**SALT – PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Shemot of Pharaoh’s cruel command to the Israelite midwives to kill all newborn boys whom they deliver. The midwives courageously defied the king’s command, and allowed the infants to live. The Torah introduces the midwives by the names “Shifra” and “Pu’a”: “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, the name of one of whom was Shifra, and the name of the second of whom was Pu’a…” (1:15). Rashi, based on the Gemara (Sota 11b), comments that these women were actually Yokheved and Miriam – the mother and sister of Moshe – but were called by the names “Shifra” and “Pu’a.”

Rav Tzvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dinov, in [*Benei Yissaskhar* (*Ma’amarei Chodesh Nissan*, 4)](https://www.sefaria.org/Bnei_Yissaschar%2C_Nisan.4.10.22?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en), offers a creative reading of this verse, positing that Pharaoh’s first command to the midwives was that they should be called by these names. According to the *Benei Yissaskhar*, the verse should be read to mean not that Pharaoh commanded the midwives “the name of one whom was Shifra, and the name of the second of whom was Pu’a,” but rather that Pharaoh commanded the midwives “that the name of one of them shall be Shifra, and the name of the second shall be Pu’a.” The *Benei Yissaskhar* explains: “This was the king of Egypt’s approach in his desire that Israel would be obedient to his authority – he gave them names, so that all the powers of their soul would be drawn after the name which he gave…” Knowing the midwives would not likely obey such a ghastly royal edict, Pharaoh devised a strategy – to give them new names, which would have the effect of drawing them under his authority, such that they would obey. But the midwives, to their credit, continued defying Pharaoh even after he renamed them, because they continued identifying themselves by the names “Yokheved” and “Miriam.”

The *Benei Yissaskhar* here teaches us the critically important lesson that we must never allow anybody else to “name” us, to define us, to determine who we are or who we ought to be. In order to avoid making difficult decisions and chart our own course in life, we might be tempted to surrender our “names,” our essential self-definition, to the authority of others, such as a peer group, thereby placing ourselves under their authority and conducting ourselves the way they tell us to. Or, we might assess ourselves based on how others assess us, and allow that assessment to define who we are and how we should act. So much of how we live our lives is a function of our “name,” the way we define ourselves, and so the “name” by which we call ourselves wields enormous power over us. The *Benei Yissaskhar* here warns that we should be the only ones assigning this “name,” that we must not relinquish this right to anybody else. Only we have the ability to determine our unique potential and capabilities, and only we should be deciding how to best maximize that potential and in which direction to channel them. Just as Yokheved and Miriam refused to allow Pharaoh to rename them, so must we be strong enough to reject the “names” and labels given to us by others, and insist on being the only ones to determine the kind of people we should be and kind of lives we should live.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Shemot of God’s first prophecy to Moshe, at the sight of a burning bush in Choreiv, where He commanded Moshe to return to Egypt and lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom. Moshe initially refused, giving various reasons why he could not take on this mission. God responded to each claim, and then Moshe simply responded, “*Shelach na be-yad tishlach*” – “Send, please, whomever you send” (4:13). God then became angry at Moshe, and Moshe eventually relented.

The standard interpretation of Moshe’s response – “*shelach na be-yad tishlach*” – is that Moshe was essentially asking God to appoint for this role anybody else but him. However, Rav Yehuda Henkin (*Mahalkhim Ba-mikra*, Parashat Shemot) offers a different possible explanation. Earlier in God’s dialogue with Moshe, He informed Moshe that Pharaoh would at first refuse to release *Benei Yisrael* from bondage, whereupon “*ve-shalachti et yadi ve-hikeiti et Mitzrayim*” – “I shall send My hand and strike Egypt” (3:20), referring to the plagues which God would bring upon the country. Rav Henkin suggests that Moshe’s response of “***shelach*** *na be-****yad*** *tishlach*,” which makes mention of God “sending” (“*shelach*”) and a “hand” (“*be-yad*”), perhaps refers to God’s declaration, “*ve-****shalachti*** *et* ***yadi***” – that He would “send” His “hand” against Egypt. Perhaps, Moshe was not asking God to choose a different human agent through whom to release *Benei Yisrael*, but rather asking that God simply do the job Himself. Once God had informed Moshe that He would “send” His “hand” and strike Egypt, to force Pharaoh to release the slaves, Moshe then contended that there was no need for a human messenger to confront Pharaoh as God’s representative. God might as well just free *Benei Yisrael* on His own, as it were.

