.

And thus the Ramban suggested that here, too, in regard to Amram’s marriage to Yokheved, the Torah uses the term “*va-yeilekh*” to emphasize that this was a bold and striking move on Amram’s part. After Pharaoh decreed death upon all newborn males, the people were discouraged and hesitant to marry. Indeed, the Gemara in Masekhet Sota (12a) famously relates that Amram actually divorced Yokheved in response to Pharaoh’s decree, and then remarried her upon being reprimanded by his daughter, Miriam. The people were disheartened and dispirited, and it took a great deal of strength and fortitude on Amram’s part to marry in defiance of the cruel edict. For this reason, according to the Ramban, the Torah does not simply state that Amram married, but that he “went ahead,” with courage and conviction, to defy Pharaoh and continue building his family and building *Am Yisrael* despite the hardships that they faced.

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