



The Bravery of the Midwives

By Noam Barenholtz (21)

Sefer Shemot begins with Bnei Yisrael's transition from a family to a nation. One generation is replaced by the next, and the nation changes character almost overnight: *"VaYamot Yosef VeChol Echav VeChol HaDor HaHu. UVenei Yisrael Paru VaYishretzu VaYirbu VaYa'atzmu BeMe'od Me'od VaTimalei Ha'Aretz Otam,"* "And Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. And the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them" (Shemot 1:6-7). The Torah describes how this nation was enslaved and persecuted through two stories: the first, Paroh's plan to subjugate Bnei Yisrael, the next, an enigmatic story about Paroh and the Jewish midwives.

Let's examine this story. Paroh calls the two Jewish midwives, who we're told are named Shifrah and Pu'ah, and instructs them to kill any Jewish male they help deliver. These midwives have great Yirat Elokim, fear of God, and of course refuse to follow Paroh's command. They can't just blatantly disregard the king's order, though, so when he calls them back and asks them why they didn't listen, they concoct an airtight alibi: the Jewish mothers are experts at giving birth, they say, and they always get there just a bit too late to kill the babies. "Oh well," Paroh says, and moves on to another plan. Meanwhile, Hashem acts kindly towards the midwives, and the nation's population explodes.

Of course, this story serves as a step in Bnei Yisrael's subjugation, and explains why Paroh decreed to throw all Jewish boys in the Nile (the midwives wouldn't do it for him), but I'm still a bit troubled by it. First, why do we care what the midwives' names were? They were, obviously, great Tzadikot who sacrificed for their nation, but they never appear again in the Torah. Why does it matter who, exactly, they were? Second, why does the

Torah focus so much on their interactions with Paroh, going into so much detail on his claim and their response? Finally, why does this story exist in the first place? What purpose does it serve other than to explain why Paroh decided to throw all the boys in the Nile? Did we really need a backstory for that?

To explain this story, we have to examine its wider context - Bnei Yisrael becoming a nation and their subjugation to Egypt. The Seforno¹ (ibid. s.v. Paru VaYishretzu) explains the transition between the generation of Bnei Yaakov and the generations that followed as one of degradation, in which the nation lost its moral bearings: "After all seventy [of Yaakov's sons] died, they turned towards the ways of vermin, who run to Be'er Shachat." Startlingly, Bnei Yisrael became morally and spiritually corrupt immediately after the death of the Dor Yoredei Mitzrayim, to the extent that, according to the Seforno, the Torah describes them as vermin. The natural consequence of this, according to the Seforno, was *"VaYakom Melech Chadash Al Mitzrayim Asher Lo Yada Et Yosef,"* "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (ibid. 8). Of course he knew who Yosef was, the Seforno comments, but he couldn't connect Yosef, the virtuous prince, with this nation of vermin.

Shibud Mitzrayim thus took place on two fronts. A nation lost its way, forgetting the God of its forebears. It also lost its humanity, at least in the eyes of the Egyptians: Bnei Yisrael was not a nation of people, but merely a dangerous, foreign presence living in Egypt.

Bnei Yisrael's initial subjugation takes these contours exactly. Paroh told his nation, *"Hineih Am Bnei Yisrael Rav Ve'Atzum Mimenu,"* "Behold, the Nation of Bnei Yisrael is too great and might for us" (ibid. 9). They are not Bnei Yisrael, the individual children of Israel, but Am Bnei Yisrael, the menacing nation threatening to supplant

¹ Thank you to Rabbi Daniel Fridman for pointing me to this Seforno in his Shnayim Mikra WhatsApp Shiur.

Egypt. They're a nameless mass, who the Torah writes about in the singular: "*VaYasimu Alav Sarei Misim*," "They placed taskmaster over it" (ibid. 11). They're a spiritually desiccated people: God comes up not once in this story. And the Egyptians revile them: "*VaYakutzu MiPenei Bnei Yisrael*," "And they were disgusted because of Bnei Yisrael" (ibid. 12). Through all this, Bnei Yisrael just accept their fate, doing nothing as the Egyptians work to embitter their lives. They are a nameless entity, passive and sclerotic, horrifying to the Egyptians and abandoned by God.

