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Make Your Effort and God Will Do the Rest

This week's Torah portion relays Moses's miraculous rescue after being placed in the Nile by his mother, Yocheved, to try to save him from the evil decree issued by the Egyptian king, Pharaoh, to kill all the Jewish baby boys. The Torah says that Pharaoh's daughter, Batya, went down to bathe in the Nile, saw a basket among the reeds and she took it (2:5). A famous Torah commentary, Rashi, comments that she stretched

out her hand and her arm grew many cubits so that she could reach the basket.

Why would Batya stretch out her hand if she knew her arm was not long enough to reach the basket? Why would someone perform an act in futility? And why would God create such an astonishing miracle of Batya's arm growing instead of something more subtle, like a wind blowing the basket closer to Batya, for example?

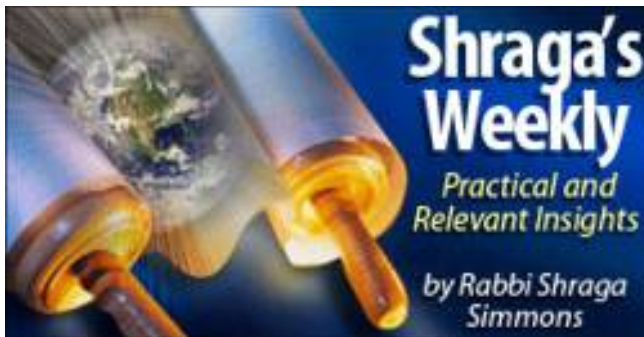
Lesson:

Batya could have easily made numerous excuses as to why it was not worth it to try to retrieve the basket. However, by extending her arm, she extended herself and her limitations. Often in life, we are confronted with different situations or opportunities that seem beyond our scope of what we can handle or accomplish. We have excuse after excuse as to why our efforts will result in failure – so what's the point in trying?

Batya recognized something very beautiful: when we go beyond what we think we are capable of, we break through the very barriers that stand in our way of success. The actual act of extending ourselves allows for personal growth, allowing us to tap into reservoirs of potential that often times we did not know existed. When Batya extended her arm beyond what it was capable of, it resulted in *growth*. And by God allowing Batya to be successful in retrieving Moses's basket, we can learn that when we push ourselves as far as we can go, God in turn will help 'extend our hands' even further.

Exercise: Take on something that you have wanted to do but have not because you thought it

was too difficult. This could be connecting with an old friend after a fallout, learning something new, or taking on a new project. Know that by making the effort, you have already come out ahead, regardless of the outcome.



The Process of Assimilation

Three Jews are at the Country Club discussing their ethnic origins. The first says, "My father was from the old country. His name was Goldsmith. He worked in gold and made a good living. When I took over the business, I changed my name to Gold."

The second one says, "My father also came from the old country. His name was Silverstein. He worked in silver and made a good living. When I took over his company, I shortened my name to Silver."

The third man says, "My father came from the old country, too. His name was Schneider. He was a tailor and always struggled to make a living. He taught me the trade and I struggled, too. One day I turned toward Heaven and prayed: 'Lord, help me succeed in

business and we'll be partners.' Since then my business has become a great success!"

The other two look at him and say, "Do you really expect us to believe that story?"

"Sure," he says, "haven't you ever heard of Lord and Taylor?"

Safeguard to Continuity

When we last left Jacob and his 12 sons, they were thriving. Despite being set in the midst of a corrupt Egyptian society, the Jewish community was flourishing with schools, synagogues and social networks. With such a strong "Jewish" infrastructure, assimilation was virtually non-existent; in fact, the Talmud reports there was only one incident of intermarriage!

Today, with "Jewish continuity" such a priority (as it is in every generation), it is important to identify: What was the secret of success for the Jewish community in Egypt?