If so, then we might explain that God became angry at Moshe for this response because He wants and expects human beings to partner with Him, so-to-speak, in creating a just world. Of course, God can accomplish anything on His own, without any human involvement, but, for reasons we can never understand, He created people with exceptional talents and skills, and with a moral conscience, in order to act as His agents and work to improve the world we live in. He endowed us with vast potential specifically so we would not sit on the sidelines and observe His work, and would rather use our great gifts to participate in His work, each to the best of his or her ability, in an effort to make the world better.

Although God does not speak to us directly as He did to Moshe, nevertheless, we are all given missions to achieve, as Moshe was, and we must embrace these missions, even when they are challenging, with an understanding that we are privileged to be God’s partners in building and advancing our world.

Monday

Yesterday, we discussed Moshe’s initial refusal to accept the mission assigned to him by God, to return to Egypt from Midyan and demand that Pharaoh release *Benei Yisrael* from bondage. After God responded to each of the reasons Moshe gave for feeling incapable of carrying out this mission, Moshe then said, “*Shelach na be-yad tishlach*” – “Send, please, whomever you send” (4:13). Eventually, of course, Moshe accepted the mission and returned to Egypt.

Rashi presents two explanations for Moshe’s request, “*Shelach na be-yad tishlach*.” According to Rashi’s second interpretation, Moshe argued that he was unworthy of leading *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt because he prophetically saw that he would not enter the Land of Israel. After bringing the people out of Egypt and tending to them for forty years in the wilderness, Moshe died on the east bank of the Jordan River, without joining the people across the river into *Eretz Yisrael*. He thus told God after being assigned his role, “I will not end up bringing them into the land and redeeming them in the future; You have many messengers.” Moshe felt that since he would not complete the mission by bringing *Benei Yisrael* into their homeland, he was unfit for the role of leader, and so this role should be assigned to somebody else.

This interpretation of the verse perhaps shows us the dangers of perfectionism, the mistake some people make by feeling unworthy and unsuited for a task because they know they will not complete it to perfection. God reacted angrily to Moshe’s request of “*Shelach na be-yad tishlach*” because it is wrong to confuse imperfection with failure. The fact that Moshe would not complete the mission did not mean that he was not the best suited person to carry it out. We should not shy away from important undertakings for which we are generally qualified even if we know we will fall short of perfection. Just as God wanted Moshe to assume the reins of leadership despite the eventuality of his dying before completing mission, we must be prepared and willing to do what we can even if we anticipate failing to perfectly complete the task.

Tuesday

When God appeared to Moshe for the first time and commanded him to return to Egypt and lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom, Moshe initially refused. At one point in his lengthy conversation with God, Moshe said, “*Ve-hein lo ya’aminu li ve-lo yishme’u be-koli*” – “But they will not believe me, and will not listen to me” (4:1). Moshe anticipated that the people would dismiss his claim that God appeared to him and informed him that they would be leaving Egypt. God responded by equipping Moshe with three “signs” – miracles that he would perform in view of the people, to prove that God had in fact spoken to him and commanded him to lead them to freedom. The first miracle was that he would transform his staff into a snake, and then back into a staff, and the second was that his hand would become leprous, and then be restored to its natural color (4:2-7).

Rashi (4:2,6), citing from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, comments that these two miracles served not only as proofs of Moshe’s authenticity, but also as a sort of punishment for Moshe. His staff turned into a snake, and his hand turned snow-white, because he assumed, “*Hein lo ya’aminu li*” – that *Benei Yisrael* would not believe him. This charge against the people, Rashi writes, constituted both “*chosheid bi-ksheirim*” – wrongly suspecting innocent people, as well as *lashon ha-ra* – inappropriate, negative speech about others. Moshe was therefore punished by having his staff turned into a snake and his hand stricken with leprosy.

The *Chafetz Chaim*, in his *Shemirat Ha-lashon* (vol. 2, chapter 13), raises the question of why the Midrash criticizes Moshe for his concern that the people might not believe him. This concern appears to have been quite legitimate. Moshe had good reason to suspect that the people would react skeptically to his announcement that God had appeared to him and promised to bring them out of Egypt, where they had been slaves for centuries. Why did the Midrash find fault in Moshe’s concern?

