SEQUENCE IS CRITICAL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Kindness and Truth -- The Sequence Is Critical

The Torah tells us that Pharaoh's daughter went out to bathe in the Nile and saw a little basket floating among the reeds. She retrieved the basket and opened it, and saw the crying baby inside. She had pity on him and realized that it was one of the Hebrews' babies. [Shemos 2:5-6]

The pasuk [verse] describing this incident seems somewhat inverted. The sequence should be, "she opened the basket and saw the baby and recognized that it was a Jewish child; she heard that it was crying and had pity on it". In that way, seeing the baby would have been connected to recognizing that it was a Jewish child. The pasuk reads, however, that after seeing the baby, Pharaoh's daughter first hears the crying and has pity. Then she recognizes that the child is a Jewish child. The identity of the baby came only after the fact that Pharaoh's daughter had compassion for the child -- not before.

Rav Nissan Alpert shared an insight into this pasuk when he delivered a hesped [eulogy] at the funeral of his teacher, Rav Moshe Feinstein. Rav Alpert illustrated this pasuk by explaining one of Rav Feinstein's philosophies of life.

Rav Alpert recalled that people had a complaint about Rav Moshe Feinstein. Rav Moshe wrote more approbations on Torah books than we would want to count. Rav Moshe was known as a "big maskim" since he wrote so many letters of approval (haskamas) for other people on their Torah literary output. He did this to an extent that people felt that a letter of approval from Rav Moshe Feinstein was "cheap". It was as if anyone who could sign his name could get a 'haskama' from Rav Moshe.

The same was true regarding letters of recommendation or letters attesting to need, etc. Often, these letters did not have the impact that one would have expected, because there were so many such letters. Rav Alpert related that people came to Rav Moshe with the complaint that he was

cheapening his name and his letters by issuing them so freely.

Rav Alpert explained that there are two mutually exclusive concepts -- Chessed [Kindness] and Emes [Truth]. Chessed is performed without thinking and considering -- it is just a favor, a good deed. Truth is an absolute quality -- right or wrong, true or false.

It is no coincidence that the word Chessed always precedes the word Emes wherever the two terms are used together in the Torah. (For example: Bereishis 24:49; Shemos 34:6; Yehoshua 2:14) If Emes would precede Chessed, we would never reach Chessed. If our perspective on life would always be 'Truth', then no one would ever be worthy of receiving any Kindness. No school would receive support, no institution would receive a donation, no poor person would receive a hand out, nobody would receive an approbation. No one stands up to the test of Truth. The only approach in life must be "And do with me Kindness and Truth" [Bereishis 47:29].

Rav Moshe's philosophy in life was that a person's natural reaction must be Chessed first. It may subsequently be tempered with Emes, but the initial response must be Chessed.

When Pharaoh's daughter picked up the basket, the first thing she saw was a baby crying that needed help. If she would have started asking "Who? What? Where does he come from? Does he deserve help?" the kindness would never have started. That is what we learn from this pasuk.

The Medrash says that Moshe was called by ten different names, but G-d would only address him by the name given to him by Basya, daughter of Pharaoh -- in order to emphasize the reward deserved by those who do acts of kindness.

What was Basya's approach, which was so deserving of reward? "You see the baby crying? -- Have mercy. Ask questions later. Later you can stop to think 'Who is he?' A Hebrew."

That was Basya's spirit and that was the spirit she imbued into Moshe Rabbeinu. For that is the spirit a Jewish leader must have -- the spirit of 'Chessed' and then 'Emes'. If we allow Emes to come first, we will never reach Chessed.

The Key To Revelation: Why Doesn't It Get Consumed By The Fire?

Rav Alpert related another insight involving the famous story of Moshe Rabbeinu and the burning bush. "Let me go look and see this wondrous sight - - why isn't the bush consumed?" [3:3] Immediately thereafter, a most historic event took place: G-d first appeared to Moshe.

Herein lies a message -- a message about achieving Belief in G-d (Emunah).

How does one convince himself that there is a Master of the Universe?

This is an age-old question that has bothered man since the beginning of time -- how does one know there is a G-d? According to the Jewish religion, every person is obligated to believe that there is a G-d. This applies to all people, regardless of whether they have tremendous IQs or not,

regardless of whether they are great philosophers or not and regardless of whether they are of great intellectual standing or not. How does one arrive at such an awareness?

This verse tells us how Moshe Rabbeinu became convinced that there is a G-d. Moshe came to this conclusion based on a question that he had. It was not a complicated question, nor was it a deep question. It was a simple question that anyone could have asked: Why doesn't the bush burn up? Immediately after Moshe asked this question, G-d appeared to him.

What is the lesson in this?

The biggest proof that G-d exists is that we are still around. There is a question -- "Why doesn't the bush burn?" How can one bush experience so many fires and still not be consumed? The answer to that question is "And G-d spoke..." -- i.e. -- because there is a G-d.

The story is told that Frederick the Great asked the wise men of his court for a succinct proof for the existence of G-d. The answer he was given was just two words -- "the Jews".

Since there exists a G-d and he has a Chosen People whom He protects, we can understand how it is that the 'bush' -- the Jewish Nation -- is not consumed.

Today (December 26, 1991) was a historic day. Something occurred today that I never thought would happen. Today, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics officially went out of business. I don't know what it was like when the Roman Empire ceased to exist. I don't know if there was a specific date on the calendar that people could point to and say, "today Rome went out of business". But we saw the USSR go out of business.

If anyone had told us this 3 years ago, we would not have believed it. If they had told us even a year ago, we would not have believed it. I grew up in an era of Sputnik and of Nikita Krushchev yelling "We will bury you". There was a real bona fide uncertainty and fear that maybe he was right. The USSR was not only an Evil Empire; it was a Mighty Empire as well. I grew up in a time when we had to catch up with the Russians. We had to increase our study of science and math because they were beating us.

To think, after 74 years it literally came apart -- the wheels just came off! I keep on saying to myself that if Rav Ruderman, zt"l, would have been alive during this period, it would have been impossible to tear him away from the radio. He hated the Communists with a passion. The worst thing he could call a person was a Bolshevik. He would literally be dancing today. This mighty Empire is now out of business.

So how is it that the 'little bush' was not consumed? We are a tiny little nation that has been oppressed for thousands of years. We never put up a Sputnik and we never put a man in space. Why doesn't the bush get consumed? There is only one answer to that -- because there is a G-d in Heaven. It requires no great intellect to realize this.

Sources and Personalities

Rav Moshe Feinstein -- (1895-1986) Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem, NY. One of contemporary Jewry's foremost halachic decisors.

Rav Nissan Alpert -- Rav of the Agudah of Long Island in Far Rockaway and Maggid Shiur at Yeshivas Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan. Died shortly after Rav Moshe in 1986.

Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman -- (1901-1987) Rosh Yeshiva and founder (1933) of Ner Israel Rabbinical College; Baltimore.

Chofetz Chaim -- (1838-1933) Rav Yisrael Meir HaKohen of Radin. Author of basic works in Jewish Law and Jewish values (halacha, hashkafa, and mussar).

Rabbi Berel Wein -- Noted author and lecturer. Formerly Congregational Rabbi, head of OU Kashrus and Rosh Yeshiva in Monsey, NY. Currently resides in Jerusalem.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Shemos are provided below:

- Tape # 038 - Husbands at Childbirth
- Tape # 081 - Cholov Yisroel: Necessary or Not in America?
- Tape # 129 - Giving English Names
- Tape # 176 - Shalosh Seudos in Shuls: Is There a Problem?
- Tape # 222 - Disposal of Shaimos
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