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MOSHE

A Gift Drawn From the Water

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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Shemos



MOSHE

A Gift Drawn From the Water

Yocheved and Miriam, Transcending Their Essence

The *Torah* tells us that because of the unusual rate of proliferation of the Jewish people in Egypt, Pharaoh became concerned that they would ultimately join with their enemies to wage war against them and force them out of their land. Pharaoh thus decreed that if a Jewish male child is born, he should be killed on the birthstool. The *Torah* states, “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives of whom the name of the first was *Shifrah* and the name of the second was *Puah*, ‘When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see them on the birthstool; if it is a son, you are to kill him and if it is a daughter, she shall live.’”

Rashi cites *Chazal* who explain, “*Shifrah* is *Yocheved* (the mother of *Moshe*). She was called *Shifrah* because her role was to cleanse and beautify the newborn children (*l’shapeir* – to beautify). *Puah* is *Miriam* (the sister of *Moshe*) because she was the one who calmed

and quieted the newborns (*Puah* is the sound that one makes to quiet and calm a crying child).”

Why does the *Torah* choose to identify *Yocheved* and *Miriam* by referring to them by their area of responsibility as midwives and not by their names? By identifying *Yocheved* as *Shifrah* and *Miriam* as *Puah*, the *Torah* is revealing to us each of their strengths as midwives. *Yocheved* was uniquely qualified, because of her predisposition and capacity to cleanse and beautify the newborn children. *Miriam* had the unique ability to calm the newborns despite the trauma of childbirth. Each of them was appointed to be the overseers of the midwives in each of their capacities.

In order to be able to be dedicated and oversee the births of unlimited number of Jewish children it is an indication that in each of their areas of expertise it was something that identified with their essence. It was due to the unique level of love to the Jewish children that were being born into existence. Why is

it necessary for the *Torah* to share with us the innate abilities of *Yocheved* and *Miriam* as midwives?

The *Torah* continues, "...But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live." *Yocheved* and *Miriam* did not obey the dictate of the king of Egypt. They were not intimidated by his order to kill the male Jewish newborns. *Chazal* explain that when the *Torah* states, "...they caused the boys to live..." it means, that they did not only defy his command, but they also fed and sustained the newborn children.

It is natural, that if a mother is told to kill her own child, she will prefer to be killed herself, rather than bring harm upon her child. *Chazal* tell us that at this time in Egypt, Jewish women were giving birth to six children in one pregnancy. This would mean that *Yocheved* and *Miriam* were overseeing the births of hundreds of thousands of children. Regardless of this staggering number of newborns, the *Torah* identifies them as *Shifrah* and *Puah*, to affirm that their love for every child was not deterred or detracted, despite the overwhelming burden. They had seen each newborn as if it was their own child.

Since the *Torah* had quantified *Yocheved* and *Miriam's* essence regarding their capacity as midwives, one would think that the reason they had defied the order of Pharaoh to kill the male newborns, was because it was contrary to their essence. It was something that they could not do, because their feelings and love was not less than a parent has towards his own child. However, the *Torah* reveals that the basis for their defiance of Pharaoh's dictate was attributed to their fear of G-d, and unrelated to their emotional connection to the newborn children. Thus, it was necessary for the *Torah* to identify *Yocheved* and *Miriam* in their capacity as midwives (*Shifra* and *Puah*) in order to appreciate that the basis for their defiance of Pharaoh's decree was unrelated to their disposition as midwives, but rather their fear of G-d.

Had the *Torah* identified the midwives as *Yocheved* and *Miriam*, it would not have revealed this aspect of their dimension of fear of G-d. It is because they had negated and subsumed their essence to G-d that they merited to have special gifts bestowed upon them. As it states, "He (*Hashem*) made for them houses.' *Chazal* explain that these houses were the houses of Priesthood and

Kingship. *Yocheved* merited the house of Priesthood and *Miriam* merited the house of Kingship.

This is similar to what the *Torah* states in the Portion of *Lech lecha*, "*Hashem* appeared to *Avram* and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar to *Hashem* Who appeared to him." *Rashi* in his commentary explains that the altar that *Avraham* had built was because of the good tidings that he received. He was told that he would have children and that they would inherit the Land.

