

SHARING THE PAIN

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"And to Yosef was born two children prior to the onset of the famine..." (41:50) Since the Torah emphasizes that Yosef's two children were born prior to the onset of the famine, the Talmud derives that one must abstain from conjugal relations during a time of famine.¹ The Baalei Hatosfos raise the following difficulty: In another section of the Talmud, we are taught that Levi's daughter, Yocheved was born as Levi entered Egypt, which occurred at the conclusion to the second year of the famine.² Therefore, it can be deduced that Levi had conjugal relations during the famine. Why was this permitted?

The answer given by the Baalei Hatosfos is that abstinence during a time of famine is not a halachic requirement, rather a suggestion for someone who wishes to conduct himself with an extra measure of piety.³ The Ohr HaChaim finds it problematic to accept that while Yosef was willing to conduct himself with this extra measure of piety, Levi, who was described by Moshe as the personification of "chasidus" - piety, was not.⁴

The Mizrachi offers his own answer to the Ba'alei Hatosfos' question. He suggests that one who has not fulfilled the mitzva of procreation is not required to abstain. Therefore, Levi, who did not have a daughter was not bound by this restriction.⁵ This answer requires further explanation, for Yosef himself had only sons, and the accepted halachic opinion is that the mitzva of procreation is fulfilled only when a person has one son and one daughter. According to the Mizrachi, we would be forced to assume that Yosef followed the unaccepted opinion that having two sons fulfills the obligation. Furthermore, the Talmudic exegesis itself appears to contradict the Mizrachi. The Talmud derives that since the Torah emphasizes that Yosef's sons were born prior to the famine, the message being conveyed is that his children could only be born then. If Yosef would have waited until the famine began, he would have been restricted even though he had not fulfilled his obligation of procreation.

To begin solving this perplexity, we must first understand why it is necessary to abstain from conjugal relations during a time when there is distress in the world. It would appear that the reason is as follows: When we see people in distress, we must empathize with them. Abstinence is the manner in which we show empathy; we do not indulge ourselves in pleasure while others are in distress. Logic dictates that this behavior is required only of someone who is otherwise not subject to the distress of his brethren; thus, there is the need to empathize. However, for someone who is subject to the same distress as his brethren, there is no need for abstinence. For this person to

abstain would be an extra measure of piety, unless he had not yet fulfilled his mizva of procreation.

Yosef did not feel the pressure of the famine, for he had taken the necessary precautions to alleviate any discomfort which might occur during the years of famine. Therefore, Yosef was required to empathize with the plight of his brethren. Levi and the rest of his brothers had not taken these precautions, for they were unaware of the fact that there would be a famine.⁶ Consequently, they were suffering along with everyone else.⁷ Levi, who was already subject to the suffering, was not obligated to abstain, for empathy is not required of those who already feel the distress of the situation. To abstain in these circumstances would be an extra measure of piety. However, Levi was not permitted to conduct himself as such, for he had not yet fulfilled his obligation of procreation.

1.Taanis 11a 2.Sotah 12a 3.Taanis ibid 4.41:50 5.Mizrachi 41:50 6.41:49 7.See Rashi 41:1 According to his second explanation, Yaakov did not have food the first time he sent his sons to Egypt, and even according to the first explanation he only had food at that time.

Setting The Standard

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states that Bnei Yisroel were coronated with three crowns: the Keser Torah - Crown of Torah, Keser Kehuna - Crown of Priesthood, and Keser Malchus - Crown of Sovereignty. However, "Vekeser Shem Tov oleh al gabeiheim" - "the Crown of a Good Name is superior to all of them".¹ Why does the Mishna record that there are three crowns, and then proceeds to list four? The Talmud teaches that the vessels in the Beis Hamikdash which possess a "zer" - "crown", literally a rim, represent the three crowns referred to by the Mishna. The Aron - Ark, which generates the energies of Torah also bears the Crown of Torah. The Mizbayach - Altar, which generates the energies of Priesthood bears the Crown of Priesthood, and the Shulchan - Table, which generates the energies of sovereignty bears the Crown of Sovereignty. The Midrash adds that the Crown of a Good Name is found upon the Menorah - Candelabra.² The Maharal explains that although the Menorah has no rim, its crown is represented by the flames of the lamps which outline the Menorah. The first three vessels all have a finite rim, while a flame is not limited or restricted. Therefore, the crown of the Menorah reflects the notion that a good name is superior to the other aforementioned qualities.³ Since the Menorah is the symbol of Chanukah, understanding the definition of a good name will shed light upon our understanding of the true meaning of the miracle of Chanukah.

The first three attributes are innate qualities developed by a person himself, while a good name is dependent upon how others perceive him. Does not striving to find appreciation in the eyes of others seem to be an unhealthy goal for the Mishna to set?

The Talmud states that Hillel's commitment to Torah study under the most severe conditions of impecuniness obligates all those who are poverty-stricken to learn Torah. Rabbi Elazar ben Charsum, the wealthiest man of his time obligates all those who are wealthy and therefore preoccupied with

their businesses to study. Yosef Hatzaddik, who showed great restraint in rebuffing the advances of Potiphar's wife, Zulaicha, obligates all those who are enticed by their impulses to show restraint.⁴ What message is the Talmud attempting to convey? Even without the actions of these three great personalities, a person is obligated to learn Torah regardless of his financial status, and is not allowed to succumb to his inclinations.

Although everyone is aware of their obligations, they are also aware that under circumstances beyond their control they cannot be held accountable for their actions. The concept of "o'ness" - being placed in a situation beyond our control, excuses our behavior. Therefore, if a person has responsibilities which prevent him from learning, or he is trapped in a situation from which he cannot extricate himself, he feels vindicated for his actions. However, most of us cannot gage our abilities and potential based upon our own merits; rather, we gage our abilities vis-a-vis the accomplishments of others. Based upon the standards created by others, we determine whether the situation with which we are confronted is beyond our control. If we see others succumb in a similar situation to our own, we feel that it is beyond our ability to show constraint.

What Hillel, Rabbi Elazar ben Charsum and Yosef Hatzaddik accomplished was to set new standards by which we must gage ourselves. These three great men were able to view themselves independent of the standards set by those around them. Therefore, they succeeded in transcending those standards and setting new limits for which we should strive. It now becomes humanly possible to reach these limits. The ability to define a particular attribute and create a living reality by which others can gage themselves is what our Rabbis entitle a "Shem Tov". Shem Tov is not a fourth crown, rather the title conferred upon a person who sets new standards of excellence for the other three crowns.

The Chashmonaim fought to establish new standards within Bnei Yisroel. New standards of purity and mesirus nefesh - the commitment to Jewish values regardless of the cost were established by their actions. This is the Shem Tov which is created on Chanukah. The concept of Shem is found in every symbol connected to the holiday: Shemen - oil, shemonah - eight, Chashmonaim - Maccabees, and the Menorah which carries the Crown of Shem Tov.

1.4:13 2.Yuma 72b, see the commentary of the Vilna Gaon to Avos who cites the Midrash in Parshas Nasso 3. See Derech Chaim 4:13 4.Yuma 35b