The *Chafetz Chaim* cites Rav Eliyahu Shick as explaining that Moshe was punished for the certainty with which he expected that the people would reject his prophecy. It would have been perfectly legitimate, and appropriate, for Moshe to raise the question of what he should do if the people react with skepticism. But Moshe pronounced, “*Hein lo ya’aminu li*” – establishing as a fact that the people would reject him, without considering the possibility that they would welcome his prophetic message. And for this reason, Moshe was reprimanded.

We often tend to assign people labels, to define them in a specific way, and then feel that we can definitively predict their behavior. The Midrash, as understood by Rav Eliyahu Shick, teaches that while it is certainly prudent to exercise caution when dealing with people, we must avoid rushing to conclusions about them. The human being is far more complex that we sometimes think. We should never write off those who do not initially impress us, because we never know the true nature and essence – or the potential – of any individual. People are, very often, far more capable and impressive than we think. We must recognize each individual’s capacity for greatness and trust in his or her ability to shine and accomplish well beyond expectations.

Wednesday

When God announced to Moshe in his inaugural prophecy that He would soon be releasing *Benei Yisrael* from bondage, He said, “And now, the Israelites’ cry has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them” (3:9). Seforno explains that God here explains to Moshe the reasons for the two processes that would now be unfolding: *Benei Yisrael*’s freedom, and the devastating plagues that would befall Egypt. God would be releasing *Benei Yisrael* because He had heard their cries, and He would punishing Egypt because He had seen their brutal oppression of *Benei Yisrael*.

Rav Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak of Alexander, in his *Yismach Yisrael*, cites his father (Rav Yechiel Danziger of Alexander) as offering a different explanation of this verse. He writes that the oppression suffered by *Benei Yisrael* in Egypt made it exceedingly difficult for them to devote themselves to God, to the point where even prayer was a great challenge. All they could muster was a simple but genuine cry of pain and anguish directed towards the Almighty. The Rebbe of Alexander thus explains this verse to mean that God heard “the Israelites’ cry,” the only prayer they were capable of uttering, because He saw their oppression, the pain and suffering they endured, which prevented them from praying properly.

The *Yismach Yisrael* added that besides the actual oppression to which *Benei Yisrael* were subjected, they also, according to tradition, experienced a drastic spiritual decline. Kabbalistic teaching describes *Benei Yisrael* as having fallen to the proverbial “forty-ninth level of impurity” in Egypt, just one step before the point from which they would have been unable to recover, due to the powerful influence of the pagan and decadent culture in which they were submerged. Under these conditions of great spiritual challenge, all the people could manage was a primal, heartfelt cry for help. God lovingly accepted their pleas, recognizing that this was the best the people could manage under the circumstances.

This chassidic insight conveys the message that God welcomes and cherishes our sincere efforts to serve Him the best we can under our current conditions. The value of our service is measured not in absolute terms, but rather by our current capabilities and the extent to which we utilize them to their fullest. The *Yismach Yisrael* emphasizes here the specific area of prayer, noting that people sometimes find themselves unable to pray as they should, with the appropriate intensity of concentration and emotion. He urges us to realize the precious value of every ounce of effort we invest to pray, and that any prayer we recite sincerely and to the best of our ability is lovingly welcomed and accepted by the Almighty.

Thursday

Yesterday, we discussed God’s pronouncement to Moshe during Moshe’s initial prophecy, at the burning bush, “And now, the Israelites’ cry has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them” (3:9). God here informed Moshe that He was sending him to lead *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt for two reasons – because He had heard the nation’s cries, and He had seen the oppression which they were suffering at the hand of the Egyptians.

Chizkuni, explaining the connection between these two clauses in the verse, comments, “‘The Israelites’ cry has come to Me’ – and should you say that they cry for naught, the verse therefore states: ‘I have also seen the oppression.’ They cry for good reason.” According to Chizkuni’s reading, the second clause in this verse affirms the significance of the first. The reason why God took note of the people’s cries and compassionately accepted their pleas is because He “also saw the oppression” – he recognized that their suffering was real. They cried not “for naught,” but out of genuine pain and anguish.