The Torah provides two insights: First, in Genesis 46:28, when the Jews move down to Egypt, Jacob sends Judah ahead to make advance arrangements. The word the Torah uses to describe Judah's preparations — "*li-horot*" — means "to teach." The Midrash says that before any synagogue, senior center or JCC, Judah established a Jewish school. To ensure Jewish continuity, Jewish education must be the number one priority.

Second, the Midrash says that when Jacob's family arrived in Egypt, they instituted a hedge

against assimilation: agreeing not to change their names, style of dress, or language. With these safeguards, they were able to maintain a healthy, unique identity.

Dual Loyalty

At the beginning of this week's Parsha, the Torah says:

"Joseph died, along with all his brothers and that entire generation. The Jews increased and became very strong and the land was filled with them." (Exodus 1:6-7)

The tide had turned. Immediately after the old generation died, the Jews spread throughout Egypt and the assimilation began. They dropped their Jewish customs and blended into secular society.

What happens next may shock you. Immediately, verse 8 reports the rise of anti-Semitism in Egypt. What makes this so unusual is that hatred of one group for another is typically due to what sociologists call "dislike of the unlike."

Foreigners are discriminated against because they have strange customs. In this case, however, the Egyptians never bothered the Jews –as long as they kept to themselves. Only once they began to resemble “regular Egyptians” did the anti-Semitism begin.

As the Torah records:

"[Pharaoh] told his people: 'Behold, the Jews are more numerous and stronger than we. Let us take precautions so that if a war should

occur, they won't side with our enemy." (Exodus 1:9-10)

The dual loyalty issue had reared its ugly head.

Anti-Semitism is often based on a the perception that Jews have power and influence. Case in point: "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a forgery purporting to be the conspiratorial discussions of the Jewish elders plotting to take over the world. It was - next to the Bible - the best-selling book in the world during the 1920s. In the United States, Henry Ford sponsored its publication. It has been printed in numerous languages, and till today has global distribution.

Even today on the streets of America, whispers can be heard: "Jews control Hollywood... Jews control the media... Israel gets too much foreign aid, etc."

Every American Jew has heard the question posed: "If the United States and Israel went to war, on whose side would you fight?" It's a good question to ponder...

Caught in the Trap

As it turns out, the Egyptians did not enslave the Jews outright. Pharaoh played off the Jews' desire for acceptance, and announced the beginning of a massive public works campaign. All Egyptian citizens were invited to participate in building the storage cities of Pitom and Raamses. To set an example, Pharaoh himself came out the first day wearing a brick-mold around his neck.

As expected, the Jews came out in full force. Even more, they bent over backwards to prove themselves as loyal Egyptian citizens - working

extra hard, putting in overtime, and surpassing production quotas.

Then Pharaoh made his move. He announced that for the Jews, the work was no longer voluntary. Each Jew was now enslaved, and expected to produce abundantly. The Egyptians had been keeping records and knew exactly how much each Jew could produce - while working overtime! This became the new quota. In their drive for acceptance, the Jews had sealed their own fate.

The Torah says: "*The Egyptians enslaved the Jews bi-perach*" (Exodus 1:14). "*Perach*" is usually translated as with "crushing hardness." But "*perach*" can also mean with "a soft mouth." The Jews were sweet-talked into it.

Where Are We Today?

A little over a hundred years ago, the Jewish philosopher-poet Yehudah Leib Gordon admonished his listeners with a phrase that became the watch-word for much of Jewish behavior in that era: "Be a Jew in your house, and a regular person outside" (Yehudi bi-vay-techa, Adam bi-tzay-techa). In other words, keep your Jewishness and its practice as your own private affair, and when interacting with the rest of the world, relegate your Jewish identity to the back burner. Or hide it altogether.

Many followed Gordon's advice, and outward Jewish signs such as Kipah (head-covering), Tzitzit (fringes on the garment), and Kashrut (dietary laws) were abandoned in public, as the Jews strove to imitate and emulate their gentile neighbors.

Eventually this public neglect of Jewish life spilled over into the private arena as well, and soon the motto was altered: "Be a Jew neither in your house nor outside."

