

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
The Portion of
Shemos

January 14, 2009

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Yad Avraham Institute
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B"H

Shemos

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

Dean

1. *Reflecting on One's Own Motivation*

The Torah tells us that Shifrah (Yocheved) and Puah (Miriam) were the midwives who oversaw the delivery of all the Jewish children who were born in Egypt. Chazal explain that Yocheved was called Shifrah because her role was to cleanse and beautify the newborn children (*l'shapeir* – to beautify), while Miriam was called Puah because she was the one who calmed and quieted the newborns (Puah is the calming sound made to quiet a crying child). By identifying Yocheved as Shifrah and Miriam as Puah, the Torah is revealing to us each of their strengths as midwives. Yocheved was uniquely qualified, because of her predisposition and capacity to cleanse and beautify the newborn children and Miriam had the unique ability to calm the newborns despite the trauma of childbirth. Both Yocheved and Miriam at the core of their being were unique in their level of love and devotion to the Jewish children. Why is it necessary for the Torah to share with us the special abilities of Yocheved and Miriam as midwives?

The Torah states, **“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives (Yocheved and Miriam)...’When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see them on the birthstool; if it is a son, you are to kill him and if it is a daughter, she shall live.’ But the midwives feared G’d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live.”** Yocheved and Miriam did not obey the dictate of the king of Egypt. They did not succumb to his wishes to kill the Jewish newborns. Chazal explain that when the Torah states, “...they caused the boys to live...” it means that they did not only defy his command, but they also fed and sustained the children.

It is natural that if one is commanded to kill his own child, he will prefer to kill himself rather than bring harm upon the one that he loves. Chazal tell us that at this time in Egypt, Jewish women were giving birth to six children in one pregnancy. This would mean that Yocheved and Miriam were assisting in the births of

hundreds of thousands of children. Regardless of this staggering number, the Torah identifies them as Shifrah and Puah to affirm that their love for every child was unwavering. Seemingly, since the Torah had quantified Yocheved and Miriam’s essence regarding their level of caring for the newborns as midwives, one would think that the reason they had defied the order of Pharaoh, not to kill the Jewish newborns, was because it was contrary to their essence. It was something that they could not do because they had the same feelings towards the Jewish children as a parent. However, the Torah reveals that their defiance to Pharaoh was rooted in their fear of G’d and unrelated to their compassion or their natural disposition to love the children. Thus, the Torah establishes Yocheved and Miriam her daughter, as people who had negated their own essence only to do the Will of G’d.

There is a positive commandment to give charity to a needy person. As the Torah states, **“You shall surely open your hand...”** When one sees his fellow in need one should understand his own motivations for giving charity to that individual. Is it because one feels the needy person’s pain and want? Is it because one has a natural propensity and desire to give? Although one is able to fulfill this positive commandment with any positive intent, if one gives because it is the Will of G’d and unrelated to his own emotions then he will fulfill the commandment at the highest level. If the reason one performs a mitzvah is because it is his natural inclination to do so, regardless of it being the Word of G’d, that mitzvah is deficient on a qualitative level. A qualitative mitzvah is only when one performs the mitzvah solely because it is the Will of G’d. Therefore, one should take pause before performing a mitzvah in order to ascertain within himself his own motive for performing the mitzvah.

2. *Yaakov, the Totality of the Jewish People*

The Midrash tells us that that the only two people that G'd had named Himself were Yitzhak and Yaakov. These were the only individual to whom G'd gave names. The Torah states regarding Yitzhak, "**G'd said to Avraham, the son that you will have will be Yitzhak...**" At the Covenant between the parts G'd decreed "**...Your children will be strangers in a land that is not their own for four hundred years...**" The Midrash tells us that the 400-year period of exile began with the birth of Yitzhak. Yitzhak was named by G'd Himself because he was the first person who was circumcised on the eighth day. Although his father Avraham had performed the mitzvah of circumcision, he did so at the age of 100.

