

# SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE SHEMOT

January 10, 2015 19 TEBET 5775

**DEDICATIONS:** In memory of Rosa Bat Victoria – Rose August  
And David ben Farha – Dave Bibi  
Sarah Bat Esther – Sara Cain  
Rahmah bat Rachel

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## Editors Notes

There is a folder on my phone with about a dozen photos dating back more than seventy years of my aunts, uncles and my mom enjoying a day on the beach. You can feel their joy and almost hear the laughter.



One image depicts my Uncle Al in his air force uniform on what looks like a chilly day on the boardwalk posing with Aunt Rose. During World War II, Uncle Al was a Lieutenant and a navigator in the Air Corp.

This week we begin the book of exodus. It's the Passover Seder story stretched out over the next month.

On Sunday I was studying with my youngest daughter Mariyah the concept of positive commands where time was a factor and this led us to the idea that our redemptions were often through women. During Hanukah it was Yehudit who assassinated the Greek general. This may have been the act that inspired the Maccabees and disheartened the Hellenists. The hero of The Purim story is Esther who risks her life to save the people. So too the rabbis tell us that we were redeemed from Egypt based on the actions of the righteous women. "Nashim Sidkanot".

Rabbi Akiva explained that when the women went to draw water, Hashem put small fish into their buckets. They returned home and put two pots on the fire, one of fish and one of water. Then they brought the pots to their husbands in the fields. They washed their husbands, rubbed them with oil, then fed them and gave them to drink; and then they had relations with them in quiet, secluded places. And when they conceived, they went home. When the time arrived to give birth, they went and gave birth in the fields underneath the apple trees.

Just like it's almost impossible to imagine what life was in Egypt so too I find it difficult to imagine what life must've been like during World War II. We often correctly focus on those murdered in Europe and forget about those who fought from this side of the Atlantic.

I read that the Royal Air Force had a 50% casualty rate. The Americans fared better at about 20%. But that's huge number

My mom told me that my aunt Rosie moved onto the base which could not have been easy. Each mission that Uncle Al undertook was a life and death situation and few can appreciate how difficult it was for a wife counting the seconds on the ticking clock. But she was there for him!

I see it in that picture of them by the beach. She was there to encourage and give strength for each mission

Rabbi Feinhandler writes: The special qualities of the righteous Jewish women which caused our ancestors

to be redeemed from Egypt were their bitachon in G-d, and their great chesed. In spite of the fact that their husbands were in bondage, they did not give up hope, but instead trusted in G-d. Many women in the same situation might have said, "Why should I bring a child into the world only to suffer and be a slave? Especially since my husband is not even available to help me. Why make all the extra effort to become pregnant under such impossible circumstances? No, thank you!" But these special women said to themselves, "G-d can redeem us at any moment. Slavery is only temporary, but bringing a child into the world is something that will have an effect for generations to come. I will do that for which G-d has created me. And I am sure that in that merit, He will do His part and redeem us from this bondage."

Such righteous women certainly deserved to be redeemed from Egypt, and so their self-sacrifice was the catalyst which saved the entire Jewish nation.

There is something about the Gindi women. Perhaps it was because they were raised in a house of pure Kohanim as my grandfather was a Kohen and my grandmother, the daughter of a Kohen. I saw it in our grandmother and each of my cousins can tell you that they saw it through their own mothers.

They had this tremendous sense of bitachon a faith and trust in G-d. An attitude of we must do what we must do and we can have faith that Hashem will do his part. He will take care of the rest. You saw it most clearly when the Shabbat left and the new week began. After havdalah they would place their hand on the mezuzah and utter a short prayer with such intense kavanah – deep concentrated thought, that I often wish I would have even a portion of that kavana at neilah – the closing prayer of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Feinhandler continues: The second outstanding quality of the righteous Jewish women in Egypt was their chesed. They were not satisfied with their husbands being given a slave's portion of food. They wanted them to have something more, and they also wanted to give them special attention. So they went to great lengths to carry pails of water and food all the way from their dwellings to the fields. This obviously involved tremendous effort. A true act of kindness.