A crisis of assimilation is happening again today. Young Jews are apathetic and disinterested. How can we break the cycle and turn the ship around?

It starts with each of us, expressing our Jewish identity on a regular basis. Some suggestions: Make the commitment to Jewish education for yourself and your children. Light Shabbat candles and the Shema every day. Listen to Torah classes while commuting, or start a lunchtime study group at the office. Teach (or your neighbor's children). Speak Hebrew and play Jewish music. And pay that long-overdue visit to Israel.

Don't hesitate. Judaism is not all-or-nothing. The options are endless. The experience is transforming. The reward is eternal.



Quality of a Great Jewish Leader

... Joseph died, and all his brothers and that entire *generation*. The Children of Israel were fruitful,

teemed, increased, and became strong ... and the land became filled with them. A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (Exodus 1:6-8)

These verses reveal the seeds of anti-Semitism. The Tribal Patriarchs, the *zeides* - the entire *generation* who kept the nation anchored to their faith – died. At the same time, the Jewish people increased, multiplied in great numbers, *spread out all over Egypt*, and became part of the Egyptian culture. And with that acculturation, we encounter the beginnings of anti-Semitism.

There is a new Pharaoh, "who did not know Joseph." But how can that be? Would the president of the United States claim that he does not know who preceded him in the White House? Our Sages explain that Pharaoh *did not want* to know Joseph. He did not want to acknowledge that Joseph literally saved Egypt from doom. Nor did he wish to recognize the contributions of the Jewish people. We see this very same pattern of anti-Semitism throughout our history.

Our mother, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust, has often related that many assimilated Jews in Europe had proudly averred that they were Germans, Hungarians, etc., and Jews *not at all*. These Jews were totally shattered emotionally and spiritually when they discovered that, despite their loyalty, contributions, and sacrifices for their respective countries, they were overnight labeled "Jews, enemies of mankind," and were marked for extermination. Yes, there was a new king in Europe who did not know Joseph. Millennia have

passed and nothing has changed; we, the Jewish people, have yet to comprehend that anti-Semitism is rooted in assimilation and that there is only one place where we can find shelter: It is within our God-given Torah way of life.

THE MAKING OF A GREAT MAN

In *Parashas Shemos*, we meet for the very first time the greatest prophet who ever walked on Planet Earth, the man who actually spoke to God face to face – *Moshe Rabbeinu* – Moses, our Rabbi, our Teacher. Moses was brilliant, strong, handsome, and powerful, yet it was not for any of these reasons that he was chosen to be a leader.

What rendered Moses great? What are the qualities that enable a man to transcend himself and become a spiritual giant?

It is written, "... *vayigdal* Moshe – Moses grew up and went out to his [enslaved] brethren and observed their burdens...."¹ Moses not only *saw* his people's pain, but he *felt* it, and he not only felt it, but he strove to *do* something about it, as we see further in the verses.

Raised in the palace of Pharaoh, Moses was a royal prince in the mightiest empire in the world. He could have shut his eyes and remained indifferent to the anguished cries of his brethren, but he chose to give up the opulence of the palace, the power of his royal position, to commiserate with his oppressed brethren in the slave camps. He took on their torment; he wept for them, he prayed for them, he fought for them, and as a child he had even convinced Pharaoh to

allow them to rest one day in seven. Thus, Moses enabled the Jewish people in Egypt to observe Shabbos, and to this very day, every Shabbos, we recall his gift in the *Amidah* (the *Shemoneh Esrei*) of *Shacharis* (the morning prayer service) when we declare, "*Yismach Moshe ...* Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion." And keep in mind that at this point in his life, he had not been charged with a mission. No Divine voice had yet summoned him. He did what he did out of the goodness, the purity of his own soul, and herein is to be found his greatness.

The pain and the love that Moses felt for his fellow Jews remained forever etched on his heart. When he was forced to flee from Egypt and his first son was born in Midian, Moses called him "Gershom," which reminded him that he too was sojourning in a strange land, just as his brethren were. And at the burning bush, God spoke about the suffering of his brethren, who were engulfed in the fires of Egypt, but who, despite their torment, were not consumed and remained Jews.

