

SERVICE CALL

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"And the king of Egypt died and the children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to Hashem"(2:23)

Following the interpretation of the Midrash, Rashi explains that Pharoah did not die, rather was struck with leprosy, which is akin to dying.¹ As a cure for his ailment, Pharoah slaughtered three hundred Jewish infants daily so that he may bathe in their blood. This, the Midrash explains, was the source of Bnei Yisroel's screams which went up to Hashem.² What is difficult to understand is that the verse gives a different reason for why Bnei Yisroel cried out. The reason given is because of their "avodah" - the oppressive work load which they were forced to assume, not because their children were being slaughtered.³

There are times when a subject can be called upon to give up his life in order to save the king. Such times would be limited only to situations in which the threat to the king's safety is an attack on the nation as well. A secret serviceman will throw himself in front of the president to protect him from the bullet of an assassin. This is understandable, for the assassin is attacking the entire nation. However, a subject is not required to give up his life in order to save a monarch from his ailments.

Chazal teach us that Pharoah did not view himself as a mere mortal monarch, rather as a deity, requiring total dedication and reverence from his subjects.⁴ Therefore, as a show of loyalty and devotion to him, Pharoah required that Bnei Yisroel give up their children for his well-being. In Pharaoh's eyes, this was dedicated service rather than murder. There is no contradiction between the Midrash and the verse, for the avodah - the service from which Bnei Yisroel were screaming out in anguish, was the service which Pharoah required of them.

1.2:23

2.Shemos Rabbah 1:43

3.See Tiferes Tzion ibid

4.See Rashi 7:15

Picking Straws

Now go to work. Straw will not be given to you, but you must provide the quota of bricks!"(5:18)

When Pharaoh saw the Jews agitating for religious freedom, he attributed it to their being lazy: -

"They are lazy."¹ He therefore decreed that although in the past straw had been distributed to them so that they could fulfill their daily quota of brick-making, the Jews would now have to begin providing their own straw.

The Torah prefaces Pharaoh's decrees against the Jewish people with an explanation of his motivations. He was frightened by the growth of Bnei Yisroel who were multiplying very quickly. The Jews were too precious a commodity to expel, and too dangerous a force to leave unchecked. Pharaoh decided to enslave the Jews, thereby harnessing their talents while neutralizing any possible danger they may have posed to the state.² Clearly, Pharaoh's affliction of Bnei Yisroel was driven by self-preservation and personal gain, rather than senseless hatred. If so, why did Pharaoh institute a decree that would hurt Bnei Yisroel's productivity, as attested to by the verses which relate that the taskmasters beat the Jews for not fulfilling their quotas? Would it not have been more productive for Pharaoh to simply increase the quota of bricks that the Jews were responsible for? In this manner, not only would the Jews be required to work longer hours, but their productivity would increase as well.

Every business owner knows that making his employees more focused on their work can only be achieved by giving them more responsibility, not by giving them more work. Pharaoh understood that the reason for Bnei Yisroel's agitating was not because they had spare time, but because their minds were not focused on their work. Pharaoh was attempting to enslave their minds, and not only their bodies. Increasing their quota would enslave their bodies to a higher degree. However, their minds still would not be focused on their work. By requiring them to provide their own straw, Pharaoh was increasing their responsibility for the product that they were producing. Thus, Bnei Yisroel would be more focused on their work, and less prone to thinking about other matters.

15:17

21:9-12

Irrational Ego

"He harnessed his chariot and he took his people with him" (14:6)

The Gur Aryeh explains that when the Torah uses the word "lakach" - "he took" in reference to objects, it means physically taking. However, when using "lakach" in reference to people, it refers to a verbal persuasion.¹ Therefore, Rashi teaches that Pharaoh was able to persuade his nation to pursue Bnei Yisroel by using the following argument: "How can we let Bnei Yisroel go with all our money? Follow me into battle, and we will plunder them and I will divide the spoils with you."² What

needs to be understood is, if the Egyptians were financially motivated, would it not have been a greater incentive to recapture the slaves themselves, who were worth far more than the wealth that they took with them? If one will argue that the ten plagues taught the Egyptians that they were not able to enslave Bnei Yisroel, how could they logically think that they would be able to slaughter Bnei Yisroel and retrieve their money?³

A person can lose money in business in two ways: Although he makes sound business decisions, a person can suffer a loss due to unforeseen circumstances which are beyond his control, or as a direct result of poor business decisions. If a person loses money in the former situation, it is easier for him to write it off than if he loses money in the latter situation. The reason for this is as follows: Losing money due to unforeseen circumstances is not a reflection of a person's business acumen. However, since writing off the losses that resulted from his poor decision-making would directly reflect upon him as a businessman, he continues to pour money into the business in an attempt to salvage his bruised ego. This concept is known as "throwing good money after bad money".

When the Jews asked the Egyptians for their valuables, Rashi comments that not only did they hand the valuables over willingly, they gave the Jews double.³ Pharaoh realized that attempting to persuade his people to recapture the slaves was futile, for that loss was beyond their control. However, the wealth that they gave willingly and generously doubled was a loss that could be attributed to foolishness. Therefore, Pharaoh appealed to their egos, for in such circumstances, a person will act irrationally.

1.Gur Arye 14:6

2.Rashi ibid.

3.15:9