However, *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains this verse differently. Although *Avraham* and his wife were barren for many years and a miracle was needed for them to conceive, and *Avraham* was a person without a land; nevertheless, when G-d appeared to him and informed him that the land would be for his offspring, *Avraham's* expression of thanks was not because of these good tidings, but rather that he merited that G-d appeared to him. As the verse states, "He built an altar to *Hashem* Who appeared to him." His love and yearning for G-d was so overwhelming that everything else was negated and subsumed by the experience of G-d appearing to him.

The Qualifying Factor to Establish

Moshe and King *David* as Leaders of Israel The verse states, "*Moshe* was shepherding the sheep of *Yisro*, his father in law..." The *Midrash* cites a verse, "All the words of G-d are purified and protect those who seek refuge in them..." G-d does not give greatness to one until he has been evaluated in an area that is (seemingly) inconsequential. If he succeeds in this area, he then will be elevated to be a leader. Two world renowned individuals were evaluated and were found to be faithful and thus G-d brought upon them greatness." *Eitz Yosef*, commentator on the *Midrash* explains that *Moshe* is mentioned by the *Midrash* as one of the greatest people of all time because he was the greatest of all prophets. King *David* is mentioned because he was the greatest king of Israel. As it states, "There was no one more victorious in conquests than King *David*."

The *Midrash* continues, "G-d tested (King) *David* through sheep. What did *David* do? He took his flocks far out into the desert in order to distance them from thievery (by grazing upon land that did not belong to

him)...G-d said, 'Because you were faithful regarding your sheep, I will give you My sheep (the Jewish people) to shepherd.' As it says in the verse, 'And G-d said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel...' Moshe also shepherded the flocks of *Yisro*. He led the flocks beyond the desert to distance them from thievery G-d said to him, 'Because you were faithful to the sheep, I will give you My flock to lead...'"

G-d tested *Moshe* and King David in areas of (seemingly) inconsequential significance before elevating them to greatness. Why were they tested specifically in areas that are seemingly insignificant? It is because when one is tested in an area that is recognized as something that is obviously forbidden, it is not an indication of sensitivity and greatness. However, if one is tested in an area that one normally glosses over, because one normally does not appreciate the seriousness of the matter, then one will rise to greatness. Therefore, when *Moshe* and King David inconvenienced themselves and took such precautions with their flocks to ensure that they should not under any circumstance graze in fields that did not belong to them, it was an indication to G-d that their degree of meticulousness and reverence for His Word, qualified them to be the leaders of the Jewish people.

Ramchal writes in his work, *Path of the Just*, that there are a number of levels of fear of heaven. One level, which is considered special and advanced, is the fear of sin itself. This individual will not only avoid transgression at all cost, he continuously evaluates his past *mitzvah* and his future responsibilities and undertakings with an exceptional degree of concern that it should not be tainted to any degree with sin. This individual not only takes every precaution not to sin in areas that are obvious, but even if the transgression may be remote, he will take every initiative not to violate the Word of G-d (even at the most minimal level).

If a shepherd acts responsibly and is cognizant and vigilant regarding the grazing of his flocks, he will not allow his flocks to graze, if there is any possibility that he may be benefiting from another's field. *Moshe* and King David chose to graze their flocks beyond the desert, indicating that they were truly fearful of sin. The possibility of stealing something that was not their own was not possible where they had taken their sheep. The degree of inconvenience that they experienced in order to do this was considered a necessity by them.

One's level of fear of sin is determined by one's degree of reverence of G-d. Due to one's understanding of the awesomeness of the Master, one takes every precaution not to be in violation of His Word. *Moshe* and King David, choosing to be cautious to the degree that they had been, demonstrates their exceptional level of reverence and fear of G-d. Thus, G-d said, "As you display your reverence for Me regarding shepherding the flocks of sheep, you are qualified to shepherd My flock, the Jewish people." Being responsible to attend and address every need of the Jewish people would be an expression of their reverence for G-d because they are G-d's people.

