

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Shemos

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Berel *ben* Max *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Out-Scheming the Schemer

Admirable Courage – or Reckless Endangerment?

The heroic exploits of the Hebrew midwives Shifrah and Pu'ah are related in this week's *parshah*. In connection with his diabolical plan to thwart the proliferation of Jewish male babies, Pharaoh instructs the midwives: "When you see on the birthing stool that it is a boy, you shall kill him" (*Shemos 1:16*). They, however, withstood the pressure: "The midwives feared Hashem and did not do as Pharaoh instructed... (instead) they 'gave life' to the male children" (*ibid. v. 17*). Chazal comment that their defiance of Pharaoh, as reflected in this verse, was actually twofold; not only did they desist from harming the babies, but they actually 'gave life' to them – that is, they nurtured them with food and drink (*Sotah 11b*).

There appears to be a perplexing element to this last aspect; while clearly brave and audacious, the question arises: was the risk really worth it?

Consider the Mishnah's comment regarding an event connected with the *halachos* of reciting *K'rias Shema*. Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel disputed the intent of the Torah's directive that the Shema is to be recited *בְּשֹׁכְבְךָ* – "When you lie down and when you arise" (*Devarim 6:7*). Beis Shamai understood this phrase in the literal sense; hence, they held that one recites the Shema in a horizontal position at night, while in the morning, one recites the prayer while standing. Beis Hillel, on the other hand, interpreted the verse as a mere reference to the time of recital, i.e., the time of day when people generally lie down (night) and when they typically arise (morning). Regarding the position of the reader, however, they felt that the Torah was not particular; a person could stand, sit, or walk during either the daytime or nighttime recital. The Mishnah (*Berachos 1:3*) records the practice of one sage who adopted Beis Shamai's stringency:

אָמַר רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן, אֲנִי הָיִיתִי בָּא בַדֶּרֶךְ, וְהִטָּתִי לְקִרְוֹת, כְּדַבְּרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי, וְסִכְנֹתַי בְּעֵצָמִי מִפְּנֵי הַלְּסָטִים. אָמְרוּ לוֹ, כְּדֵי הָיִיתָ לְחוּב בְּעֵצָמְךָ, שְׁעַבְרָתָ עַל דְּבַרֵי בֵּית הַלֵּל:

"R' Tarfon said: 'I was once travelling on the way (at night), and I stopped to recite the Shema while reclining, in accordance with the opinion of Beis Shamai; I had even placed myself in danger to do so, due to the threat of bandits.' They said to him: 'You were actually worthy of death due to your actions, for having disregarded the opinion of Beis Hillel.'"

So steadfast had R' Tarfon been in his adherence to this directive that he followed the stringency of Beis Shamai (of pausing and "laying" for the nighttime Shema), even to the point of risking an attack by marauders. Far from crediting his gallantry, however, his disputants accused him of reckless behavior. He could have avoided danger by following Beis Hillel and reciting the Shema while continuing on his journey. Leaving himself open to harm, they felt, was actually a grievous act of near suicide.

In a similar vein, R' Yosef Shaul Halevi Natanzon (*Divrei Shaul, parshas Shemos*) wondered about the

midwives' actions. True, they were confronted with a command to commit murder -- one of the three cardinal sins for which a Jew must be willing to sacrifice his life to avoid the violation. But wouldn't it have sufficed to merely refrain from killing the children? Why did they have to add fuel to the fire by going so far as to supply the children with extra care and nourishment? This flagrant defiance of Pharaoh's will would certainly raise his ire and unnecessarily increase the danger to themselves! How were they authorized to go so far?

In a brilliant exposition, R' Yosef Shaul demonstrates that these women were not some foolhardy martyrs but actually quite clever and resourceful strategists.

Pharaoh's PR Problem

It seems that – at this point in the narrative, at least – Pharaoh was still concerned with appearances and sought to conduct his baby-killings in a clandestine manner. As such, he much preferred that the murders be perpetrated on as-of-yet unborn children, which could presumably be dispatched without raising too much of an alarm. (Once the babies emerged alive, there was no longer a possibility of a “stillborn” alibi.)

The midwives were fully aware of Pharaoh's concern – and they took full advantage of it. They concocted a scheme whereby they could simultaneously assist the Jewish mothers and neutralize any potential complaint against themselves.

Essentially, this is what they told Pharaoh:

“We would like to cooperate with your infanticide plot, but there's one problem. As employees of the Egyptian establishment, the Jewish mothers will be wary of us; as such, they may very well attempt to give birth on their own, without calling for our help. By the time we are on hand, the babies will already be born, and it will be too late for any covert assassinations.

“But we have a plan,” they continued, “to win the confidence of the Jewish women. If we provide care and succor to the newborns – in apparent contradiction of your anti-Hebrew campaign – the mothers will feel more secure with us. The word will get around that we midwives are to be trusted after all, and so the mothers will begin to summon us even before they give birth.”

This, explains the Divrei Shaul, was the midwives' clever ruse. By actively lending a helping hand to the mothers and their newborns, they were not recklessly risking Pharaoh's wrath. On the contrary, they put him in a nice little bind while protecting their own skins. To Pharaoh they could claim that their efforts were necessary to lull the mothers into complacency, so his instructions would eventually be carried out. But their true aim was the nurturing itself. They figured out a way to keep the babies alive – happy and healthy – right under Pharaoh's nose.