But let's continue to the story of the Meyaleted. What do we know about them? We have no idea who they are, where they came from, or what they're going to do after this, but we know their names. With that, we can answer our first question. The Meyaleted rebel against Bnei Yisrael's designation as Sheratzim, weeds Egypt can't seem to get rid of: they are people, and so the Torah must tell us their names. They also rebel against Bnei Yisrael's spiritual decline: "*VaTirenah HaMeyaleted Et Ha'Elokim, VeLo Asu Ka'Asher Dibeir Aleihem Melech Mitzrayim*," "The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them" (ibid. 17). Their fear of God, absent in their entire generation is what gives them the courage to disobey orders coming from Paroh himself.

Why, however, does the Torah provide so much detail about the midwives' interactions with Paroh? A second glance at the midwives' alibi explains why. Their excuse - they always happen to miss the birth - doesn't hold water. Why does Paroh accept it? The answer may lie in the next Pasuk: "*VaYeitev Elokim LaMeyaleted*," "And God was good to the midwives" (ibid. 20). What was the good that Hashem performed for the midwives? Maybe it was the very fact that Paroh accepted their alibi. In consequence of that, of course, they could continue serving as midwives, and "the people multiplied and increased greatly" (ibid.). The Meyaleted's Yirat Elokim was reciprocated by God, and he provided them with special Siyata DiShemaya.

With all that in mind, we can answer our final question. What is the point of this narrative in the wider story of Shibus Mitzrayim? The Meyaleted, in contrast to the mass of Bnei Yisrael, show how Geulah will be achieved. Passivity, indifference towards God, and groupthink accomplish nothing. Yirat Elokim and

personal initiative, on the other hand, will bring the redemption.

This change in mindset, from group to individual, and from passivity to active protest, plays out in the rest of the Parashah. Paroh's next decree, in response to the Meyaleted's actions, is to throw all the newborn Jewish male's into the Nile. Yocheved, (who, interestingly, is not named in the story) of course, cannot accept this and takes matters into her own hands, sending her son into the Nile and trusting to God's protection to save him. Moshe, too, cannot sit by while God sends somebody else to save Bnei Yisrael. When he asks Hashem, "*Shelach Na BeYad Tishlach*," "Please make someone else your agent" (ibid. 4:13), Hashem responds in anger. What is so upsetting about Moshe's request? Isn't it just another aspect of his humility? It may be so, but the Ge'ulah will not come if leaders don't accept the mission God has trusted them with. Only Yirat Elokim, and the ability to step up when needed, will bring Ge'ulah. "*UVeMekom She'Eini Anashim, Hishtadeil LiHiyot Ish*" (Pirkei Avot 2:5).

A Three Month Preparation

By Eytan Goldstein ('24)

When looked at, Sefer Shemot shifts from the story of the Patriarchs and focuses on the story of the now larger "Jewish" nation. Within the three months of the year which Sefer Shemot is read, the big pictures of this Sefer are: how we began as slaves, a long Galut, and in the end, we have Pesach, where we leave Egypt. We see all of that in the entirety of Sefer Shemot, which we read from the middle of the month of Tevet to the middle of Nissan, a span of 3 months. Why is this the case?

Aside from being in a nationwide Galut, everyone is in their own Galut, with their own personal Yeitzer HaRa and problems. To experience the same type of Ge'ulah that Bnei Yisrael had when they left Egypt, we must start fighting extra hard against our Yeitzer HaRa now to feel a similar Ge'ulah by the time Pesach comes. We say that in every generation, the people should feel like they themselves left Egypt on Pesach, but this can only be accomplished through preparation. So, with all this time allotted in the days to come, we can take small steps against our Yeitzer Hara to ensure a Ge'ulah by the time Pesach arrives.

(The main idea for this came from the Sefer Avodah Avodat with my own twist)

Moshe Moshe

By Reuben Kaminetzky ('25)

In Parashat Shemot, Hashem calls out to Moshe twice at the burning bush. There are other times when Hashem calls out to a Navi and calls their name twice. Some examples are Avraham Avinu, Yaakov Avinu, and Shmuel HaNavi. However, in the case of Moshe the Ta'amei HaMikra are different. Here there is no Pesik, a line indicating a pause in the Pasuk, while in the other cases, there is a Pesik between two names, indicating a pause. Many Mefarshim ask why there is no Pesik here.