The Midrash relates that, prior to commissioning Moses with his mission, God gave him yet one more test. While Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, in the desert, a little lamb ran away. Concerned for his charge, Moses went in search of it. After a while, he found the animal drinking at a brook. "My poor little lamb," Moses said, reaching out for it. "I didn't know you were thirsty; forgive me. You must be weary." And with that, he picked up the lamb, placed it on his shoulders, and carried it back to the flock.

Then a Heavenly voice was heard: "This is the man who is worthy of shepherding My people." And so, Moses became the "*Ro'eh Ne'eman* – the loyal shepherd of Israel."

One need not be a rabbi or rebbetzin; one need not major in psychology, nor need one take a special course in leadership to be a *loyal shepherd*. One need only *feel love* toward those whom one guides, be concerned for their welfare, and dedicate oneself to them. With understanding and empathy, and guided always by God's laws, one will be able to lead one's family in the path of righteousness.

TORAH QUALIFICATIONS FOR A LEADER

The Torah testifies that no other person even came close to the greatness of Moses in his perception of God's prophecy. While we cannot possibly fully comprehend his majesty, we will try to note some of the great abilities that made him unique. Perhaps one way to do so is to contrast his life to that of Noah.

Initially, the Torah describes Moses in very modest terms. The daughters of Jethro even refer to him as "an Egyptian man."² On the other hand, Noah is described in glowing terms as a *tzaddik*, "a perfectly righteous man."³ At the end of their lives, however, their roles are reversed. Moses is called "the servant of God,"⁴ and Noah is called "the man of the earth."⁵ What was it that led to the spiritual ascent of Moses and the spiritual descent of Noah?

Yes, Noah built the Ark as God had commanded, but he never put his life on the line to save others. He did not plead with God to save his generation. In contrast, when the survival of the Jewish people was in jeopardy following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people or "erase my name from Your Book." The Torah teaches that we measure our success not by what we *achieve for ourselves*, but rather, by *how we impact on our fellow man and the extent through which we become a blessing to others*. This does not mean that we should neglect ourselves or our own needs, but rather, that we should expand ourselves to include others and make their concerns our own.

The average person may better relate to this concept through the oneness he feels with his immediate family, but if he can extend this oneness, this love, to encompass a larger circle, his own soul will expand and he will emerge stronger and better for the experience. Moses came by this love naturally; it was in his genes. His mother, Jochebed, and his sister, Miriam, were the midwives of the Jewish community who courageously defied Pharaoh's decree and saved the babies. And more: they lovingly cared for every infant as if it were their own.

To Moses, every soul was dear and precious. He cared for and worried about each and every person in his flock. Awed by the greatness of Moses, we can endeavor to emulate him in some measure and bond with our brothers, feel their pain, rejoice in their joy, and extend *chesed* to them.

BITYA'S TRUE IDENTITY

Were we to be told that, during the Holocaust, Hitler's daughter decided to convert to Judaism, we would dismiss the idea out of hand. It simply wouldn't be credible. So how can we explain the phenomenon of Bitya's desire to convert? After all, her father was the "Hitler" of his generation, attempting to destroy the Jewish nation even before it became a reality.

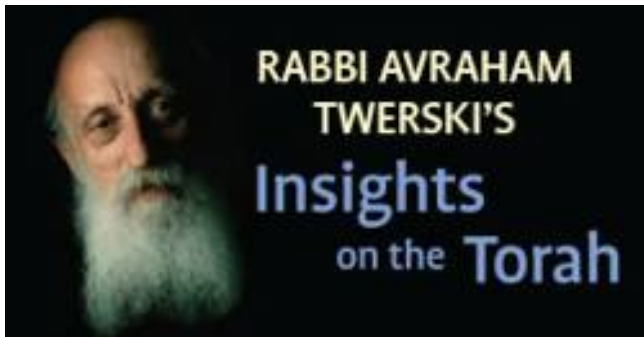
The Kabbalah teaches that Bitya was a *gilgul* (reincarnation) of Eve, the first woman. In the Garden of Eden, Eve *stretched out her hand* to take the forbidden fruit,⁶ thereby extinguishing the light of the world – the law of God. Centuries later, she is reborn to perform a *tikun* (rectification) of her misdeed, so she *stretches out her hand* again, this time to rescue the basket that contains the light of the world: Moses, who would ascend Sinai, give us the Torah, and restore God's light.

