

PARSHAS SHEMOS 5778

PART I

Sefer Shemos marks a radical change in the narrative of Chumash. Until now we have been talking about the great individuals, the founders of Klal Yisroel. Now we begin to talk about a nation. It describes how the Jewish People were fashioned and formed and what unites us as a nation.

Pharaoh called upon the Ivri midwives to kill the male Jewish infants they delivered. But they feared Hashem and refused Pharaoh's direct orders. This is a very important statement. The midwives could have refused Pharaoh's command out of a simple sense of morality—one shouldn't murder innocent infants! Another motivation could have been to save the Jewish people. But the Torah tells us that what motivated them was Yiras Shomayim. This is the reason they were rewarded by Hashem—not because of their natural moral instincts and not because of their concern for the survival of the Jews.

The Akeidoh is an incredible story. Avrohom Ovinu spent his life making people aware of the existence of Hashem and teaching people that there are absolute demands upon us to lead a moral life. According to the Rambam, this is how belief in Hashem expresses itself in everyday behavior.

Avrohom was afraid of being murdered by Avimelech's people—because there is no Yiras Hashem in this place. Only when one's morality is built out of Hashem's absolute system of good and bad, does it have any chance of remaining intact. A morality based on human instincts is subject to change and is vulnerable to rationalizations and pressures of convenience.

Then Hashem tells Avrohom to take his favorite son and kill him.

Now Avrohom faces a deep personal crisis on many levels. Hashem is asking him to sacrifice the one thing that is most valuable and precious to him in life. On another level, imagine how Avrohom is going to face all his disciples who he has been preaching to about Hashem's demands of absolute morality? How is he going to tell them that this benevolent and merciful God has commanded him to slaughter his only son as a human sacrifice!

It is a contradiction to everything he has been talking about his entire adult life.

After Avrohom passes the test of the Akeidoh, an angel calls out to bless Avrohom with a promise of tremendous growth and propagation of his progeny. The Ramban asks what is being promised now that wasn't promised already? And how is this a reward of middoh ke'negged middoh?

The Ramban answers that here Hashem promised him that there will always be a Klal Yisroel. At the Bris Bein Habesorim, Hashem promised Avrohom that he will father a great nation. This great nation will come from Yitzchok. But then Hashem commanded that Yitzchok be sacrificed and there will be no Klal Yisroel. Until

now, the promise of a future Klal Yisroel is not a given. If Hashem wants, He will allow Himself to renege on this promise. Until now Hashem commanded Avrohom Ovinu to be merciful and compassionate, and now He is commanding him to kill his son. Avrohom Ovinu said that if Hashem wants a Klal Yisroel there will be one and if not then not. Since he was willing to forego the existence of Klal Yisroel, Hashem promised him that there would always be one.

All we know about morality is that the right thing to do is doing what Hashem wants. We begin Shema with kabbolas ol Malchus Shomayim and then we come to kabbolas ol mitzvos. There is no independent value of "doing for the Klal" outside the will of Hashem. There is no concept of absolute morality outside the will of Hashem. This idea goes against the popular conception of what chessed and klal work is all about.

The Rambam writes in Moreh Nevuchim that the goal of all mitzvos is to forge a bigger and stronger, more constant keshar between the human being and Hashem. The purpose of middos tovos is to make us closer to Hashem. They have no independent value. The demands of the Torah to enable one to connect to Hashem are the only jobs a Jew has in this world.

The Rambam says that when you have a deep love for something, you will naturally share it with others. We know if a person loves Torah if he speaks about it with others all the time. Kol hayom he sichosi. Avrohom's commitment to spread the ideas of Hashem to the world was borne from his love of Hashem and it simply spilled over to others. He didn't have a prior agenda to work for the klal. Rav Dessler has a beautiful explanation for the Hebrew word "hashpo'oh"; it comes from the word "shefa" which means "overflow". You fill something up till it overflows. If you are so full of excitement and enthusiasm about something, it naturally flows out of you and affects those you come in contact with. A marbitz Torah is successful when he is excited and inspired by limud Torah.

Shifroh and Puoh were motivated by their deep yiras shomayim. From this central point in their personality, the other values for morality and the survival of Klal Yisroel sprang forth. But its roots were in yiras shomayim. But this doesn't happen automatically.

We live in a world where Hashem's presence is not an active, tangible reality in people's conscious, daily lives. It's sitting there dormant in the background, if at all.

