

PARTICIPATING WITH SOMEONE ELSE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemos

Participating With Someone Else's Troubles

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #654 - The Woman Mohel; Laser Milah. Good Shabbos!

Pharaoh decreed that every male child must be thrown into the Nile River. Moshe's parents were able to hide their infant son for only 3 months. After that, they made a small basket, lined it with a water-resistant material, placed it in the river and left the baby to fate.

The pasuk [verse] writes "His sister stood at a distance, to see what will be with him." [Shemos 2:4] Miriam had no expectation of what might happen. Eventually, Pharaoh's own daughter came to bathe and took the baby home to raise him. However, Miriam went there without the expectation that she would be able to save the child, but simply to become aware of his fate.

Rav Dovid Povarsky, the Rosh Yeshiva in Ponevezh, makes a very poignant observation. There is a similar incident in Tanach where a concerned family member does not know what the fate of a young child will be, where the family member has a totally different reaction. When Hagar was chased out of the house of Avraham, she went into the dessert, her water supply was exhausted, her child got sick, and she was almost certain that he would die. She threw the child from herself and went to sit a distance away saying "Let me not see the death of the child." [Bereishis 21:16]

Hagar's reaction was that she did not want to be around to see what would happen to Yishmael. Rav Povarsky notes the difference "between a Jewish sister and an Ishmaelite mother." Miriam had no expectation of saving her brother but there is a concept amongst the Jewish people of "participating in the hardship of one's fellow man," i.e. - to become part of another person's suffering. Our Sages refer to this as "bearing the burden with one's friend" (noseh b'ol im chaveiro). Miriam went because if her brother was going to suffer or her brother was going to drown, she wanted to be there! She would want to see it because he was her brother and she would want to experience the pain that he was going to endure.

Hagar, on the other hand, did exactly the opposite. "I do not want to see the death of the child." It is

too painful! In a certain sense, there is selfishness here. A Jewish sister wants to be part of her brother's pain but an Ishmaelite mother cannot take it. She says "Let me not see the death of the lad."

According to the Medrash, it was not just Moshe's sister who went to observe her brother's fate. In describing the fact that Pharaoh's daughter heard a child cry out from the basket, the Torah says "And behold a lad (naar) was crying." [Shemos 2:6] The simple reading of course is that the lad referred to in the pasuk is the baby Moshe. The Medrash, however, teaches that the lad crying refers to Aharon, Moshe's older brother.

In other words, it was not only Miriam who went to the banks of the river to see what would be. Aharon, his brother, also went. The Baal HaTurim buttresses this Medrash by citing the following gematria [arithmetic equation]: "na'ar bocheh = zeh Aharon haKohen" [a lad crying = this is Aaron the Priest]. There is a connection between every Jew which engenders this attitude of "bearing the burden together with his friend." This connection does not allow me to merely "look away" when tragedy strikes. I have to see it. I have to feel it. I have to be part of it.

Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm teaches a similar idea. He notes that this parsha introduces us to Moshe Rabbeinu. From now until the end of the Torah, we will be learning and studying about the life of Moshe Rabbeinu. This is the parsha (at the famous incident of the burning bush) where G-d taps Moshe on the shoulder, so to speak, and asks him to lead the Jewish people. It is only natural, Rav Simcha Zissel says, that the Torah should provide some background information about the life of this individual to give us an idea of why specifically he was charged with this leadership role. What did he ever do in his life that earned him this job?

We only have 4 brief incidents in four different pasukim giving us slight clues to his qualifications and capabilities. The first pasuk tells us he grew up and he went out to his brethren to see their suffering. [Shemos 2:11] Although he lived in the lap of luxury in the palace of Pharaoh, he refused to sit back in comfort but went out to empathize with the suffering of his brethren.

The next incident was that he saw an Egyptian man hitting a Jewish man [2:12]. In other words, his concern was not limited to the masses (tzibur), he was concerned about the problem of each individual Jew (yachid).

The third incident [2:13] teaches us that Moshe was not just concerned about a situation of an Egyptian beating up a Jew. Even when it was one Jew beating up another Jew, Moshe was concerned and got involved to come to the aid of the victim.

Finally, we are taught that Moshe's compassion is not just for his fellow Jews. He goes to Midyan and steps in to protect Yisro's daughters who are being taken advantage of [2:17]. He stands up for the oppressed young girls who were not able to fend for themselves.

These are four incidents out of the first 80 years of Moshe Rabbeinu's life that the Torah tells us

about, before relating that G-d appointed him to be the leader and deliverer of the Jewish people. In these four incidents, Moshe exhibited the quality which every Jew should have, but most importantly it is a quality that is absolutely essential for the leader of the Jewish people - the quality of participating in the burden of his fellow man, feeling his pain, and empathizing with his suffering.

The following story was brought to my attention by Rabbi Zev Katz of Silver Spring, Maryland. It is a fascinating little story which eloquently illustrates this same message of bearing the burden together with one's fellow man:

"A Blanket of Trust" by Howard Schultz (Chief Global Strategist of Starbucks)

When I was in Israel, I went to Mea Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox area within Jerusalem. Along with a group of businessmen, I had the opportunity to have an audience with Rabbi [Nosson Tzvi] Finkel, the head of a yeshiva there [Mir Yeshiva]. I had never heard of him and did not know anything about him. We went into his study and waited ten to 15 minutes for him. Finally, the doors opened.

What we did not know was that Rabbi Finkel was severely afflicted with Parkinson's disease. He sat down at the head of the table, and, naturally, our inclination was to look away. We did not want to embarrass him.

We were all looking away, and we heard this big bang on the table: "Gentlemen, look at me, and look at me right now." Now his speech affliction was worse than his physical shaking. It was really hard to listen to him and watch him. He said, "I have only a few minutes for you because I know you are all busy American businessmen." You know, just a little dig there.

Then he asked, "Who can tell me what the lesson of the Holocaust is?" He called on one guy, who did not know what to do - it was like being called on in the fifth grade without the answer. And the guy says something benign like, "We will never, ever forget." And the rabbi completely dismisses him. I felt terrible for the guy until I realized the rabbi was getting ready to call on someone else. All of us were sort of under the table, looking away - you know, please, not me. He did not call me. I was sweating. He called on another guy, who had such a fantastic answer: "We will never, ever again be a victim or bystander."

The rabbi said, "You guys just do not get it. Okay, gentlemen, let me tell you the essence of the human spirit.

"As you know, during the Holocaust, the people were transported in the worst possible, inhumane way by railcar. They thought they were going to a work camp. We all know they were going to a death camp.

"After hours and hours in this inhumane corral with no light, no bathroom, cold, they arrived at the camps. The doors were swung wide open, and they were blinded by the light. Men were separated from women, mothers from daughters, fathers from sons. They went off to the bunkers to sleep.

"As they went into the area to sleep, only one person was given a blanket for every six. The person who received the blanket, when he went to bed, had to decide, 'Am I going to push the blanket to the five other people who did not get one, or am I going to pull it toward myself to stay warm?'"

And Rabbi Finkel says, "It was during this defining moment that we learned the power of the human spirit, because we pushed the blanket to five others."

And with that, he stood up and said, "Take your blanket. Take it back to America and push it to five other people."

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
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- Tape # 129 - Giving English Names
- Tape # 176 - Shalosh Seudos in Shuls: Is There a Problem?
- Tape # 222 - Disposal of Shaimos
- Tape # 266 - The Laws and Customs of Chupah
- Tape # 312 - The Do's and Don'ts of Naming Babies
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