The Ohr HaChaim explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was a Navi from birth, and immediately recognized that Hashem was speaking to him, and therefore, a pause is not needed. Malbim similarly explains that Moshe was not like any other Navi as the Pasuk says “לֹא־כֵן עֲבַדְי מֹשֶׁה” (BeMidbar 12:7-8). This Pasuk means that Hashem spoke to Moshe differently than any other Navi. Other Nevi'im needed to prepare, but Hashem could speak to Moshe without his preparation. With the other Nevi'im, the Pesik shows the pause needed before the Navi could receive Nevu'ah from Hashem. Since Moshe didn't need to prepare, there is no need for a Pesik in the Pasuk.

Another explanation is offered by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. He explained that regarding Moshe Rabbeinu there was a sense of urgency. Hashem needed someone who would lead the Jewish People, and Hashem repeated Moshe's name because he needed Moshe to quickly save Bnei Yisrael. This situation can be compared to a house that is on fire. You will call someone repeatedly without pausing to wake them up and get them out of the house. Since Hashem did not pause when calling Moshe, there is no Pesik. The absence of the Pesik reflects the urgent situation Bnei Yisrael was in.

The Ta'amei HaMikra teach us more than how to read the Torah; it helps explain what is omitted from the Pasuk. We can learn a lot just by paying attention to the Ta'amei HaMikra.

The Inexplicably Foolish Fall of Beitar²

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

The foolishness of the people of Beitar, as related by the Gemara, is astonishing! The Gemara (Gittin 57a) relates: “Beitar was destroyed on account of a shaft from a carriage. The Gemara explains that it was customary in Beitar that when a boy was born they would plant a cedar tree and when a girl was born they would plant a cypress. And when they would later marry each other they would cut down these trees and construct a wedding canopy for them with their branches. One day the emperor's daughter passed by there and the shaft of the carriage in which she was riding broke. Her attendants chopped down a cedar from among those trees and brought it to her. Owing to the importance that they attached to their custom, the residents of Beitar came and fell upon them and beat them. The attendants came and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you. The emperor then came against them in war.

“The losses at Beitar were staggering, as the Gemara continues and relates: “It was in connection with the war that ensued that the Sages expounded the following verse: “He has cut off in His fierce anger all the horn of Israel” (Eichah 2:3). Rabi Zeira says that Rabi Avahu says that Rabi Yochanan says: These are the eighty thousand officers bearing battle trumpets in their hands, who entered the city of Beitar when the enemy took it and killed men, women, and children until their blood flowed into the Great Sea. Lest you say that the city was close to the sea, know that it was a Mil away³.

“It is similarly taught in a Braitta that Rabi Eliezer the Great says: There are two rivers in the Yadayim Valley in that region, one flowing one way and one flowing the other way. And the Sages estimated that in the aftermath of this war these rivers were filled with two parts water to one part blood. Likewise, it was taught in a Braitta: For

² Our analysis stems from the discussion at the Jachter table and the pre-Mincha learning at Congregation Shaarei Orah on Shabbat Chazon 5782

³ The Beitar with which we are familiar, that lies a few miles south of Jerusalem, lies much more than a Mil (kilometer) from the Mediterranean Sea. However, that Beitar does lie at the top of Eretz Yisrael's central mountain range, and blood from there would flow to the Mediterranean.

seven years the gentiles harvested their vineyards that had been soaked with the blood of Israel without requiring any additional fertilizer.”

Beitar's Many Mistakes

Upon reflection, we realize that the people of Beitar made a series of inexplicably foolish mistakes that led to their awful demise. First, attacking the attendants of the Roman emperor's daughter was astoundingly dangerous. The story takes place decades after the Romans destroyed the second Beit HaMikdash. The Romans were severe in their punishments for those they perceived as rebels. So how could Beitar even think of attacking those attending to a high-ranking Roman dignitary? What did they believe would result from this recklessly aggressive action?