The *Midrash* states in the portion of *Lech Lecha*, regarding *Avraham* our Patriarch, "One who is meticulous regarding *mitzvos*, his reward is great. We find that *Avraham* was meticulous regarding *mitzvos*. Because of this, he is referred to as 'the beloved of G-d.' As it states in *Yeshaya*, 'They are the progeny of *Avraham*, my beloved...' Even the rabbinic law of *eiruv tavshilin* was observed in the household of *Avraham*. As it states, 'He observed My Commandments, My Dictates, and My *Torahs*...'"

Avraham not only observed all of the Divine dictates of the *Torah* (before they were given), although he was only bound by the seven Noahide laws. He established all the safeguards and fences that were necessary to observe every aspect of the *Torah* on the most meticulous level. He understood that one could only guarantee the observance of *Torah* if one establishes fences. *Avraham's* concern for G-d's Glory, not to transgress His Will, was an indication of his unlimited reverence for G-d. Thus, he was deserving of great reward. He was thus established as the "beloved of G-d."

Miriam's Concern for Her Brother Moshe

The *Torah* states regarding *Moshe's* birth, "The woman (*Yocheved*) conceived and gave birth to a son. She saw that he was good and hid him for three months (Because Pharaoh decreed that the Jewish newborn males should be killed). She could not hide him any longer, so she took for him a wicker basket...and placed it among the reeds at the bank of the River. His sister (*Miriam*) stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done with him." Did *Miriam* stand at a distance to know what would happen to *Moshe*

because of her concern for the fate of her youngest sibling or was her standing at a distance for a more profound reason?

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Sotah* tells us that *Miriam* began to prophesize before the birth of *Moshe*. She had said, "My mother will give birth to the Redeemer of Israel." The *Midrash* states, "When *Moshe* was born, the house was illuminated with light, confirming that he was indeed destined to be the Redeemer. They had seen the Divine Presence upon him. *Amram* (*Miriam's* father) kissed her on her head and said, 'My daughter your prophecy has come about.' When *Yocheved* the mother of *Moshe* was forced to place *Moshe* into the Nile, *Amram* tapped *Miriam* on the head and said, 'What will become of your prophecy?' (Meaning that it is not certain that *Moshe* will survive and thus not be the Redeemer). *Miriam* thus stood and waited at a distance by the bank of the Nile to see if her prophecy regarding *Moshe* would come to fruition."

Miriam's concern for *Moshe* was not merely a sister's concern for a sibling's survival. She understood, as a prophetess, that *Moshe* was the only one who was qualified to be the Redeemer of Israel. If *Moshe* would not survive the Nile, the Jewish people would never be redeemed from Egypt. Consequently, the exodus from Egypt to receive the *Torah* at Sinai would never take place. Thus, the objective of creation, which is the fulfillment of the *Torah* by G-d's chosen, the Jewish people, would not be achieved. *Miriam's* pain and concern was only regarding G-d's glory. Would it be actualized through *Moshe* as the Redeemer or not? At that moment, she understood that the objective of Creation was at stake.

The *Torah* tells us that when the Jewish people were in the desert, *Miriam* spoke critically of her brother *Moshe* to *Aaron*. As a result of this negative speech, *Miriam* became a leper. When she became a leper she needed to leave the camp of Israel for a seven-day period, which is the law pertaining to a leper. During this period of time the Jewish people were meant to travel on; however, in order to honor *Miriam* G-d said that the 600,000 men above the age of twenty, the Divine Presence, and the Clouds of Glory will wait for *Miriam* until she will be able to return to the camp.

The *Midrash* tells us that just as *Miriam* stood at a distance by the Nile to see if her prophecy would come to fruition, G-d said that the entire Jewish

people, Divine Presence, and Clouds of Glory should wait for her to return to the camp. There is a positive commandment to remember what G-d had done to *Miriam* in the desert after leaving Egypt as a result of her speaking critically of *Moshe*.

Ramban explains in his commentary on the *Torah* that although *Miriam* loved her brother *Moshe* as much as she loved herself and the criticism that she had made of *Moshe* was only shared with *Aaron* her holy brother, she deserved to be punished. In addition, *Miriam* endangered her life when she waited to see what would happen to *Moshe* her brother by the Nile. Because of this, she deserved that the entire Jewish people, the Divine Presence, and the Clouds of Glory should wait for her. *Miriam* deserved this level of honor, measure for measure, for waiting to see what would happen to *Moshe*. It was not because she had behaved as a concerned sister for a brother, but rather as a prophetess who was concerned for the Glory of G-d. If *Moshe* would not survive, *Miriam* understood that the objective of existence would not come to fruition.

