

# MIRACLES AND FREE CHOICE

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"And a man from the house of Levi went out, and took for his wife a daughter of Levi." [Shemos 2:1]*

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) explains the extra word "vayelech [went out]" in this verse, which refers to Amram and Yocheved. Amram had previously married Yocheved, he explains, but separated from her in response to Pharaoh's decree that all Jewish boys be killed. Amram "went out" in the path of his daughter's advice.

According to our Sages, his daughter Miriam told him, "Your decree is still worse than Pharaoh's! Pharaoh decreed only against Jewish boys, but yours is against girls as well!" Because of Miriam's counsel, Amram remarried Yocheved, and Our Rabbi Moshe was born.

We should wonder, though, when Miriam made her argument, and when it was accepted. Obviously the separation went on for some time, especially because Pharaoh made two decrees. The first decree was that the midwives should kill any male Jewish child [1:16]. After that failed, Pharaoh then told his entire nation to throw any Jewish boy into the Nile river [1:22]. Amram, apparently, remarried only after the second decree, which ordered all Egyptians to take part! Does this make sense?

In order to answer this, let us look first at another puzzling story. In Parshas Vayeshev, which we read several weeks ago, Yosef's brothers decide to kill him. But "Reuven heard, and he saved him from their hands..." [Br. 37:21]. What did they do instead? They threw him in a pit, "and the pit was empty, it had no water" [37:24]. Our Sages asked, "if it says the pit is empty, don't I know that it has no water? Rather, it had no water, but it did have snakes and scorpions" [Talmud Shabbos 22a]. So what kind of "rescue" did Reuven carry out? How can the Torah credit Reuven with "saving" Yosef, when he dumped Yosef into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions?

The answer goes to the very nature of a human being. A human being has one trait which, above all others, distinguishes us from animals: the trait of free will, of choice. Humans can choose to kill or not to kill; for animals, the decision is made by a host of external factors – animals don't go on a rampage because they "feel like doing it," nor are they generous by choice. [In other words, the problem with calling Hamas "human animals" is that animals are incapable of that level of barbarity and inhuman cruelty.]

Because the natural order of things is for humans to have free will, it would have been miraculous beyond nature for Divine Intervention to save Yosef from his stronger brothers who had surrounded him. Because scorpions, on the other hand, do not have free choice, it is not entirely unnatural

(though certainly unusual) for them to fail to sting and kill someone who lands in their pit. Therefore Reuven did indeed save Yosef. He saved Yosef from his brothers, given that Divine Intervention could then save him from the snakes and scorpions in the pit – a miracle, but not beyond nature.

We can then understand why Amram might more willingly remarry Yocheved after the second decree. Under the first, the midwives were commanded to kill the boys, and had they not displayed amazing self-sacrifice, an open miracle would have been needed to save each child. The second decree, however, put death in the hands of the river – and thus only a “natural” miracle would be needed to save them.

*[From Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Hertzberg zt"l, Rabbi in Baltimore for 42 years, and my wife's grandfather. The original text is in the posthumous collection of his Divrei Torah, Tzaddik B'Emunaso.]*

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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*This week's class is dedicated to the speedy healing of Azriel Yitzchak ben Chaya Gitel.*

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