Second, the Romans did not intend to intrude on a Jewish practice by cutting down the tree – they intended only to fix the carriage of the daughter of the Roman emperor. Attacking the Romans was an overwrought and irresponsible response. Third, if the Jews were so concerned about these trees, why did they not think ahead and plant them away from the road? Planting the trees so laden with meaning so close to the road is an invitation to trouble!

Finally, the tree practice was not a Torah or rabbinic law; it was merely a Minhag. It is hardly worth waging war over a custom! What a lack of perspective!

Thinking Ahead

It is not for naught that the Sugya of the Churban begins (ibid. 55b) by citing the Pasuk, “אִשְׁרֵי אָדָם, מִפְּחַד תָּמִיד וּמִקְשָׁה” (ibid. 55b), “Happy is the man who fears always, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief” (Mishlei 28:14). Rashi (Gittin 55b s.v. Mephacheid) explains that happy is one who “carefully anticipates the results of his actions, realizing the terrible results if he were to act in a particular manner.”

The people of Beitar failed miserably in this regard. They were caught in the emotional heat of the moment and recklessly caused the total demise of their community. They hardened their collective hearts to their future and fell into misery.

How ironic is it that Beitar failed to consider the future in defense of a beautiful practice rooted in thinking about the future? Its beauty is thinking ahead and preparing for marriage as soon as a child is born. If so,

why did Beitar not think ahead before they attacked the Romans?

A Failure to De-escalate

Similar to Kamtza Bar Kamtza, a minor annoyance spiraled into a major catastrophe, the Jews of Beitar dramatically overreacted to an unintended provocation. The Roman emperor, in turn, misinterpreted Beitar's actions as a full-scale rebellion.

The importance of de-escalating a collision of cultures (as occurred in this case where the Roman and Jewish cultures unintentionally collided) is on full display in this story.

Sometimes a conflict is unavoidable. However, the carriage situation in Beitar was a conflict that we should have squelched early on. The failure to nip the problem in the bud resulted in a devastating disaster.

Beitar's Leadership

Many questions emerge from thoughtful reflection on this Gemara. For example, where were the leaders of Beitar? Why did they not prevent the attack? Why did they not hand over the irresponsible perpetrators to the Roman authorities to save Beitar (as did the wise woman of Avel Beit Ma'acah, Shmuel II Perek 20)? Why did they not try to bribe the Roman leadership (as done in Ta'anit 21a) to save their community?

As in the Kamtza Bar Kamtza story, the apparent silence and inaction of Beitar's rabbis and lay leaders looms large and should be included in a long list of blunders that brought about Beitar's end.

Hashem's Role

Several Sha'arei Orah congregants thought that the magnitude of fatal errors points to divine manipulation. We find the Tanach attributing Rechavam's staggeringly foolish handling of the northern tribes' rebellion (in Melachim I Perek 12) to Hashem's control of Rechavam (Melachim I 12:15 and 24). Perhaps the same applies here to the fall of Beitar.

However, the Gemara's introduction of the Sugya – happy is one who always fears – leads us to conclude that Chazal are teaching how reckless decision-making leads to catastrophe. Thus, we cannot shift the responsibility to Hashem for these foolish moves. Instead, we must reap the sobering lessons of the capacity of otherwise intelligent people to make irrational decisions that lead to their destruction.

Conclusion

Interestingly, many stories associated with the Churban involve a wedding. Weddings are times of high emotion, and therefore, much can go wrong. Chazal (Berachot 31a) wisely introduced mourning for the Churban at a Chuppah to temper the emotions slightly.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explains why the Halachah declares children lack Da'at, sensible reason. He notes that when children are happy, they are engulfed in complete happiness, but when they are sad, they are immersed in sadness. Such an imbalance reflects a lack of Da'at.

It is often tempting to fall into the emotional high of the moment. However, adults must never fall into the emotional trap of unfettered joy or complete sadness. We must always retain the capacity for rational judgment. The stories associated with the Churban, such as the fall of Beitar, are dramatic and vivid reminders of the horrifying results of failing to do so.

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Questions, comments? Contact us at:

Phone: (201) 837-7696
webmasters@koltorah.org