The *Torah* tells us after the Splitting of the Sea when it had closed upon the Egyptian army, *Moshe* sang the song of the Sea and, "*Miriam* the prophetess, the sister of *Aaron* took her drum in her hand and all the women..." *Miriam* led all of the women in song to praise G-d for all that he had done. The *Midrash* asks, "Why is *Miriam* only referred to as the sister of *Aaron*? Was she not also the sister of *Moshe*?" *Rashi* cites one interpretation of the *Midrash*, "When *Miriam* first prophesized she was only the sister of *Aaron* because it was before the birth of *Moshe*. She had prophesized that her mother would give birth to the Redeemer of Israel." Another interpretation cited by *Rashi* as to why she is referred to as "the sister of *Aaron*" is because after *Miriam* had become a leper in the desert, *Aaron* pleaded with *Moshe* to pray on her behalf to recover.

We thus see that the *Miriam* is referred to as "the sister of *Aaron*" for one of two reasons. Either because she had waited to see if her prophecy would come to fruition, that *Moshe* would indeed be the Redeemer or it was because *Aaron* had asked *Moshe* to pray on her behalf to recover from her leprous state, which was at a time when the entire Jewish people waited on her behalf, which was a consequence of measure for measure. These two events are interlinked because the second event was a consequence of the initial waiting.

The Zodiac, A Reflection of Reality

The *Torah* tells us that Pharaoh decreed that all newborn Jewish male children in Egypt should be thrown into the Nile. *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain that the astrologers of Egypt had seen in the stars/zodiac that the Redeemer of Israel will be smitten through water. They interpreted this to mean that the Redeemer will be destroyed as a result of drowning.

On the day that the Redeemer of Israel was born, since the astrologers did not know if the newborn, who would be the Redeemer of Israel, was Egyptian or Jewish Pharaoh decreed that all newborn males should be drown into the Nile. Because *Moshe* was born prematurely, *Yocheved* his mother was able to hide him for three months. However, after the three-month period had passed, she could no longer hide him. The *Torah* states that she thus fashioned, "a wicker basket and smeared it with clay and pitch and she placed the child into it and placed it among the reeds at the bank of the River."

Due to a miracle, *Moshe* did not drown in the Nile. The *Torah* tells us regarding the first plague, which was blood, *Aaron* the brother of *Moshe* strike the Nile with the staff and not *Moshe*. *Moshe* did not strike the Nile because since he was a beneficiary of the Nile, that he miraculously did not drown in it, he thus did not strike it. Therefore, the responsibility to strike the Nile was given to *Aaron*.

The *Midrash* states, "The moment *Yocheved* had placed the basket with *Moshe* into the Nile the astrologers of Egypt said, 'At this moment the Redeemer of Egypt died.'" Although factually *Moshe* was still alive, the stargazers saw in the stars that he had drowned. How could they have been mistaken in their reading of the stars? The stars of the zodiac provide an accurate reading of all that takes place in existence based on the natural order. Anything within a supernatural context, such as miracles, is not reflected in the stars. Based on nature, given the type of wooden basket that *Yocheved* used to fashion the basket in which she had placed *Moshe*, he should have drowned in the Nile. It was only due to miracle that he did not. Therefore, the astrologers of Egypt gave an accurate reading of the stars to Pharaoh that the Redeemer had died.

The *Midrash* asks, "What was the quality of the wood that *Yocheved* used to fashion the basket? Was it of the best quality wood or was it of the most inferior

quality?" One opinion in the *Midrash* was that it was the most inferior quality wood because "The devoutly righteous (*tzaddikim*) value their money more than their lives." Meaning, a *tzaddik* values everything that he has, because he understands that it is an endowment from G-d to be used and not wasted. The *tzaddik* therefore only uses only the minimum amount of material in order to achieve his purpose. If a *tzaddik* could purchase wood of the most inferior quality and it would serve in the same capacity as if he had purchased the best quality wood, purchasing anything more than the inferior wood would be excessive and wasteful. If the basket was intended to save the life of *Moshe*, who was to be the Redeemer of Israel, why did *Yocheved* not purchase the best quality wood to fashion the basket?