Nowadays, Hashem is very absent from people's minds. When someone is sick, you remember Him in shul to daven for him and make a "mi shebeirach". But when you leave the shul and go to the hospital, you completely forget about Hashem being in charge and you worship the expertise of the doctors and the state of the art medical technology. During the shivah for my sister, I reflected that her life was a contradiction to that whole mentality. Many people are very impressed with science and what science says is possible and not possible. My sister

outlived every single medical prognosis given by the most expert doctors in the world. According to medical science, she should have died decades ago. They never saw anyone with this condition live and be as productive in life as she was. People who know the Torah are aware that the world is run by Hashem and not by the rules of biology.

What was the greatness of Yosef HaTzaddik? He was able to see through the superficial motivations and schemes of the brothers who hated him and sold him to slavery and come to the clear realization that it was Hashem's plan all along that the brothers were merely acting out on His behalf.

Hashem took Yosef HaTzaddik's commitment and devotion to his father—to obey his father's command to find his brothers no matter what. He was successful because the Ramban says that if a person is determined to fulfill a mitzvah, he will be successful.

Hashem knew his determination to be mekayem the mitzvah of kibbud av and used it to make sure Yosef would find his brothers eventually. And He took the brother's envy and hatred of Yosef to make sure Yosef wound up in Egypt.

Yosef as the king of Egypt understood how the world runs. The fact that he is the ruler over the entire civilized world is purely a matter of the will of Hashem manipulating various personalities. Yosef told his brothers that their middos ro'os is a matter between them and Hashem. But Hashem used it to achieve His goals.

The midwives also understood how the world runs. The survival of Klal Yisroel is not up to them or their commitment to the klal. They know Hashem is in charge and He will make sure there is a Klal Yisroel if He wants. Our job is to follow his will.

Yosef had a nevuah 13 years earlier telling him that he was fit to be the ruler over the brothers. But, he had to prove himself worthy of that nevuah by undergoing all those horrible nisyonos that we couldn't imagine and emerging victorious. If he would have failed, then it would have been over. The nevuah is not an absolute promise—Yosef had no guarantees that he would rule. And more than that—Yosef had to prove himself by acting towards his brothers in a way that will inspire them to do teshuvah and not be vindictive.

Hashem runs the world and we have to see where we fit into His plans and not vice-versa.

The midwives were certainly ba'alei chessed and were concerned for the klal. But that would not have been enough. They needed yiras shomayim to deserve their reward. Just being nice people or even super-nice people would not be enough. Human feelings are fickle and are subject to pressure and change.

An old talmid of mine from the mid-60's came to be menachem ovel. I hadn't seen him in a long time. His father was a talmid of Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg in his yeshivah in Germany. When Kristallnacht struck in 1938, his mother decided the family needed to emigrate to America to be with relatives. Rav Yechiel tried to calm them down and tried to convince them that this was an aberration. After all, Germany was the most cultured and civilized country in the world! They had great universities who educated the German citizens with their world-class ethicists and philosophers! It must be just the rabble who did this to the Jews—a fringe group.

The answer is that today they are ethical and tomorrow they kill six million Jews.

So it isn't the ethics and morality which made them worthy of Hashem's notice. It wasn't their desire to save Klal Yisroel. It comes from a deep yiras shomayim. It begins when a person thinks about his purpose in this world and asks himself why he is here. Is it to make as much money as possible and be as comfortable as possible? No. Hashem gave us life—a pure neshomo was created and placed into my body and someday, that neshomo is going back to report to Hashem about what it accomplished. That is our essence. It had nothing to do with their natural moral feelings and concern for Klal Yisroel. It was their yiras shomayim that was the basis of their morality, their concern, and everything.

The founding of Klal Yisroel, as the posuk says, began with the yiras shomayim of the midwives. That was what allowed them to survive and continue to thrive as a nation.

PART II

Rashi says that although the Torah counted the Shevotim previously while alive, they are counted again in death. Hashem is able to count people while retaining their individuality. It is forbidden to count Jews. Reducing Jews to a number takes away the uniqueness and infinite value of a Jew that cannot be quantified. But Hashem is able to see the total number and see the infinite potential of kedushoh of every Jew.

Sometimes when people work for the klal, there is a danger of losing focus on the value of the individual. You have to deal with each individual. Hashem is able to have numbers and names simultaneously.

Why does the Torah keep mentioning the names of the Shevotim? It is because they were special, unusual individuals. They were able to give birth to a unique nation of ovdei Hashem. In this week's parsha we simply list the Shevotim themselves. In Parshas Vayigash, all the descendants are counted in detail.

