

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Shmot, January 2017

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Shmot – the courage to do what is right under pressure

This week we start sefer Shmot and we learn about the commencement of the slavery in Egypt. One of Pharaoh's early decrees for dealing with the 'Jewish problem' was infanticide. He called Moshe's mother and sister who were in charge of the midwives and issued a chilling instruction: *“When you deliver the Hebrew women and you see them on the birth stool, if it is a son then you must kill him and if it is a daughter then she shall live.”* (Shmot 1:16)

These midwives had enormous pressure to comply. The most powerful king in the world had given them an order. To defy would mean almost certain death. However, that is precisely what the midwives did: *“But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt said to them and they caused the boys to live”.* (Shmot 1:17)

Miraculously Pharaoh did not kill the midwives and Hashem rewarded them for their courage: *“And it was because the midwives feared G-d that He made for them houses”.* (Shmot 1:20)

Rashi explains that this reward of “houses” referred to dynasties¹ – Yocheved became the ancestor of the Kohanim and the Leviim and Miriam became an ancestor of David HaMelech. Yocheved and Miriam both displayed courage, fortitude and self-sacrifice to do what was right despite the enormous pressure placed on them. We see that this same character trait was also apparent in these two dynasties with which the midwives were blessed.

For instance, in relation to David HaMelech, he writes in the book of Tehillim: *“And now, kings, be wise. Be disciplined you judges of the earth”.*² This passuk is talking to the gentile kings. Rashi explains that David is admonishing the gentile kings to turn away from evil and be spared punishment. Let's try to imagine the meetings between David and the other kings of his time. They would want to talk about the topics that kings find interesting – the size of their treasury, their military victories and lands they had conquered. David would insist on talking about Hashem, teshuva and the Torah! The other kings must have thought that David was weird! There would have been significant pressure on David to conform to the behaviour of the other kings. However, David didn't care what the other kings thought. He knew what was right and he stuck to it tenaciously.

The Kohanim were also renowned for their bravery and courage. At the time of the Chanukah story, the powerful Syrian-Greek Empire had outlawed the practice of Judaism under penalty of death. Matityahu, the elderly priest, came from a brave family of Kohanim who had the audacity to stand up to one of the world superpowers. He began the revolution by killing a traitor who was about to offer a sacrifice to the Greek gods. He then called on others to join him. Though completely outnumbered, the brave Maccabees knew what was right and were willing to defend the Torah at the risk of death.

This admirable character trait of courage to do what is right under pressure is apparent in Levi himself, the father and grandfather of the brave midwives. However, the merit of this character trait when it first appears is slightly ambiguous. When Shechem abducts Dinah³, Levi, together with his brother Shimon, take matters into their own hands. They rescue their sister, kill every male and

¹ See Shmuel II 7:11 for a similar usage of this term “house” to refer to a dynasty.

² Tehillim 2:10.

³ See Breishit, Chapter 34.

destroy the town. Yaakov is not impressed with their behaviour and admonishes them. However this incident still demonstrates Levi's courage and fortitude to follow what he believed to be right.

Years later, we see this courage and gevura again at the time of the Golden Calf. However by this stage the tribe of Levi had successfully redirected this character trait so that it was purely focused on the service of Hashem. The tribe of Levi was the only tribe that totally refused to participate in the building and worshipping of the Golden Calf. Then, when Moshe called out "Whoever is for Hashem, join me"⁴, the entire tribe of Levi rallied around him. They then punished the other members of Bnei Yisrael that were deserving of death, even if they were closely related.

One day, the Chafetz Chaim was visited by a young Yeshiva student. The Chafetz Chaim asked him if he was a Kohen. The student replied that he was not. The Chafetz Chaim then explained to the student why he had the merit of being a Kohen but the student was not: "Many years ago, after the sin of the golden calf, Moshe called out: 'Whoever is for Hashem, join me'. The entire tribe of Levi grabbed the opportunity and ran to Moshe. For that reason, the tribe of Levi merited to take over the role of the first born and serve in the Mishkan". The Chafetz Chaim was teaching an important lesson. There will be times when the call comes out: "Whoever is for Hashem, join me". When we hear that call, we have to have the courage to take the risk and follow Hashem's will despite the pressure.

These days, we are rarely called upon to serve Hashem at the risk of our lives. However we still feel pressure from other sources – most notably from those around us who scorn us. This is similar to the pressure that David HaMelech must have felt when he met with the foreign kings. We are taught in Pirkei Avot: "Be bold as a leopard...to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven".⁵ Commentators explain this to mean that we should not be embarrassed to carry out Hashem's will, even among people who scorn and laugh at us. This can certainly require us to exhibit a healthy dose of courage.

Peer pressure is when people are influenced by their peers and encouraged to change their attitudes, values, or behaviours to conform to those of the influencing group.⁶ Though teenagers are usually more susceptible to this problem, the reality is that we all experience pressure to conform. It can often be difficult to stick to what we know Hashem wants us to do in the face of such pressure.

What is the secret of all these courageous people? How do they overcome their fear of death, of violence, of peer pressure? The answer is revealed in the second passuk quoted above: "But the midwives **feared G-d** and they did not do as the king of Egypt said to them". The true answer to courage is to keep the 5th of the 6 constant mitzvot – fearing Hashem. If we truly fear Hashem then there is no need to fear anything else because we understand that He is in charge of everything.

In daily life we often face pressure to do what we know is wrong. This pressure can come from many sources - non-Jews, fellow Jews, neighbours, even our own family. We need the courage to stand up to that pressure and boldly stick to what is right. To fire up our courage we can focus on fearing Hashem and reminding ourselves that He is in charge and is All Powerful. We can draw courage from the example of the midwives in this week's Parsha and the other heroes of Jewish history.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of situations in our daily lives which require us to stand up for Hashem with courage. The pressure to conform can be very subtle and if we are not alert we can find ourselves subconsciously modifying our behaviour without even being aware of it.
2. When we find ourselves under pressure to do what is wrong, think about the brave examples from Jewish history. If they could stand firm despite the pressure and at risk of seemingly certain death, then we can also be brave!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Shmot 32:26.

⁵ Yehuda Ben Tema, Pirkei Avot 5:23.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer_pressure