Yocheved understood that since *Moshe* was to be the Redeemer of Israel, he would be saved through Divine Intervention. However, in order to conceal the miracle, she needed to place *Moshe* into a basket so that the miracle of *Moshe's* survival would be concealed. Thus, the basket was only intended to conceal the miracle of *Moshe's* survival and not be an actual flotation device to keep in alive on the Nile.

Ramban in his commentary in the Portion of *Noach* explains that although it was not possible to contain all living existence into the Ark, G-d gave *Noach* specific dimensions for its building in order to conceal the miracle that was happening. Therefore, when *Moshe* was placed into the Nile with the basket that his mother had fashioned, the astrologers of Egypt immediately saw in the stars that the Redeemer of Israel had drowned, because according to the natural order such a basket made of inferior quality wood could not sustain *Moshe* in the River. Consequently, Pharaoh rescinded the decree to kill the newborn male Jewish children at that time. Had *Yocheved* made the basket out of the best quality wood, *Moshe's* life would not have been in jeopardy and the stars would read that the Redeemer was still alive. This would not have been a favorable reading for *Moshe's* survival or the Jewish newborns.

The *Midrash* tells us that Pharaoh loved *Moshe* as his own grandchild because he was the adopted child of his daughter. One day Pharaoh placed *Moshe* on his lap. *Moshe* as a young child took Pharaoh's crown and placed it on his own head. Although it could have been

seen as an innocent act of a child, *Bilaam* who was an advisor to Pharaoh, immediately became concerned. He told Pharaoh that he must kill the child immediately. It was because when *Moshe* placed the crown on his head it was a sign that the destruction of Egypt would come through him. Pharaoh wanted to dismiss this claim saying that *Moshe* was only an innocent child.

Bilaam said that in order to ensure that *Moshe* was not in fact a threat, he would make a test for him. He took a plate of hot glowing coals and a plate of gold nuggets. If *Moshe* would reach for the sparkling gold nuggets it would be an indication that his actions were with a specific intent, indicating that *Bilaam's* understanding was correct. If he would reach of the hot coals then *Moshe* was an innocent child. When presented with the two plates, *Moshe* was about to reach for the gold, G-d sent an angel to push his hands to the hot coals. After grasping a hot coal, he put it to his lips to cool it and thus burned himself. This is how *Moshe* acquired his speech impediment. Pharaoh initially dismissed *Bilaam's* advice to kill *Moshe* because his astrologers had told him that the Redeemer of Israel had died.

The Primary Source of One's Spiritual Sustenance

The *Gemara* tells us at the end of Tractate *Kesubos* that if one does not study *Torah*, he will not be resurrected at the end of time. This is because resurrection is dependent upon a special type of dew, which is called "dew of resurrection (*tal tchiya*)," which is based upon one's *Torah* study. The *Gemara* states, "Therefore, although the simple unlearned Jew (*aam haaretz*) may be observant to a certain degree he will not merit a share in the world to come (to be resurrected)." Since the unlearned Jew has no relevance to the "dew of resurrection," which is the *Torah* itself, he will not merit to be resurrected.

The *Mishna* in Ethics of our Fathers states, "Reward in this world does not exist." Meaning, one cannot be rewarded for performing a *mitzvah* in the physical world. Since the effect of *mitzvah* performance is unlimited one cannot receive reward for its performance within a limited context, which is the physical world. Something of an unlimited and eternal nature cannot be contained within a limited context. It is because of this, that one can only be rewarded for a *mitzvah* in the world to come, which is eternal.

Chofetz Chaim writes that just as one needs to nourish one's physicality by eating every day in order to sustain himself, identically one must sustain his spirituality. Regardless if one had eaten sufficiently on one day, he nevertheless must eat again the following day in order to nourish his physicality in order to survive. The body needs continuous sustenance to continue; however, the need to sustain one's physicality is only necessary as long as the person is alive and therefore it is sufficient to have sustenance that has limitation.