The Midrash has a dispute regarding how many stones Yaakov gathered to sleep under on his way to Lovon's house to start his family. One opinion says he took two stones which became one. This symbolized the fact that Yaakov was able to take the positive middos of Avrohom and Yitzchok and successfully synthesize them within himself to produce shleimus and found Klal Yisroel. Another opinion says he gathered three stones to include himself.

The last opinion says he took 12 stones symbolizing the 12 different kochos hanefesh within Yaakov Ovinu. He was saying that if I will be able to develop all these kochos in the perfect way and produce 12 sons who will exemplify these kochos properly, then Klal Yisroel can be created. We draw on the kochos of the Ovos and the Shevotim and the 70 nefesh that came to Egypt.

Yosef was the first one of his brothers to die. Afterwards the rest of the shevotim died and then the entire first generation died. At first Yaakov's influence started to wane and grow distant. Then Yosef's influence and finally the rest of that first generation fade into history. Then there is an unbelievable population explosion and the Jews spread out to settle in the rest of the country.

Chazal tell us that Yaakov and Yosef understood who Klal Yisroel were supposed to be and who the Egyptians were. They took great pains to set clear lines of separation between themselves and their family and the Egyptians. The plan was

to grow into a separate and unique nation defined by the Torah and avodas Hashem with no influence from the outside. As the population increased, they left the Jewish Ghetto of Goshen. Why? Because they wanted to assimilate and become like Egyptians. As part of this attempt, they stopped performing bris miloh. The reaction was that the affection that the Egyptians had for the Jews simply disappeared and was replaced by hatred and suspicion.

This teaches us a very valuable lesson in Jewish history. As long as we are unique and we are proud of our uniqueness and separateness, the Non-Jewish world will respect us and admire us. There will be peaceful co-existence. But the moment we start to feel inferior and ashamed of our uniqueness and try to ingratiate ourselves with the Non-Jews, then all of a sudden they turn on us with irrational hatred. This is the nature of our interaction with the Nations historically.

Moshe Rabbeinu described the dream of Yaakov—"Betach bodod" to be isolated and separate is how we are secure.

When the shibbud Mitzrayim began, Klal Yisroel were numerous and powerful and somehow the more Pharaoh persecuted the Jews, the more numerous and populous they became. Hashem gave them supernatural koach to withstand these persecutions. Hashem uses the nisyonos of life to bring out hidden kochos that people didn't know they had.

Yosef was destined to rule over his brothers and become king over Egypt. But it wasn't automatic. It wasn't something that just happened smoothly and easily. Hashem made Yosef go through 13 years of nisyonos and trials, one of which he almost failed and would have lost everything he should have had. These nisyonos were designed to pull out all his kochos hanefesh and develop him. Only after that process was Yosef worthy of rising to the throne. Rashi comments that Yosef could have emerged from the prison two years earlier, but he faltered slightly and had to spend two years to rectify that middoh.

We say in the Haggada that in Egypt we were molded into a mature nation. It could have happened in more pleasant and positive ways without all the bitterness of the shibbud. But since Klal Yisroel were pulled by the lure of assimilation, Hashem had to go a different, more painful route to bring out those kochos that were latent in Klal Yisroel. Not everyone survived this nisoyn. There were many, many Jews—80%—who preferred to stay in Egypt and not leave golus. The pull of assimilation was so overwhelming that Klal Yisroel had to be put through a kur habarzel—a smelting furnace—that burns out all impurities from a metal. Only 20% remain by the time they are ready to leave. But first, they have to show they are worthy by going through pain and danger—perform bris miloh and slaughter the avodo zoro of Egypt. For a 2nd or 3rd generation slave to pull himself out of the mentality of servitude and subservience to his master and publically slaughter his master's avodo zoro would take tremendous courage. A slave is naturally under the control of his master in every dimension of his being. Going through this act was a sign of total liberation.

In the end of the parsha when Moshe starts to announce that the process of geuloh is starting, Pharaoh says we have to increase the work load on the Jews. We cannot let them have any spare time to concentrate on geuloh. The midrash says that when Klal Yisroel first came down to Egypt, they brought down with them megillos which recorded the teachings of the Ovos. They studied these megillos in the yeshiva that Yehudah prepared. Over time, all the Jews stopped learning except for Shevet Levi. But Pharaoh gave them relief from work of

Shabbos. During those days of rest, the midrash says that the Jews studied those megillos.

A person is where his mind is.

