

SHIFRAH AND PUAH / MIRIAM AND JOCHEVED PART II

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

In our previous class we explored how, as a result of the work of the midwives Shifrah and Puah, God multiplied the Jewish people during their enslavement in Egypt. The following class examines the character trait, "fear of God," which is key to understanding the greatness of the midwives (referred to here by their Hebrew names, Miriam and Yocheved), as well as the nature of their reward.

(The Jewish definition of "fear of God" implies an understanding of the greatness of God. "Fear of God" has several levels, the lowest being fear of punishment or Divine retribution. This level is seen only as a first step towards a higher ability to remain constantly in awe of the Divine and to conduct one's life according to this awareness. In other words, according to the Jewish definition, the highest expression of "fear" is awe.)

Yocheved and Miriam possessed many beautiful character traits including, faith in Hashem, kindness, an unwavering belief in a better future and courage in the face of adversity. But none of these traits is mentioned in the Torah. Instead the text tells us: "...it was because the midwives feared God that He made them houses" (Shemos 1:21) and "...the midwives feared God and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live" (Shemos 1:17).

The "houses" - God's reward to the midwives for their perfect fear of Him -were the dynasties of: Priests (Kehunah) and Levites (Leviah) who served in the Temple, as well as Kings (Malchut), including the House of King David, for Yocheved and Miriam, respectively.

Why is "fear of God" seen as the source of the midwives' behavior and why is it considered so fundamental to the Jewish greatness they embody? On a simple level, fear of God and Torah wisdom are connected. Since Torah deals with all aspects of life, it imparts wisdom about how to live properly. At cross-purpose to acquiring this wisdom, however, is the ongoing temptation to do what we want to do, rather than what the Torah tells us to do. "Fear of God" is what ultimately prevents us from turning away from Torah.

To illustrate: our sages tell us that when a person leaves this world, God asks him six questions including, "were you honest in business, did you study Torah, did you wait for the Messiah?" If a person is on the level that he can truly respond "yes" to all six questions, he is then asked, "were you God-fearing?" If he says "no," he is told that all six previous answers are worthless without the fear of God. This seems somewhat bewildering. Why are six accomplishments insignificant in the face of

this one specific failure?

Heavenly judgement is based on the quality of the relationship between man and God. The better the relationship, the greater the guarantee that a person will do the right thing for the right reasons, especially under dire circumstances. This is so, because a person may abandon his or her good intentions under duress and come to act improperly, unless there is a solid relationship with God and an unflagging commitment to Divine will.

In order to be able to do the right thing, especially in adversity, one's actions must transcend self-interest or fear of consequence. The only basis for this strength is fear of God. When a person's good deeds are completely motivated by God-given standards, he or she will act correctly, no matter what. Such a person understands God's awesomeness in a very real way, and will have the strength to be loyal to His will even in the worst times. This is the essence of fear of God, which gives permanence to Jewish values, while more humanistic values and definitions of right and wrong vary according to time, place and human interest.

This is the level of Miriam and Yocheved. Maintaining one's fear of God has to do with remembering His greatness, at all costs. This was the accomplishment of Miriam and Yocheved, who were in Egypt during one of the worst eras in the history of the Jewish Nation. At this time, Egypt was indebted to the Jews, because Joseph had saved the country from devastating famine. Pharaoh was, nonetheless, threatened by the Jewish population's miraculous growth and strength (God was granting multiple births to Jewish women). The Torah describes Pharaoh as "one who did not know Joseph." Meaning that, in order to serve his own purposes, Pharaoh chose to "forget" Joseph's kindness, because it conflicted with his desire to subdue the Jewish people.

In the midst of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jews and, specifically, against the death warrant that Pharaoh had ordered the midwives to administer, Miriam and Yocheved maintained their awe of and attachment to the Divine. Their fear of G-d motivated them to do the right thing for the Jewish Nation, even at tremendous risk. While kindness, self-sacrifice and other strengths came into play, these qualities supported their fundamental commitment to doing God's will.

The consistency and permanence of the midwives' commitment to doing the right thing is key to understanding why God established the "houses" - or dynasties - of Priests, Levites and Kings from them as a reward. Each of these groups possess the ability to be completely aware of God at all times, to remain loyal to His ways and to provide an example to the Jewish people of how to maintain a proper relationship with God. These houses pass from father to son - as a birthright - generation following generation. That they will exist forever is fitting, because "permanence" is behind the consistency and loyalty to doing the right thing, which is the basis for fear of God. (On a more mundane level, a house is something of permanence. We move into a house with the intention to create a longstanding dwelling. In much the same way, fear of God, at its highest, is longstanding).

These aspects of "house" express Miriam's and Yocheved's devotion to their people, because of

their fear of God. In return, He rewarded them with the power of Jewish continuity, and the recognition that the Divine is at the center of Jewish life for all time.

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