However in order for one's soul to merit and function in the world to come, which is eternal, it must be infused with eternal sustenance. This can only be derived through the performance of the *mitzvos* of the *Torah*. However, in order to merit the ultimate eternal existence through resurrection, *mitzvah* performance is not sufficient. One must engage in *Torah* study which is the equivalent of all the *mitzvos* combined. As it states, "*talmid Torah keneged kulom*."

Vilna Gaon z'tl writes based on the Jerusalem *Talmud*, that when *Chazal* tell us that the study of *Torah* is the equivalent of all the *mitzvos*, it is to be understood that even the study of one word of *Torah* is the equivalent of all the *mitzvos* combined. Thus, the continuous study of *Torah* provides the ultimate eternal sustenance that is necessary for the eternal soul. However, the *Gemara* in Tractate *Kesubos* concludes, that even the unlearned Jew can have a share in the world to come, despite his noninvolvement in *Torah* study. If he should provide for others to study *Torah*, he will have a sufficient connection to the spirituality of the *Torah* to merit eternal existence (resurrection).

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Berachos* asks, "Since women are not obligated in the study of *Torah*, what is the basis for their merit? By waiting for her husband to return from the study hall at night (to greet him) and by taking her children to the synagogue (to receive a *Torah* education) does she merit reward." *Rashi* in his commentary explains that by waiting for her husband to return from the study hall and by taking her children to the synagogue, the woman is the first to receive reward at the end of time, because it is due to her involvement that her husband and children are encouraged to study *Torah*.

Sforno explains, "If *Yissachar* was the tribe that was dedicated and immersed in *Torah* study and thus achieved a unique level of clarity of *Torah*, why is

Yaakov's blessing to Zevulon mentioned before the blessing that was given to Yissachar? (One would think that since the study of *Torah* is the ultimate, the blessing to Yissachar should have preceded the blessing to Zevulon.) It is because one cannot be fully immersed in *Torah* study without distraction unless his material needs are addressed.

As it states in the *Mishna* in Ethics of our Fathers, '*im ein kemach, ein Torah* – if there is no flour there is no *Torah*.' If one provides for his fellow's material needs so that he should be able to engage in *Torah* study, as Zevulon had done for Yissachar, then the merit of that *Torah* study will accrue to both of them. Meaning, not only the one who had studied the *Torah* will be deserving of reward, but also the one who had enabled him to do so through his financial support. Both will be fully accredited for the *Torah* that had been studied.

This is the intent of the *Torah* establishing the obligation of tithing one's produce to the *Kohen* (Priests) and the *Levy*. Since the Priests and Levites were the ones who were fully dedicated to the study and dissemination of *Torah*, by providing them with their respective tithes, each Jew will have a share in the *Torah* that is studied by them. Similarly, we find regarding the blessing that was given by Moshe to the Tribe of *Levy*, 'Who are the ones who will teach and give direction to Yaakov? It is the Tribe of *Levy*.' By establishing such a partnership between every Jew and the tribe that consists of the *Kohen* and *Levy*, the *Torah* is providing each Jew with an opportunity to have a share in the world to come. As it states in the *Mishna* in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, 'Every Jew has a share in the world to come.'"

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that there was a significant minority of "*aamei haaretz* – a sect of Jews who were not meticulous and sensitive to many areas of Jewish Law." They did not give the tithe (10%) to the *Levy* because they were not willing to part with a significant percentage of their profit. Since they believed that this tithe had no particular level of sanctity, they justified withholding it.

In contrast, they understood that that the tithe of the *Kohen* could not be withheld because of its level of sanctity and liability if they should eat it. Thus, even the *aamei haaretz* would give the *Kohen* his tithe, causing him to participate in the *Torah* study of the *Kohen*. He thus merited a share in the world to come.

However, after the destruction of the Holy Temple and being exiled, there no longer is a context in which one has the opportunity to give the tithes to those who are dedicated to the study of *Torah*. (It is only the produce that is grown in the Land of Israel that must be tithed). How then is the unlearned Jew able to merit a share in the world to come if the mechanism of tithes is no longer applicable? It is only if one assumes financial responsibility or facilitates the study of *Torah* by others will he merit a share in the world to come.

