

# BALANCED FORCES

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Shemos

## Balanced Forces

**By Shlomo Katz**

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Today's Learning:  
Eduyot 1:10-11  
O.C. 59:3-5  
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nedarim 8  
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Megillah 21

In this first part of this week's parashah we read how Pharaoh conspired to enslave the Jewish People and prevent them from growing as a nation. At one point, he even commanded that every newborn baby be thrown into the Nile.

Rashi z"l writes that this last decree was not against Bnei Yisrael alone, for the Torah says (1:22), "Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, 'Every son that will be born -- into the River shall you throw him!'" Rashi explains that Pharaoh's astrologers told him that the savior of Bnei Yisrael would be born on a certain day, and he might be Jewish or he might be Egyptian. (They were confused because the savior, Moshe, actually would be a Jew who would grow up in Pharaoh's palace.)

R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld z"l (1848-1932; rabbi of the Edah Ha'chareidit in Yerushalayim) observes that this story illustrates how Hashem pulls all the strings behind the scenes and uses every person to bring about the result that His Will has ordained. The Gemara (Chagigah 15a) teaches that everything in the world has an opposite. In the physical world, for example, there are mountains and valleys, etc. In the spiritual world, there are tzaddikim and resha'im, Gan Eden and Gehinnom, etc. In

the same vein, we are taught that the opposing forces of good and evil must be balanced in the world in order to preserve man's ability to exercise his free will. According to Hashem's own design, if a soul enters the world that has the ability to become a great tzaddik like Moshe Rabbeinu, another soul must come into the world that has the potential to counter- balance that holiness by spreading unspeakable evil and impurity.

Whatever became of the impure soul that was destined to counter-balance the soul of Moshe Rabbeinu? We never hear of such a person! The answer, says R' Sonnenfeld, is that "Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, 'Every son that will be born -- into the River shall you throw him!'" Unwittingly, Pharaoh killed the one person who might have impeded Moshe Rabbeinu's future mission. (Chochmat Chaim)

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*"Va'yoel Moshe / Moshe desired to dwell with the man [Yitro]; and he gave his daughter Tzipporah to Moshe."* (Shmot 2:21)

The midrash Mechilta translates the word "Va'yoel" differently than we have translated it above. According to the midrash, the word is related to "Alah"(aleph-lamed-heh) / "oath." The verse would then mean that Moshe took an oath to Yitro. What was the oath? The midrash says that Moshe swore that The first child that would be born from his marriage to Tzipporah would be dedicated to avodah zarah / idolatry, while his other children would be dedicated to Hashem.

How could Moshe make such an oath? R' Menachem M. Kasher z"l (20th century editor of a monumental anthology of midrashim and commentaries entitled Torah Sheleimah) collects the following answers:

Moshe knew that Yitro himself would ultimately convert to Judaism. Indeed, Moshe intended to help his father-in-law come closer to Hashem. Thus, Moshe did not anticipate that his son would have to be an idolator. Nevertheless, Moshe was punished for taking this oath in that he had a grandson, Yonatan ben Gershom, who was a priest to idolatry. (Ba'al Ha'Turim)

A similar answer: Moshe saw that Yitro worshipped a different idol every day, and he knew that Yitro eventually would reject all of them. Perhaps this was even revealed to him in a prophecy. (Siftei Kohen)

As used in this midrash, "Avodah zarah" does not mean idolatry. Rather, it should be understood literally to mean "strange work." In effect, Moshe promised Yitro that Moshe's oldest son would wear the clothes of the Midianites and learn their language and customs. The midrash calls this "avodah zarah" in the same sense as the statement in the Gemara (Bava Batra 110), "It is preferable to do avodah zarah than to take charity." This does not mean that a person may perform idolatry to earn money. Rather, it means, "It is preferable to do work that is strange to you than to take charity." (Rabbeinu Ephraim).

Yitro assumed that just as the oldest son of Avraham and Yitzchak had been wicked (i.e., Yishmael and Esav), so, too, the oldest son of Moshe would be wicked. Yitro's intent in asking Moshe to take the oath was as follows: "You might be tempted to take another wife as your ancestor Avraham did, so that your wicked son and your good son will not come from the same wife. Swear to me that all your children will come from Tzipporah, both the (presumed) idolator and the servant of Hashem." (Alshich)

Yitro thought Moshe was Egyptian (see 2:20). He did not realize that Moshe was from Bnei Yisrael. Yitro's intention in requesting the oath was: "Your first child you may dedicate to your Egyptian idols, but I, Yitro, will be permitted to teach your other children about Hashem." (Merkevet Ha'mishnah)

R' Chaim Shmulevitz z"l (1902-1979; rosh yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Shanghai and Yerushalayim) explains Moshe's oath as follows:

Our sages teach that Yitro converted to Judaism after trying out every idolatry that existed. Yitro believed that this was the proper path for every person to follow. He knew that Hashem is the One True G-d, but he did not believe parents should force that belief on their children. He therefore insisted that Moshe allow his first-born son to experiment with different faiths and discover Hashem on his own.

