

THE BEST OF PERSONALITIES AND THE WORST OF PERSONALITIES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemos

The Best of Personalities and the Worst of Personalities

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #752 - Saving Your Life: How Far Must I Go? Good Shabbos!

Rashi cites two opinions on the pasuk "And a new King arose who did not know Yosef" [Shemos 1:8]: The first opinion is that it actually was a new administration that arose. The other opinion is that it was the same Pharaoh who knew Yosef but who had a change of policy and imposed the terrible decree of slavery upon the Jewish people.

Rav Moshe Feinstein asked, "Why should we care about this? What difference did it make to Chazal whether it was a new king or the same king with a new policy?" Rav Moshe points out that there is something to learn from this. According to the opinion that it was a new king -- we can readily understand that a new king will have new policies. We see this all the time in Washington D.C. -- when there is a change of government, there is a change in policy. However the opinion that it is the same king with new policies is teaching us a lesson:

The Torah is showing us the depths to which a human being can sink. Here we have a king who was indebted to his advisor (Yosef) like no other person has ever been indebted. Pharaoh had an advisor that literally saved the entire country. Not only did he save the country, but made it prosperous as well. This very king can turn on the immediate descendants of this advisor and tell them "Sorry, I changed my mind. We have a new policy."

It is important for us to know that this happens. We should not think to ourselves "No one could be so low to do such a thing. No one could be such a snake, such a traitor." The Torah wants to teach us just how ungrateful and unreliable human beings can be. Just look at Pharaoh.

Rabbeinu Bechaye quotes a Medrash on this pasuk: "Whoever denies the favors done for him by his friend will in the end deny the favors done for him by the Almighty." The Medrash derives this

principle from Pharaoh, about whom it first says, "who did not know Yosef" and about whom it later says, "Who is G-d?" [Shemos 5:2]

This is a lesson for all of us -- this can happen to a human being. But it gets even worse. There is an example in this week's parsha that is even more egregious than Pharaoh's lack of gratitude.

Moshe went out and saw an Egyptian striking a Jew. Moshe killed the Egyptian who was striking the Jew. The next day, Moshe encountered two Jews fighting and asked the aggressor why he is beating his friend. The aggressor turned to Moshe and asked him "Are you going to kill me like you killed that other guy?" Moshe responded, "I see the matter is known!"

The Medrash says that the Egyptians had a system whereby the Egyptian taskmasters would lord over the Jewish policemen to force them to get the other Jews to do work. The Medrash says that every single morning, at the crack of dawn, the Egyptian taskmasters woke up the Jewish policemen to get the other slaves to start working. This particular Egyptian taskmaster saw that the wife of the policeman he was waking up was a beautiful woman. After he sent the Jewish policeman out of the house, he came back and had relations with the man's wife. It was still before dawn and the woman, in the dark, thought she was having relations with her husband.

When the Jewish policeman came back to his house he noticed the Egyptian leaving. When the Jewish policeman asked his wife if the Egyptian had done anything to her, she admitted that she had relations with him thinking that he was her husband. When the Egyptian realized that the Jew found out what he had done, he started beating him and wanted to kill him.

This is the context of the story in the Torah of the Egyptian beating the Hebrew. Moshe, upon seeing this, knew through Ruach HaKodesh [Divine intuition] what the Egyptian had done to this man's wife and what he was trying to do now to destroy the evidence of his crime. Moshe realized that for the crime of adultery as well as for attempted murder, the Egyptian was deserving of death and therefore Moshe took the law into his own hands in killing him.

The Jewish person who Moshe rescued in this story was named Dassin. The next day, when Moshe went out, he saw this very same Dassin beating up another Jew. Moshe chastised Dassin and said, "You wicked one, why are you hitting your fellow man?" Dassin turned around and taunted Moshe, "Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?" Dassin then went to the authorities and reported that Moshe Rabbeinu killed an Egyptian taskmaster, getting Moshe in trouble to the extent that he had to run for his life and escape Egypt.

Can we imagine a more ungrateful person than Dassin? Moshe saves his life and he turned around and causes Moshe to have to flee the country!

Pharaoh and Dassin were the "worst of human personalities" -- totally ungrateful to those whom they should have owed a tremendous debt of gratitude.

In contrast, now I will cite an example of the "best of human personalities": Yisro. What is the story

with Yisro? Pharaoh called in his most trusted advisors. He called in Bilaam, Iyov, and Yisro among his advisory panel. He asked them to help him solve his 'Jewish Problem': "Come let us take counsel regarding them lest they become more numerous and it may be that if a war will occur, they too may join our enemies, and wage war..." [Shemos 1:10] The advisory panel came up with the "brilliant" idea of throwing all male newborns into the Nile River. Bilaam supported the idea enthusiastically. Iyov kept quiet. Yisro resigned from his advisory capacity. In those days, one could not just resign in protest of the government's policies. That was grounds for having oneself executed. But Yisro felt that after all that Yosef did for Egypt, to now turn on his family like this would be such colossal ingratitude that there was no way he could be a party to it.

What motivated Yisro? He was a "makir tova". He recognized a favor when it was done and he realized the moral responsibility that comes with being the beneficiary of a favor. He understood that one of the most basic ethical traits a person must practice is to be appreciative for what one has received. As a result of this courageous stand on Yisro's part, he merited to marry off his daughter, Tziporah, to Moshe Rabbeinu.

How did Yisro merit getting such a wonderful son-in-law? Moshe Rabbeinu was better than "the best boy in Lakewood". He was better than the best guy in Brisk, the best guy in Mir, the best guy in Ponnevez. He was the best guy in the world! How did Yisro get him? The answer is revealed in a pasuk in the Torah.

Moshe Rabbeinu came to Midyan. Yisro's daughters were being picked on by the Midyanites. Moshe came to their rescue and Yisro's daughters came home and told their father what happened. Yisro responded with surprise that his daughters let the stranger go after this rescue without inviting him home and offering him a meal. He chastised them for being such ingrates. This was his life -- Hakaras haTov! He could not understand how his daughters could not have picked up on the key attribute of his own personality -- that of being beholden to someone who has done a favor. The daughters explained -- according to the Medrash -- that Moshe was a fugitive from Justice; that he had a price on his head in Egypt.

Nevertheless, Yisro insisted that they owed him a favor after having rescued them from the Midyanites bullying. He ordered his daughters to go back and find the stranger and insist that he come home to eat with them. Moshe Rabbeinu came, sat down for supper, and made a nice impression on Yisro. The rest is history. Yisro said, "I want this man as my son-in-law!" This is a segulah we should all be aware of: One who is "makir tov" [appreciative] will wind up with "the best son-in-law in the history of the world."

Parshas Shemos represents the best of times and the worst of times -- the best of human personalities and the worst of human personalities. It includes the worst ingrates we will ever learn about and on the other hand, one of the most appreciative persons who ever lived.

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 # 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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- Tape # 312 - The Do's and Don'ts of Naming Babies
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