Chizkuni’s interpretation to this verse points to the fact that not all crying is valid. As the Gemara (Ta’anit 29a) famously comments, in response to *Benei Yisrael*’s weeping after hearing the spies’ report about the Land of Israel (Bamidbar 14:1), God harshly condemned their “*bekhiya shel chinam*” – “needless crying.” The cause of their fear and angst was their lack of faith, and thus it was deemed illegitimate, and unworthy of God’s compassion. God looks mercifully upon our pain and anguish, and lovingly accepts our prayers uttered out of distress, but only if the distress is real, and not imagined or unnecessarily self-imposed.

A famous verse in Tehillim (145:18) says, “The Lord is close to all call Him, to all who call to Him truthfully.” The word “*be-emet*” (“truthfully”) in this verse might refer not only to sincerity, to an honest, heartfelt plea to God for help, but also to “truthful” pain and desperation. Both the plea and the pain must be real. Pain over minor, trivial matters does not evoke God’s mercy. Such problems are to be handled maturely and with composure. It is when we cry out to God “*be-emet*,” in a situation of legitimate pain, that He compassionately hears our prayers.

Friday

            The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells of Moshe’s inaugural prophecy, which he received when he was shepherding his father-in-law’s sheep and brought them “to the Mountain of God, to Choreiv” (3:1).  Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, explains that this mountain was so named because of the event that later transpired there – God’s revelation to the people.  Indeed, already during this prophecy, God informed Moshe that after *Benei Yisrael* leave Egypt, they would serve Him on that mountain (3:12), referring to the Revelation.  And, in Sefer Devarim (4:10,15), Moshe speaks of the Revelation as having occurred in Choreiv, the name given here to the site of “the Mountain of God.”  It thus seems clear that this mountain, where Moshe received his first prophecy, was Mount Sinai.  Accordingly, Rashi comments that the title “Mountain of God” was assigned to Mount Sinai here in Parashat Shemot because it would later be the site of God’s revelation to *Benei Yisrael*.

            Rav Yehuda Henkin (*Mahalkhim Be-mikra*) offers a different approach to explain the meaning of the name “*Har Ha-Elokim*” – “the Mountain of God.”  He notes that the name “Choreiv” stems from the root *ch.r.v.*, which means “dry.”  Thus, for example, the verb “*charevu*” is used by the Torah (Bereishit 8:13) in reference to the earth’s drying after the flood.  The region of Mount Sinai was naturally called “Choreiv” because of its dry, desert climate.  Yet, there are a number of indications that Mount Sinai had vegetation.  For one thing, if Moshe brought the sheep under his charge to this mountain, we must assume that this was an area with water and pasture.  Moreover, when God later summoned Moshe to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the second set of stone tablets, He commanded that no cattle should graze on the mountain during that time (Shemot 34:3) – clearly implying that Mount Sinai was filled with pasture for animals.  Rav Henkin further notes that after the sin of the golden calf, Moshe burned the calf and scattered the ashes “on the surface of the water” (Shemot 32:20), which we later discover refers to “the stream that fell from the mountain” (Devarim 9:21).  According to tradition, the sin of the golden calf occurred on 17 Tammuz, in the summertime, when no rain falls, and yet, there was, apparently, a constant stream of water from the mountain.  This stream, presumably, accounted for the rich vegetation that grew there.

            The question thus arises, why would Mount Sinai be called “Choreiv” – which means “dry” – if it had a constant water source and vegetation?

            Rav Henkin suggests that the name “Choreiv” was given to the general region because of its arid climate, but Mount Sinai itself was an exceptional location that was blessed with water.  When the Torah refers to the site here in Parashat Shemot as “*Har Ha-Elokim, Choreiva*” (“the Mountain of God, to Choreiv”), Rav Henkin proposes, it means that this mountain was an exceptional site in the otherwise arid region of Choreiv.  It was known as “*Har Ha-Elokim*” because it stood out from among all other areas in Choreiv, having a natural water source, and thus people regarded this mountain as having received some sort of special blessing from God.  Accordingly, the name “*Har Ha-Elokim*” refers not to the future event that took place on this mountain, but rather to its exceptional quality even at that time, when Moshe brought his father-in-law’s sheep there to take advantage of its large quantities of pasture.

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