The Midrash continues, "G'd named Yaakov. Who is Yaakov our Patriarch? His name contains four letters which correspond to the four crowns through which G'd's children will coronate Him. The letter "yud" corresponds to the Ten Commandments. The letter "aayin" (which is numerically 70) corresponds to the seventy elders of Israel. The letter "kuf" corresponds to the height of the Covered Sanctuary that the Jewish people had built for G'd. The letter "bais" (which is numerically two) corresponds to the two tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. It was only in the merit of Yaakov that the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt. As it states, 'It was established as a statute to Yaakov (that the Jewish people must leave Egypt).'"

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos cites a verse which states, "You should bring desolation upon the land..." The Gemara tells us that one should not read the word in the verse as "*shamos*," which means "desolation" but rather it should be read as "*sheimos*," which means "names." From here, we learn the principle "*shma k'garim*" that the name that one is given determines that individual's potential and destiny. The Gemara tells us that the reason Ruth (Rus) was given this name was because she was destined to have a grandson who would satiate G'd with song and praise (*meraveh HaKadosh Baruch b'shiros v'tishbachos*). The name "Ruth" foretells the future that she would have a grandson, King David, who would author Psalms.

Yaakov was the most special of the Patriarchs because his destiny was set in place by G'd when He had named him "Yaakov." The spiritual potential that lies within the letters of his name encompass the totality of the Jewish people, which touches upon the four crowns through which G'd will be coronated.

The Midrash tells us that the reason Avraham, our Patriarch merited to survive the fiery kiln of Kasdim was not because he merited was willing to sacrifice himself for G'd, but rather it was in the merit of his grandson Yaakov as the verse from Isaiah states, "Therefore, G'd said the House of Yaakov, who redeemed Avraham..." Meaning, because Yaakov our Patriarch needed to come into existence as the father of the tribes of Israel, Avraham could not perish in the fire. The Midrash continues "In the merit of Yaakov the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt." The objective and purpose of being freed from the bondage of Egypt was so that the Jewish people should ascend to Sinai to receive the Torah. It was because Yaakov had encompassed the Torah and all that is associated with it, that he fathered tribes that had the potential to develop into G'd's people. It was therefore in his merit that they were redeemed from Egypt.

Although it was in the merit of Yaakov that Avraham was saved from the kiln of Kasdim, it was only because Avraham had established the spiritual foundation that allowed Yaakov to become who he was. This is clearly indicated from the words of Chazal who explain that although we say in Amidah, "the G'd of Avraham, the G'd of Yitzhak, and the G'd of Yaakov" the blessing concludes only with "...the shield of Avraham." This indicates that although Yaakov had been the most special of the Patriarchs it could not have come about unless Avraham had established his own spirituality as he had.

3. *Payment of the Spiritual Debt*

The Midrash cites a verse from the prophet Hosheiah, "The prophet states, 'They (the Jewish people) betrayed G'd...' How did the Jewish people betray G'd? They fathered children and would not have them circumcised. When Yosef had passed away in Egypt the Jewish people no longer circumcised themselves. They had said, 'We want to be similar to the Egyptians...' When G'd had seen what they had done, He had nullified the love that He had for them. As King David writes in Psalms, 'G'd changed His heart to despise His people.' It was because they ceased to circumcise themselves, G'd allowed a new king to rise upon Egypt with a mandate to enslave the Jewish people."

The Torah tells us that the Egyptian exile came about as a result of G'd's decree which was communicated to Avraham, our Patriarch at the time of the Covenant Between the Parts. The verse states, "**...Your children will be strangers in a land that is not their own for four hundred years...**" The Midrash tells us that the 400-year

period of exile began with the birth of Yitzchak. This is because G'd had said to Avraham, **“Your children will be strangers...”** If one were to calculate the time from the birth of Yitzchak until the redemption from Egypt it would be 400 years.