When the Torah counts the 70 souls who came down to Egypt from Canaan it counts Menashe and Ephrayim among the 70. But how can that be—they were never in Canaan? We see from here that Yosef brought them up with such a powerful connection to his family living in Canaan, that mentally they were living with Yaakov and the Shevotim even though they were physically located in Egypt. When the family of Yaakov came down, Menashe and Ephrayim were coming down together with them. They commuted from the palace to Goshen to live together with the rest of Klal Yisroel when they arrived.

A slave is controlled by his master's will. His mind, his body, his emotions are all under his master's command. The essence of an army and being a soldier is that you are under a commanding officer. You lose any sense of being an independent individual.

But the Jews in Egypt were different. On Shabbos, instead of just resting from the previous six days of back-breaking torture, they used the time to read those megillos and reconnect with their true identity as Klal Yisroel. Otherwise, they would have become complete slaves with no separate identity. Our minds belong to Torah and not to Pharaoh. So when Pharaoh realized the Jews wanted to leave and gain freedom, he said that we have to cut out Shabbos and not give them time to read those megillos. Their desire to leave means I don't have full control over them.

The time one spends in yeshiva is precious beyond words. It is a time when you can remove yourself physically and mentally from all the distractions of the outside world and immerse your mind in the concepts and values of Torah and avoda. But when people come to yeshiva, where is their mind? Who controls their mind? One of the problems of all the mobile devices today is that people have "lost their minds". They have given up control and the devices have taken over their mental world completely. It is the opposite of what a Jew's mental situation is supposed to be. We say birkas haTorah in the morning for the whole day. If I am in the sukkah in the morning and then I leave, then when I come back to the sukkah much later, I need to make a new brocho because there is a hefsek. But by limud haTorah, there isn't supposed to be a hefsek because mentally, that is where my mind is throughout the day. The reality that we confront when we leave yeshiva is the question of who we are and what we are at the core. Where are our minds?

Pharaoh couldn't break Klal Yisroel's will to leave the shibbud of Mitzrayim because they were connected mentally to the Ovos and to their separate identity as Klal Yisroel and not as slaves. So Pharaoh knew that the only way to break their will was to cut our Shabbos, cut out those megillos and distract them completely— 24/7.

Yeshiva can be experienced in many different ways. You can be here in the Beis Midrash and in the dorms physically, but mentally be elsewhere. The Rambam says the Torah is like a mikveh which has the power to permanently transform a Jew from tumoh to taharah. But it requires a total immersion.

A moshol can be made about a cucumber that is immersed in brine for a number of days. The process of submersion in the brine transforms it from a cucumber to a pickle. And even when you take out that pickle, it will remain a pickle and will

never revert to being a cucumber. The change made by the immersion in the brine is permanent. That is the Torah's impact on a person when you immerse yourself in it. No reversing is possible.

When I contemplate the various alumni of Torah Moshe, and they now occupy many different positions and fields of parnassoh, the ones who allowed themselves to get a total immersive experience in yeshiva are the ones who are still connected to limud haTorah in a very strong way. It defines who they are and the families they are raising years later. The ones who didn't allow themselves to do that look back at their ToMo experience with nostalgia, but it didn't transform them to the core.

Klal Yisroel were in Egypt and wanted to be like the Egyptians. They were fascinated by the culture. But one Shevet said no. Pharaoh wanted to enslave the entire Klal Yisroel, but he knew he couldn't do it suddenly with force. Instead, he preyed upon Klal Yisroel's inferiority complex and their desire to be accepted into Egyptian society. He told them that if they want to prove their loyalty and patriotism, they need to join the national service. Pharaoh himself was part of it at the beginning. Over time he started to give out exemptions to his

own people, and eventually the only ones still working were the Jews. They rushed in with enthusiasm to show that they were one of them.

But even these Jews were aware that when Shabbos comes, we belong to Hashem. This is what saved them and prevented Pharaoh from controlling their minds. They were able to take their master's avodo zero and slaughter it publicly and put the blood on the doorpost for all to see. They had a separate identity because of Torah.

We live in a very difficult environment. When we grow up in the Western world, the Torah isn't in the air you breathe and the streets you walk. There are foreign influences in every aspect of daily life and this makes our immersion in Torah all the most urgent and necessary. That is what's necessary to make Torah an integral part of your life. The drive to drink alcohol at every opportunity or to live your life on the internet and social media is simply an excuse to get away from the total immersion in Torah that defines a true yeshiva experience.

While you are here, let the Torah impact you and change you and transform you. That is the purpose of being in yeshiva.