

THE TRUE REWARD FOR THE MIDWIVES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemos

The True Reward For The Midwives

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #576 - Davening With Shoes. Good Shabbos!

In the first chapter of Shemos, we learn about Pharaoh commanding the Jewish midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill all newborn Hebrew boys -- and that they disobeyed the King's orders. Chazal [Our Sages] teach that not only did they disobey the orders and not kill the babies but "they caused the boys to live." Even if they found a sickly child, they provided him with water and sustenance and helped nurse him back to health.

Pharaoh chastised the midwives. They offered excuses for their disobedience. Then the Torah says: "G-d benefited the midwives -- and the people increased and became very strong -- and it was because the midwives feared G-d that He made them houses." [Shemos 1:20-21] (Our Sages say this means they were the matriarchs of houses of monarchy and priesthood.)

There is an obvious difficulty in the narration of G-d's reward to the midwives. The phrase "and the people increased and became very strong" seems totally out of place in these verses [pas ukim]. It appears to interrupt the description of the reward with which "G-d benefited the midwives."

Rav Mordechai Kamenetsky cites an interesting observation in the name of Rav Elya Svei that explains the sequence of the verses. Reb Elya bases his observation on a personal anecdote. A relative of Reb Elya's had a premature child. The baby was in the hospital for a couple of months and came home after several weeks of intensive care in the hospital. The parents were very grateful to the doctors and especially to the nurses in the neo-natal unit. The father of the baby called Reb Elya and asked him how he could show his appreciation to the staff in the hospital.

Reb Elya advised the following: Every year on the child's birthday, he should take the child back to the neo-natal unit and show the nurses and the doctors how much he has grown. "See the actions of

your hands. Look who you allowed to live and to grow up."

The greatest reward for the people working in that unit is seeing that their efforts paid off, that their labors resulted in a very significant accomplishment.

Reb Elya said that the same interpretation should be read in these pasukim: "G-d rewarded the midwives." What did He do? "The people became many and very mighty." The greatest reward for the midwives was that Klal Yisrael grew. Pharaoh wanted to kill off all the Jews and destroy the possibility of a future Jewish nation. The "houses" that G-d made for Shifra and Puah were only the peripheral reward. Their main reward was seeing the fruits of their labor: Pharaoh's decree failed. Their work to save the Jewish people succeeded. The people became many and very mighty!

One Mitzvah Leads To Another

In the second chapter of Shemos, we read the sequence of events whereby Moshe must flee Egypt. One day, Moshe saw an Egyptian beating a Jew, and he killed the Egyptian. The next day, he became aware that his action was discovered and he had to flee for his life. [Shemos 2:12-15]

Moshe fled to Midian. He met the seven daughters of the priest of Midian by the well when they were trying to water their father's sheep. Moshe saw the local shepherds come and drive away the seven daughters. Moshe saved them and watered their sheep. They returned to their father who was surprised to see them home so early that day. They explained, "An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds..." [Shemos 2:16-19].

The simple reading of this comment of Yisro's daughters is that they perceived Moshe to be an Egyptian, and this is how they described him to their father.

There is a Medrash on this pasuk that gives another interpretation. We have cited this Medrash on previous occasions. This year, however, we will give a new insight into this Medrash based on the teaching of Rav Meir Bergman.

The Medrash incredulously asks, "Would Moshe identify himself as an Egyptian?" Rather, Moshe explained to the daughters of Yisro that they were saved by an Egyptian man -- namely the Egyptian who was beating up on the Jew who Moshe killed. Had that Egyptian not started the chain reaction of events that caused Moshe to flee Egypt and arrive in Midian, they would have never been rescued by Moshe from the shepherds.

The Medrash supplies a parallel example: A person was bitten by an animal, and ran to the river to wash out the poison from his wound. While at the river, he saw a child drowning. He jumped into the water and rescued the child. When the child thanked him, he responded, "Don't thank me, thank the animal that bit me. It was his bite that sent me to the river in the first place, so that I might be in a position to rescue you."

Rav Bergman rejects a "simple interpretation" of the Medrash. Rav Bergman finds it difficult to say

that Moshe was telling Yisro's daughters that they owe thanks to the Egyptian who was beating up on the Jew. Rav Bergman quotes an alternate interpretation of the Medrash, in the name of his father-in-law (Rav Eliezer Shach), in the name of the Brisker Rav (Rav Velvel Soloveitchik).

When the Yeshiva in Lublin was to be built, a certain wealthy Jew, who had been very generous to the Yeshiva, was honored with placing the cornerstone at the dedication of the building. In its heyday, the Lubliner Yeshiva was one of the most elite and prestigious Torah institutions in the world. Thousands of people, representing the leadership of Polish Jewry and beyond, came to the historic event of the cornerstone laying for this Yeshiva's main building.

The Boyaner Rebbe approached the wealthy Jew who was honored with placing the cornerstone and told him: "I am not jealous of the merit you have for laying the cornerstone. But I am jealous of the other action you must have done sometime in your life that brought you the merit of being able to lay the cornerstone." The first "merit," the Rebbe told him, was greater than the "merit" of laying the cornerstone. The "merit" of laying the cornerstone comes with publicity, an ego trip, and all kinds of trappings that take away from the reward of doing a simple mitzvah. But the original mitzvah that was done privately (b'tznius) without publicity and without crowds -- the mitzvah which triggered this second mitzvah (via the principle of mitzvah goreres mitzvah) is indeed something to be jealous of.

Rav Bergman links the message of the Boyaner Rebbe to the Jew in Lublin with the message Moshe Rabbeinu gave the daughters of Yisro. Moshe said, in effect, "What allowed me to have the merit to be able to save you today? It was the merit I achieved by rescuing my Jewish brother from the hand of the Egyptian who was beating him. Today's salvation was in front of many people. It made me look heroic. On what basis did I deserve to gain such honor? It was the fact that when (I thought) no one was looking, I risked my life to save a Jew being beaten up by an Egyptian. My first mitzvah in tzniyus (privacy) provided the opportunity for me to do this second mitzvah b'farhesya [with great fanfare]." This is the interpretation of the words "An Egyptian man saved us", according to the Medrash, according to Rav Bergman.

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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- Tape # 176 - Shalosh Seudos in Shuls: Is There a Problem?
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Transcribed by [David Twersky](#) Seattle, WA;
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#), Baltimore, MD

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