Maharal of Prague in his work *Gevuras Hashem* (the Power of G'd) asks that if the exile of the Jewish people was to be one consisting of 400 years of bondage in a land that was not their own, how could this period commence with the birth of Yitzchak? At that time, Avraham and his family dwelled in the land of Canaan. Avraham, our Patriarch had achieved at that time great wealth and world renown. He was acknowledged by the nations of the world as the “father of all nations.” After the birth of Yitzchak, Avraham continuously ascended through the many trials and tribulations that were presented to him. His greatest accomplishment was the Akeidah (binding of Yitzchak), which was the most difficult. In the merit of the Akeidah the Jewish people are protected from the Attribute of Justice until the end of time. Chazal tell us that Avraham and his wife Sarah succeeded greatly in espousing monotheism. Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women. Avraham had made G'd's existence known to all mankind. How could this time period of monumental spiritual accomplishment be considered the equivalent to the years of bondage in Egypt?

Maharal explains that the Attribute of Justice is exacting in every respect. The application of Attribute of Justice in the context of punishment is exacting to the point that the person receives exactly what he deserves. Identically, regarding accomplishment, one is deserving of reward to the smallest detail based on what he accomplished. Avraham, our Patriarch was selflessly dedicated to the service of G'd – only to utilize existence as a means to glorify His Name. He was pained by the spiritual void that existed in the world – and thus was motivated to engage in theological dialogue in order to dispel the falsehood of paganism from existence. He detested idolatry to such a degree that when the three wayfarers (who were in fact angels) were approached by him to offer his hospitality, he provided the water to wash their feet through a third party. Although every aspect of their hospitality was attended by him personally and his wife, however regarding the water, he chose not to be involved. Since Avraham had suspected that the three wayfarers were pagans who worshiped the dust, he did not want have any degree of association with the idolatrous object.

Avraham himself, having a profound sensitivity and understanding of G'd was continuously pained by the spiritual void in which he lived. Avraham and subsequently Yitzchak, the spiritual heir of his father, suffered tremendously by being surrounded with impurity. G'd evaluated and valued Avraham's suffering to be the equivalent of exile and bondage. Although he had wealth and renown, Avraham suffered from the spiritual affliction of his environment no less than the Jewish people suffered under their Egyptian taskmasters in the physical sense. As a result of this, we begin calculating the 400 years of exile from the birth of Yitzchak.

The remaining 210 years of exile in Egypt began when Yaakov had descended to Egypt. Although Yaakov was alive and provided protection for family not to be subject to spiritual diminishment, nevertheless those years are considered as part of the exile/bondage that was decreed upon Avraham's progeny. As long as Yaakov was alive, Chazal tell us that the eyes and hearts of the Jewish people were not closed to spirituality. Until the generation of those who had descended with Yaakov to Egypt had passed away, the Jewish people were not subjected to physical bondage. Because Yaakov and his family had great spiritual sensitivity, entering into an environment that was depraved and spiritual impure, caused them great pain which was the equivalent of bondage. However, when the Jewish people chose not to circumcise themselves after the passing of Yosef, it was an indication that they no longer valued their spirituality. At this point, being denied a spiritual environment was no longer considered by them to be a state of bondage. Therefore, the bondage needed to manifest itself through the physical, which is what they truly valued. This is the reason the physical bondage began immediately after the passing of that generation.

One of the tenets of Jewish belief is that one's behavior has consequences. It is the principle of reward and punishment. This principle manifests itself in a manner that has relevance to each individual. If one dedicates his life to spirituality, being deprived or failing spiritually would be considered a punishment because it is something over which the individual will agonize. However, if one does not value his spirituality to such a degree, a spiritual setback/deprivation would not be considered by that individual to be a loss. Therefore, this person must experience punishment through something in the physical/material realm.

4. Amram's and Yocheved's Contribution to the Jewish People

The Torah states, **“A man went from the house of Levi and he took a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and gave birth to a son...”** The Torah does not reveal the identity of the “man” or the “daughter of Levi.” Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the “man” was Amram and the “daughter of Levi” was Yocheved. Amram and Yocheved were Moshe’s parents. Amram was the leading sage of his generation and Yocheved was the leading midwife (Shifra), who defied the edict of the Pharaoh regarding the killing of the Jewish newborn males. Why does the Torah conceal the identity of Amram and Yocheved?

