

BEING MADE MATRIARCHS WAS THE REWARD FOR ACTING AS MOTHERS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemos

Being Made Matriarchs Was The Reward For Acting As Mothers

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #620 - Kosher Cheese: What Is It? Good Shabbos!

In this week's parsha, at the beginning of Sefer Shemos, Pharaoh issues his cruel order to the Hebrew midwives that they must kill all male Hebrew children. The Torah tells us that the names of the midwives were Shifrah and Puah. Rashi identifies Shifrah as Yocheved and Puah as Miriam, the mother and sister respectively of Moshe Rabbeinu. The names Shifrah and Puah were given because of their treatment of the newborn children. Shifrah comes from the root shin-pey-reish, meaning to improve the child (through cuddling and massaging in a way to correct any deformity that occurred as a result of the birthing process). Puah refers to the way Miriam spoke to the infants, calming them down and stopping their crying.

In an act of tremendous courage, the midwives did not listen to Pharaoh's edict. At his whim, he could have put them both to death for disobedience. When confronted, they gave the excuse that Jewish women did not really need midwives and by the time the midwives arrived at the women's homes, the babies were already born.

The Torah states: "And it was because the midwives feared G-d that He made them houses." [Shemos 1:21]. Rashi interprets this as referring to houses of Kehuna, Leviya, and Malchus [Priests, Levites and monarchy].

The question that must be asked is why the Torah seems to hide the identities of these women, by calling them Shifrah and Puah. We are talking about the daughter and granddaughter of Levi. This is the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of Yaakov Avinu. Why be so oblique? Why not call them by their real names - Yocheved and Miriam?

I saw an interesting observation in the sefer Tiferes Torah by Rav Shimshon Pinkus, zt"l. Rav Pinkus invites us to picture the following scene: (May we never personally have to witness it!) We have before us a child who is seriously sick. We rush him to the hospital at night. The doctors and nurses take one look at him and say the baby is in extreme danger. They quickly remove his clothes and start an IV. They immediately rush the child to treatment and feverishly try to save his life.

In such a situation, do the doctors and nurses bother to start cooing at the baby and making smiling faces at him so he will be happy? They do not waste a minute with niceties and small talk. Emergency room personnel have no time to worry about soothing the child and cooing at him. A life is at stake. There is no time for pleasantries!

What does the mother do through all of this? When the mother sees those doctors working on the baby in the emergency room, she sits there with the child and gently soothes the baby assuring him everything will be alright, that the poking and prodding will soon be over. She coos at the baby, she pets the baby, she whispers to the baby, she sings to the baby. Why? Because that is what a mother does.

The doctors are saving the baby's life. They are doing what they must do. But they are not mamas. Mamas are mothers. Mothers realize that babies need to be soothed and comforted.

Yocheved and Miriam were righteous women who risked their lives. But what really impressed the Almighty was the fact that while risking their lives, they simultaneously demonstrated they were still mamas. They treated each child as if it were their own baby. When a baby needed to be cuddled and soothed, Miriam -- sister of Moshe and daughter of Amram - sang sweet little lullabies to the baby. And Yocheved - the daughter of Levi and wife of Amram - despite everything that was going on, still worried that the shape of the baby's head should be just right.

That is why the just reward for their heroism is that G-d made them "houses". He made them matriarchs. This was midah k'neged midah [measure for measure] because above everything else, they were mothers. The reward for being a mother is to have grandchildren and great grandchildren and great, great grandchildren. When motherhood could have perhaps been overlooked, they nevertheless remained mothers and so G-d saw to it that they would eternally be remembered as matriarchs of the nation.

The wife of Rav Shlomo Heiman, zt"l, was involved in charity and kindness all her life. She specialized in marrying off orphans. She was once going to a wedding of one of these orphan girls for whom she had arranged the entire wedding. Her husband asked her if she was taking flowers for the bride to the wedding. She was surprised at the question, because she felt it was not right to buy flowers with charity money that she raised for hachnasas kallah. However, her husband insisted that she buy flowers because this orphan was also like a daughter. He reminded his wife that she was not only a charity collector, but she was also a mother for this bride. Just like a mother would not contemplate her own daughter walking down the aisle to her Chuppah without carrying a bouquet of flowers, so

too here. "You are not just a Gabbai Tzedakah, you are a mamma for this girl. A mama worries about the flowers."

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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