

MODERN MEDICINE CORROBORATES MEDIEVAL DOCTORS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Modern Medicine Corroborates Medieval Doctors

The pasuk says, "And the children of Israel were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong - very, very much so, and the land became filled with them" [Shemos 1:7]. Chazal state that the Jewish women in Egypt miraculously gave birth to six children at a time (sextuplets). The Ibn Ezra writes that he himself witnessed a case in which a woman had four children at once (quadruplets). He further states that the doctors advised him that women can physically have up to 7 children from a single pregnancy.

Until fairly recently, we would have been tempted to write off such a statement with sentiments such as "what did the doctors know in the time of the Ibn Ezra?" However, modern medicine, has proved that the doctors in the time of Ibn Ezra were right. It is possible to have up to seven children in one pregnancy - witness: the McCaughey septuplets (born on November 19, 1997 in Des Moines, Iowa).

The Bottom Line Is Exactly As Spelled Out By King Solomon

Although Pharaoh decreed that all male children were to be drowned in the Nile immediately after their birth, the two Hebrew midwives -- "Shifra" and "Puah" - did not follow through with the evil decree. They allowed the boys to live. Twice, the Torah says that the midwives feared Hashem. First the pasuk says: "The midwives feared the G-d and they did not comply" [Shemos 1:17]. Shortly later the Torah again writes: "And it was because the midwives feared G-d that He made them houses" [Shemos 1:21]

I saw a similar thought from both Rav Gifter and Rav Elya Meir Bloch on this narration. If we would have been asked to identify the human character trait that was most responsible for prompting the midwives to refuse to follow Pharaoh's orders, we would most likely have attributed it to the trait of compassion. We would say that women have a natural compassion for little infants. This reflects their midas haChessed (kind-heartedness), and that is what motivated them to save the lives of

these babies.

Yet the Torah does not attribute their actions to kindness or good-heartedness. Their action is attributed purely to their Yiraas Shamayim [Fear of Heaven]. In 'crunch time', when a person's life is on the line, the main motivating force in a person's life is his Yiraas Shamayim. Ultimately, it is the realization that what a person is doing is wrong -- in this case, murder -- that inhibits a person from taking actions that he would otherwise be pressured into taking. In the final analysis, it is only the fact that we are bound by a Higher Moral Authority not to kill anybody stopping us from murder when we might otherwise be tempted to do just that.

Every other motivating factor one can rationalize and weasel out of. The only thing that allowed the midwives to stand up and say "no" was the fact that they feared a Greater Authority than Pharaoh. Otherwise it would have been very easy to rationalize. They could have constructed very logical arguments for themselves: Let us at least comply with his decree and kill the unhealthy children and the premature babies. This way perhaps we can save some of the healthier babies. If we save everyone Pharaoh will fire us and replace us with Egyptian midwives who would not even save the healthy children! They could have made the argument that they were not engaged in murder. On the contrary, they might have argued -- "we are SAVING lives by killing only some of the babies!"

Had their motivation been kindness or compassion or even logic, they could have devised all kinds of justifications. In the final analysis, the only thing that stopped them from committing murder was the fact that G-d said it was forbidden. No "ifs", "ands", or "buts".

In a very poignant comment Rav Elya Meir Bloch says: We saw this with our own eyes. What do we say about the great doctors who were trained by the best of what western civilization had to offer? They performed sadistic and cruel experiments on Jewish men, women, and children - knowing that these human "guinea pigs" would die as a result of these experiments. They argued: "medical knowledge will be gained" from these cruel experiments. What happened to all their training? The first rule of medicine is "do no harm!" How does a doctor do this? We are not talking about "witch doctors" or doctors from barbaric countries. We are speaking of doctors from the most cultured country in Europe.

The argument was "this is for the good of humanity." "We are not killing lives -- we are saving lives! These Jews were going to be put to death anyway by Hitler. I am just following orders!" They were not stopped by their conscience. They were not stopped by the Hippocratic Oath. Nothing stopped them from murder -- not compassion, not professional credibility, nothing. One thing was lacking: Fear of G-d.

Therefore, the Torah testifies concerning our holy matriarchs (Yocheved and Miriam who our Sages identify as Shifra and Puah): The midwives feared the L-rd. All their moral fortitude came to them as a result of their Yiras HaElokim.

This dovetails with the remark of Shlomo Hamelech at the end of Koheles: "The sum of the matter

when all has been considered: Fear G-d and keep His commandments, for that is man's whole duty."
[Koheles 12:13]

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:

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