Maharal of Prague in his work *Gevuras Hashem* explains that most often a child’s ability and potential is determined by the characteristics and genealogy of the parents. By concealing the parentage of Moshe, the Torah is telling us that his dimension of being was unrelated to the innate characteristics and genealogy of his parents. However because Amram and Yocheved were very special in their own right because of their own accomplishments, they merited having Moshe. Moshe, even at the time of his birth was obviously unique with special abilities. Chazal tell us that on the day that Moshe was born, he was able to speak and walk. The Gemara tells us that on that day the house was illuminated with light because the Divine Presence was upon him. These endowments were in no way a reflection of the capabilities or potential of Moshe’s parents. Thus, the Torah only identifies his parents as: **“A man from the house of Levi who took a daughter of Levi.”**

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that because Yocheved had defied the dictate of Pharaoh to kill the Jewish newborn males, she merited having Moshe – the most exceptional Jew as her son. Because of Yocheved’s defiance and not heeding the decree of Pharaoh, there is a Jewish people. Had she succumbed to his will, the Jewish people would have become gone into oblivion in Egypt. Chazal tell us that Moshe’s dimension of spirituality was the equivalent of the entire Jewish people. Therefore, based on the principle of measure for measure – just as her sacrifice was the cause of having a Jewish people, she merited having a son that was the equivalent of the entire Jewish people - measure for measure. What was Amram’s merit for having a son such as Moshe?

Chazal tell us that the tribe of Levi merited having the Priesthood (Kehuna) because they were the only ones who did not participate in the sin of the Golden Calf. It seems however, that they had rejected idolatry not because of their special ability, but rather because they were not spiritually handicapped as the rest of the Jewish people.

All of the tribes of Israel, with the exception of Levi, were subject to bondage in Egypt. It is because of this bondage that they had declined spiritually and ultimately had become idolaters. In contrast, the tribe of Levi, because they had freedom of movement, would go out into the field with scrolls to teach the Jewish people about their spiritual antecedents – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

The Jewish people, when they had stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, were already weaned and purged of the idolatrous beliefs of Egypt because of all of the revealed miracles that they had seen and experienced. However, because of their past, there was a trace of that impurity that still existed within them. When they found themselves in a precarious position, believing that Moshe had died and they were stranded alone in the desert, they gravitated back to their idolatrous past. This was not the case regarding the tribe of Levi. They were never victimized in Egypt nor did they ever possess the impurity of idolatry because they were never enslaved. If this is so, then why do we see the tribe of Levi as extraordinary for not succumbing to the temptation of the Golden Calf?

The Gemara in Tractate Sotah tells us that initially Pharaoh approached the Jewish people and asked them to participate and join with him in building the Egyptian civilization. He removed his regal garments and began to work with mortar and brick to show that he was willing to compromise on his position as king for the sake of building Egypt. His request of the Jewish people was very alluring and convincing. Amram told the Jewish people that under no circumstance were they to reveal to Pharaoh their capability in this area. He should never know the potential and dimension of the capabilities of the Jewish people. He explained to them that the moment the Egyptians would understand their capability, they would be enslaved. Every tribe rejected and defied Amram’s warning, except for the tribe of Levi. The tribes had believed that it would be inappropriate and disrespectful to not heed the call of the monarch of Egypt- especially because Egypt was their host country. However, the tribe of Levi, although they understood the rationale of other tribes and their convincing argument, they nevertheless negated their feelings and understanding to accept the ruling of Amram – the leading Torah sage of the generation. The tribe of Levi subordinated themselves to the Will of G’d which was communicated by Amram the leading Torah sage.

