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The Maimonides School Parsha Newsletter

כ' טבת תשפ"ג-ג 1/13/2023

שמות

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Staying True to 'ה

By Nathan Grossman

This week in פרשת שמות, the first step of the Jews slavery begins. As we know, this story truly began when אברהם אבינו had the prophecy of the הבתרים. The Jews went down into מצרים, led by יעקב to reunite with יוסף, and midway through this trip, it dawned on יעקב: He was leading his descendants into slavery. יעקב was worried about this, and so 'ה came down and said that יעקב couldn't turn around, but everything would be okay. As we all now know, this turned into מתן תורה. It would have been difficult for יעקב to see the good that would come of this. However, he stayed true to 'ה.

What happened next was that בני ישראל went down to מצרים, but to avoid assimilation, they stayed in גשן, a much more neutral town in Egypt, where they stayed as shepherds. Then פרעה got worried that the Jews were becoming too big a nation, and that they would attempt to overthrow him. So he made a plan to enslave them. Step one was to have them work for him. First he offered jobs to everyone to build the country of Egypt. Once he had everyone, but שבט לוי, who was too busy studying תורה to work, he slowly increased the work and gave them less until it became slavery. And thus began our slavery to the Egyptians. But why did this happen, what did we do wrong to deserve such a long horrible slavery?

There are many simple answers, like that it was 'ה's plan, or this was just what Egyptians do, or that this was a test. While these are good answers, I'd like to offer an alternative one. This was a lesson to us, that our assimilation was the problem. We learn in the מכילתא that four-fifths of the Jews were never going to leave Egypt, and that these Jews fully assimilated with the Egyptians. If we just simply stayed in גשן like שבט לוי, we would have never begun working for the Egyptians. But this is not an isolated story, this cycle has repeated many times throughout Jewish history. A more recent example would be the blood libel. In Europe, the Jews were doing very well for themselves. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem for the Jews or the gentiles. The problem was that the Jews decided to start meddling in the affairs of the gentiles. The Jews were bankers who lent money with interest to the non-Jews because Christians couldn't lend with interest to anyone, and therefore the Christians owed money to the Jews. The problem the Christians had with the Jews wasn't that the Jews were doing extremely well; It was that the Jews were doing well within their society. This is what caused a rise in European antisemitism and the blood libel. If we had never mixed with the gentiles and assimilated, the blood libels would've been much less likely to occur.

So ultimately, did we assimilate in Egypt? The answer is that the one-fifth of Jews who'd been in Egypt, who left, never assimilated. We learn that throughout our stay in Egypt, we kept our Hebrew language, Jewish clothing, and Jewish names, in other words, our identity. We never assimilated with the Egyptians. The lesson here is a clear one. No matter how great everything else seems, Judaism is the ultimate issue of our lives. We must stick with it regardless of how enticing all the other religions may seem. By sticking to our roots we survive. When we try to stray from our path is when we fall.

חיות: An Insult or a Compliment?

By Binyamin Orkaby

תורה begins with listing the children of יעקב. The תורה then tells us they all passed away, and then it tells us “וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע אֶת-יוֹסֵף” a new king rose in the land of Egypt that didn't know who יוסף was. This new king sees that the בני ישראל are becoming too numerous in the land, and so he forces them into slavery where they build “פֶּתֶם וְאֶת-רַעְמֶסֶס”. To further try to stop the growth of בני ישראל, the new king decides to call on a few midwives, named שִׁפְרָה and פּוּעֵה to kill all the baby boys of בני ישראל when they are born. רש"י quotes (י"א ב') which says that שִׁפְרָה was יוכבד, and פּוּעֵה was מרים. This explains why in the next פסוק we are told וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילֶדֶת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים-לֵקִים that they feared ה' and wouldn't kill the children of בני ישראל. They are then asked by פרעה why they let the kids live. To which they respond, and say “כִּי לֹא כְנָשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיֹּת הָעֹבְרֹת כִּי-חַיֹּת הֵנָּה בְּטֶרֶם תָּבֹאוּ אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילֶדֶת וַיֵּלְדוּ” for they are not like the Egyptian women, these עֹבְרֹת, they are like animals, before the midwives can even them they have already given birth. Why is the term “כִּי-חַיֹּת הֵנָּה”, for they are like animals, used to describe the עבריות?

One opinion is brought by the (י"א ב') גמרא סוטה where it offers the explanation that חַיֹּת means that the נשים עבריות were all midwives. The גמרא rejects this opinion as it asks rhetorically - do midwives not need midwives to help deliver their children? The גמרא then offers a second opinion as to what חַיֹּת means, and says that the midwives were saying to פרעה that the whole Jewish nation was compared to animals. The reasoning brought by the midwives is that it says by half the שבטים that their שבט was like some animal. The גמרא further comments that with regards to the שבטים who weren't compared to animals, the גמרא brings a פסוק from (יט:ב) that says “מָה אִמִּי לִבְיָא בֵּין אֲרִיֹת רִבְצָה” oh how your mother was a lioness, among lions she would dwell. Thus the גמרא explains that the women were like animals in the sense that they didn't need midwives.

The ספורנו gives a different understanding and says that חַיֹּת means that the women knew the art of midwives, and if the midwives who came to help them deliver the baby tried to do anything suspicious, the women would notice and would not use שִׁפְרָה and פּוּעֵה again. The אור החיים suggests that the women of בני ישראל were more knowledgeable about midwifery than the Egyptian midwives and thus they didn't need any midwives to help them.

The פני דוד brings down a more flattering reading of the word חַיֹּת and says that they were צדיקניות. The were righteous like חוה before the חטא of eating from the עץ הדעת when she was called חיה. Each one was called חיה to show that they were all righteous.

רש"י says that חיה comes from חי which refers to a special physical activity which is independent and rejects anything outside of itself. So to the women of בני ישראל did not need anyone else as they were like animals that could give birth on their own.

Each day when we think of our mothers we should think of how important they are to our existence in this world. For without mothers there would be no life. Therefore when the פסוק uses the word חַיֹּת it should not be seen as something derogatory or deeming. The פרשנים have shown that it should instead be the opposite, see how amazing the Jewish women are. They are righteous, and knowledgeable, special creations of ה'. May we be זוכה to realize how amazing our mothers are and to thank them for all they have done for us. כן יהי רצון ונאמר אמן.

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