

TIMELESS TORAH

SHEMOT: The Sound, Silence and Strength of Exile

Response to Tyranny

Much of the narrative of the Exodus focuses on the interactions between the Jewish and Egyptian leadership. Read carefully, however, there is a fascinating perspective to be discovered in the voice of the ordinary people of the Bnei Yisrael. The first recorded reaction of the people to the decree of slavery is the midwives' response to Pharaoh's command that they kill all the Jewish boys at birth. This command met with stubborn and courageous refusal, but, based on the Midrash, three distinct stages can be traced in the way the midwives managed the situation.

Although the two midwives are normally identified with Yocheved, mother of Moshe, and her daughter, Miriam, the Torah records their names as Shifra and Puah. The Midrash offers the back-story to these monikers. Puah was Miriam, the younger midwife, and her name is related to the word '*hofiah* – appeared'. This means that she presented a brazen face to Pharaoh – the Midrash dramatically describes her as 'sticking her nose out at him' – in an outright rejection of his command to harm the Jewish babies. Shifra then had to be '*me-shaperet* – improve' her daughter's words, appeasing Pharaoh and apologising for the hastiness of her youth.

Here we find two contrasting approaches to the oppression that has followed us throughout our long history. Often, when we faced with persecution and subjugation, we have had to choose between displaying our outrage and defiance on the one hand, and the need to remain calm and rational on the other hand.

Eventually, though, the verses describe how together, the midwives developed a more

pragmatic approach. They secretly supported the births and the young babies, while explaining to Pharaoh that the Jewish mothers were able to give birth without midwives and that they had become redundant. Through centuries of experience, a primary route of defence against tyranny has often come through finding the middle way, thereby quietly preserving our way of life against the odds.

Perception of Maturity

Before the narrative turns to the general population, the Torah describes the reaction of a particular individual to the enslavement. Although not yet in any leadership position, Moshe is part of a privileged class, living in the palace as a foster child of the princess. It seems that Moshe is aware of his roots; he 'goes out to his brothers and he sees their burdens, and he sees an Egyptian man hitting a Jewish man – one of his brothers' (2:11). The repetition of the word 'sees' stands out in this verse, but this point becomes all the more significant when we examine another repetition. The previous verse (2:10), relates that 'the lad grew up' and was passed from his Jewish nurse to Batya, the Egyptian princess, while verse 11 says again that 'Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers'. The Ramban explains that the first mention of growing up refers to Moshe's physical development, and with the second 'and he grew', the Torah emphasises that he did not just grow older but he also became emotionally mature. He developed a sense of belonging and empathy towards his persecuted people. As Rashi puts it, he 'directed his eyes and heart to be distressed because of them'.

With this in mind, we can begin to appreciate why the word 'see' is mentioned twice. Moshe did not just see the Jewish enslavement;



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he felt the pain of his brothers. He did not just take note of the burdens of the people as a whole; he also saw the pain of individuals. And in a profound rare Midrash, contained within a manuscript discovered in the mountains of Kurdistan, we find yet another interpretation in the same vein. The Midrash says that Moshe noticed that the wind would blow the cement that the Jewish people were using into their eyes, and he would apply ointments to help restore their vision. As a reward for this care, Moshe was blessed that his own eyes did not dim until his dying day: '*Lo chahata eino* – his eye had not dimmed' (Devarim 34:7).

Moshe becomes Moshe Rabbeinu, 'our teacher', because he sees and, more importantly, he understands what he sees. To see oppression requires perception, and although Moshe at this point is a private individual, it is this insightfulness that brings him eventually to a place of greatness.

Sound of Silence

Finally, the spotlight of the Torah's narrative turns to the enslaved Jewish people and describes how they managed their situation: 'And the Bnei Yisrael groaned from the work, and they cried out to Hashem from the work ... And Hashem remembered His covenant ... And Hashem saw Bnei Yisrael, and Hashem knew' (2:23-5; *Haggadah shel Pesach*). From this verse, the Sages (Jerusalem Talmud, Taanit 1:1) highlight several core reasons that were instrumental to the Bnei Yisrael meriting their Redemption - their pain, their cries, the merit of their ancestors ('His covenant') and their teshuvah ('and Hashem saw').

In this list, we can discern two distinct elements that characterise the Jewish response to any tyranny: sound, meaning our cries of prayer to Hashem and silence,

meaning the merit of our ancestors in the background. There is however, a crucial third element to the Jewish people's response, and that is the strength of their teshuvah, which we translate as repentance, implying an ability to find deep within themselves the power to improve and draw close to Hashem.

Examining these verses, we discover that the teshuvah of the Bnei Yisrael did not come about in a vacuum but was triggered through the groans of the people. Rav Simchah Bunim of Peshischa (d.1827), an early Chassidic leader, would retell an anecdote that illustrates the strength of a 'groan'. He would say that he was once walking through a marketplace on Friday afternoon and he observed a butcher hard at work serving his customers. Suddenly, the butcher noticed the time and with a deep groan, thrust his earnings into a corner and rushed to ready himself for Shabbat. That Shabbat evening, Rav Simchah Bunim witnessed the butcher thanking Hashem for giving him the gift of Shabbat.

This butcher's groan, Rav Simchah Bunim would say, was not a groan of despair or discontent. This was a groan of strength, of deep yearning and anticipation for change. It was not the butcher who groaned, but the Jewish soul within him. In Egypt too, the first catalyst for redemption was neither the Jewish people's teshuvah nor their prayers; all this came about only through their groans, a transformative realisation that things could change for the better. This is the true strength of the Jewish people, a strength which precedes both the sound and the silence of all other reactions.

Next Week - VA'ERA: The Significance of a Sign