Levi did not succumb to the temptation of the Golden Calf because initially when they were in Egypt, they had chosen to subordinate themselves to the ruling of Amram not to participate in the building of Egypt. It was

their subordination to G'd's Will which allowed them to retain and maintain the purity of Yaakov, their forefather. The tribe of Levi was essential to the spirituality of the Jewish people. They were the officiants of G'd – the representatives of the Jewish people within the context of spiritual atonement. Their negation was only set in motion because of the ruling of Amram, the father of Moshe. Thus, he merited to have a child who was the equivalent of the entire Jewish people.

5. Being Denied the Blessing of Yaakov *(form Vayechi)*

The Torah tells us that when Yosef had taken his sons, Ephraim and Menasha, to Yaakov, his father, to receive his blessing, Yaakov had asked, "**Who are these?** ..." The Midrash states, "Is it possible that Yaakov did not recognize Yosef's children? Ephraim had studied Torah with Yaakov for a period of seventeen-years that they were together in Egypt. How could he not recognize them? Rather, the Divine Presence departed from Yaakov at that moment. (He thus suspected that there was a spiritual deficiency in Ephraim and Menasha that prevented him from giving his blessing.) When Yosef had realized what had happened, he prostrated himself on the ground and supplicated G'd for mercy. Yosef had said, 'Master of the world, if in fact my sons are worthy of my father's blessing, please do not allow me to be in a state of disgrace.' As a result of Yosef's supplication, the Divine Presence returned to his father Yaakov."

The Torah tells us that on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, the Divine Presence was meant to descend upon the offering of Aaron, who began officiating as the High Priest, and consume it. However, this did not happen. Chazal tell us that Moshe and Aaron entered into the communion tent and supplicated G'd to allow His Presence to descend into the Mishkan. Consequently, the Divine Presence descended and consumed the offering. One would think that if Yaakov wanted his grandchildren Ephraim and Menasha to receive an effective blessing, he should have together with his son Yosef supplicated G'd to allow this to take place. Yet Chazal tell us that it was only Yosef who had beseeched G'd for this to occur. Why did Yaakov not participate in the supplication as Moshe had done with Aaron?

When Aaron realized that his service was not accepted by G'd, he said to Moshe, "I know G'd is angry with me. It is because of me that the Fire did not descend. Moshe, my brother how could you have embarrassed me (by choosing me as the High Priest when I am seemingly not qualified)." Moshe understood that Aaron was in fact

the only one who qualified for the position because G'd Himself had commanded Moshe to anoint him as the High Priest. When the Fire did not descend Moshe understood that in order to bring about the Presence of G'd in the Mishkan, he and Aaron needed to supplicate G'd for this to take place.

Yaakov, on the other hand, did not participate together with Yosef to restore the Divine Presence because he had understood that the blessing for Yosef's children was based upon Yosef's worthiness. If Yosef and his children were spiritually worthy then the Divine Presence would return to allow the blessing to take place. However, if it does not return it was a sign to Yaakov that Yosef had a spiritual deficiency that did not allow the Divine Presence to come upon him. If Yaakov would have participated and the Divine Presence would have returned, Yaakov would have still been unsure regarding Yosef's spiritual viability. Therefore, only Yosef beseeched G'd for mercy.

It is interesting to note that when Yosef supplicated G'd he had said, "Master of the world, if in fact my sons are worthy of my father's blessing, please do not allow me to be in a state of disgrace." What is the significance of Yosef not wanting to be in a state of disgrace? Did he not want to be embarrassed before his father if in fact his sons were not worthy? Seemingly, he should have wanted his sons to be qualified to be the beneficiaries of his father's blessings.

The only way that Ephraim and Menasha would be able to actualize their potential was through the blessing of Yaakov. If they did not receive his blessing they would not be able to succeed as tribes. The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin states, "A child brings merit to his father." If Ephraim and Menasha would be able to actualize their potential as tribes of Israel then Yosef would be able to be the beneficiary of his children's spiritual accomplishments end of time. However, if the Divine Presence did not return to Yaakov, and thus put limitation upon Ephraim and Menasha and their descendants, then they would not bring sufficient merit to Yosef. Therefore Yosef would be disgraced in the eyes of G'd.