Is Yitro's philosophy correct? No, says R' Shmulevitz. G-d intends that we be his servants. Our minds are, in fact, capable of discovering G-d, but if we serve Him only because we have discovered him on our own, then we are not truly servants to Him.

What does it mean to be a servant? Isn't it enough to comply with the laws in the Shulchan Aruch / Code of Jewish Law? R' Shmulevitz explains that a servant will comply with the Shulchan Aruch all of the time. In contrast, one who keeps the mitzvot but has not subjugated himself entirely to Hashem will occasionally rationalize not following halachah. People can be heard to argue that in a particular situation a kiddush Hashem / sanctification of G-d will result from "bending" halachah slightly. Such an assertion comes from not seeing oneself as a servant to Hashem, completely bound by His laws and decrees. (Sichot Mussar: Year 5731 No.25)

R' Shmuel Dvir z"l (20th century; Israel) explains Moshe's oath based on the Gemara (Ketubot 110b) which states that a person who lives outside of Eretz Yisrael, even if he keeps all of the mitzvot, is akin to an idolator. Yitro asked Moshe to swear that when Bnei Yisrael depart Egypt for Eretz Yisrael, Moshe's oldest son would stay in Midian and live with Yitro.

R' Dvir continues: This is alluded to by the gematria of the Hebrew phrase "Va'yoel Moshe" (398). Adding two to represent the two words (referred to as "adding the kollelim"), we have 400. This is the number of years that everyone thought Bnei Yisrael would be in Egypt. In effect, Yitro said, "When the 400 years are over, your son will stay with me." (Quoted in Otzrot Ha'aggadah: Ketubot 111)

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*"Moshe returned to Hashem and said, 'My Master, why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people'." (Shmot 5:22-23)*

R' Shlomo Eliasoff z'l (leading kabbalist in the early 20th century; grandfather of the contemporary halachic authority, R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv) explains this verse as follows: Moshe's objection to becoming Hashem's emissary was based on his belief that Bnei Yisrael were not capable or worthy of receiving the great "light" that Hashem was planning to reveal. Moshe feared that they would first have to be purified through suffering, and he did not wish to be the emissary to bring about that suffering. In our verse, Moshe essentially argues that his fears have been confirmed. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach R' Elyashiv p.90)

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## Shemittah

This week we continue discussing the sanctity of the fruits of shevi'it / the seventh year. The halachot below are taken from chapter seven of Sefer Ha'shemittah by R' Yechiel Michel Tikochinski z"l.

Anything that has kedushat shevi'it / sanctity of the seventh year, may not be destroyed. This applies to human food, animal food, dyes made from produce, etc. Therefore, if the pit of a fruit still has meat of the fruit attached to it, or if the pit itself is edible, it may not be thrown away. "Edible pits" includes also those hard pits which have a soft kernel inside. Also, one may not overflow the havdalah cup if he is using wine of shemittah.

Skins of fruits may not be thrown away if they are edible. If they are fit for making preserves, one should do so. If they are fit for animals, they should be given to animals. If dyes can be made from them, they should be used for dyes. If they are not useful for any purpose, they may be thrown away.

If produce is fit for eating, but one does not want to eat it, it should be set aside until it rots. Alternatively, it may be put in a place where an animal will eat it (notwithstanding the prohibition on giving human food to an animal directly). [Ed. note: It emerges from this halachah that one can, as a practical matter, dispose of any produce that he does not plan to eat even though we have stated that produce of shemittah may not be thrown away. In practice, observant households in Israel separate their garbage during the shemittah year so that refuse that has sanctity (fruits and vegetables) is not mixed with refuse that does not have sanctity (everything else that was on the table, from the chicken bones to the paper napkins).]

One is permitted to give a child fruits of shemittah to eat even though the child might throw away the edible parts of the peels or pits.

One is not permitted to pick unripe fruits during the shemittah because that is wasting them. However, if one wishes to pick a small quantity to eat on the spot, he may.

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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