We have no way of knowing whether we lived in an earlier life or what failings we may have been guilty of perpetrating. But one thing we can know with certainty: Whatever tests or challenges come our way, we must rise to the occasion and reach beyond ourselves to pass them. It is God Who is Master of the world, and He places tests and challenges in our paths so that we may fulfill our true purpose and mission in life. So, when confronted by challenges, let us never feel overwhelmed or paralyzed. Hashem would never test us with a mission which we are not capable of fulfilling.

1. Exodus 2:11.

2. Ibid. 2:19.

3. Genesis 6:9.
4. Deuteronomy 34:5.
5. Genesis 9:20.
6. See Genesis 3:6.



How We Relate to God Depends On How We Relate to Others

"A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know of Joseph" (Exodus 1:8).

The Talmud quotes two opinions: It was either a new king or the existing monarch with new policies, who acted as if he "did not know of Joseph" (Sotah 11a). The Midrash follows the second opinion, and states that when the Egyptians turned against the Jews, Pharaoh refused to go along with them and they deposed him for three months, until he yielded to their wishes (Shemos Rabbah 1:9).

Is it not amazing that the king who said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there can be no one so discerning and wise as you" (Genesis 41:39), now says to Moses, "Who is God that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know God" (Exodus 5:2)?

Rabbi Meir Rubman cites Mishnas R' Eliezer: "The reason the Torah is so harsh regarding an ingrate is because denial of gratitude toward another person is tantamount to denial of gratitude toward God. Today one denies gratitude toward a fellow man, and the next day he denies gratitude toward God. All of Egypt knew that Joseph had saved their land, as did Pharaoh. However, Pharaoh chose to deny gratitude toward Joseph, and thereafter denied God, saying, "Who is God that I should heed His voice? #133; I do not know God" (Lekach Tov, Shemos p. 5)

How we relate to God depends on how we relate to other people. When the Baal Shem Tov was asked, How can one develop a love for God? How can one love a Being that one cannot see or have any sense experience of Him? He responded, "Love your fellow man. This will lead you to love of God." Indeed, the Talmud says that the way a human being can cleave unto God is to emulate His traits: "Just as He is merciful, you should be merciful" (Shabbos 133a).

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Chasman shares another insight with us. The Midrash says that Pharaoh initially resisted his people's demands that he enslave Jews, because he felt indebted to Joseph and to Jacob's blessing the land. However, when expedience required that he persecute the Jews in order to retain his throne, he became a cruel tyrant, enslaving them and ordering their children to be killed. This shows us that a person is capable of altering his emotions. A person may not say, "That's me. That's just the way I am."

Pharaoh underwent an emotional change because of his desire to keep his position. Just as a person



Shmot (Exodus 1:1-6:1) *basic compendium*

can alter one's emotions negatively, so can one change one's emotions positively. Pharaoh was motivated by expedience. A person can also be motivated by a sincere conviction to do what is right. One need only realize which emotions are proper and have a sincere desire to cultivate them.

People who do not wish to put forth the effort to modify their character traits may say, "I was born that way." Rabbi Shneur Zalman says in Tanya, "It is an inborn capacity that the intellect can be master over the emotions." The ability to change is an inborn trait. In fact, it is the most significant distinguishing feature between man and other living things. A person who denies his ability to alter his character is lowering himself to a subhuman level. Our dignity should not allow us to do this.

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