My cousin Morris reminded us that when we were kids in Bradley Beach and we would come back from the beach, Aunt Rosie was always the first stop. Her house was closest to the beach. Hers was the family pit stop. We would eat, sit and relax. Auntie Rose was always hospitable. She had a special way of entertaining friends and family. Entertaining is more

than just food and Aunt Rose had a very witty sense of humor especially when she made fun of Uncle Al's beloved Red Sox.

She had what my cousin Morris calls the Gindi laugh. It was a laugh ingrained into all of us through our Uncle Moe, may Hashem bless him with Refuah. It's the laugh of our aunts Sally, Ray and Margie and most especially of our grandfather and our uncle Hymie. The memory of the two of them sitting in the front room and watching Jackie Gleason in the Honeymooners, and belly laughing, brings me pleasure always. That joyous atmosphere is what we will always recall.

I can only imagine how close she was, how hospitable she was and how much joy Aunt Rose brought to her own grandchildren and I'm sure that they can go on for hours with their special stories.

My mom told me of her sister big Rose. They spoke almost daily. Rosie was very close to her parents; our grandparents David and Victoria Gindi. When Sally left home with Uncle Jimmy Azrak, Rosie became the big sister. My mom told us how she waited for Rosie's hand me downs. She always had the latest fashions. My mom especially looked forward to a coat with a fur trim hood. Rosie could have kept the coat for a second year, but she knew my mom wanted it so she bought a new one and gave that one to my mom. Rosie always put others needs before her own.

My mom told me how brilliant her sister was. She was never afraid of a challenge. She decided to teach herself bridge and not only did she learn this difficult game, she truly mastered it often hosting her friends.

She told me of the summer that my mom and dad shared a house in Bradley Beach with Aunt Rose and Uncle Al and how she always cherished those days.

Aunt Rosies kindness passed to her children.

Her daughter Maureen has simply been amazing in her care for her mom. It goes beyond imagination. Vicky is such a special mother and grandmother and what can I say about Debbie. Debbie was and is much more than a cousin. Debbie was like a sister to us especially during the days she lived with us in Deal. And today she is like everyone's mother for those residing on the Jersey Shore.

My heart goes out to the three of them. To their children and grandchildren who will miss a special

grandmother who was always a fixture. To our uncle Moe and to my Mom, both together today in Florida.

The Rabbis teach us when we give over a Torah thought of someone who has passed, their lips move. I think it comes to teach us that when we tell stories about a person, when we remember them and emulate them then they live on through us.

We laid my aunt Rose to rest this morning, but she will live on eternally through her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Tehi Nafsha Serurah BeSror HaChayim

### **The Sistine Chapel of the Jews Is Restored to Life in Jerusalem**

*Yaakov Stark died penniless and unknown. His murals at the Ades Synagogue are a masterpiece of early Zionist art.*

**By Matti Friedman]**

*New restoration of the murals at the Ades Synagogue, Jerusalem. (Matti Friedman)*

In 1901, in Ottoman Jerusalem, members of the wealthy Ades family funded the construction of a synagogue for Jews who had moved to the city from Aleppo, Syria. It was built off an alleyway near the open-air market of Mahaneh Yehuda, a neighborhood where the other houses of worship were little more than shacks; so although this one was barely the size of a small restaurant, it was called the "Great Synagogue."

The woodwork inside the Ades (pronounced "Addis") Aynagogue was intricate Damascene carpentry inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a reminder of the community's Syrian origins. The benches were not arranged facing the front, as in European synagogues, but rather in a rectangle, so that worshipers faced the small central platform where the cantor stood and where the Torah was read, and faced each other, in the more social style of the Middle East.

This was all in keeping with custom. But then the synagogue's leaders made an unlikely decision: To decorate the walls they would invite an artist not from Syria but from

Galicia, and affiliated not with any of the city's religious communities but with the Zionist bohemians and avant-gardists who had just established an art school nearby.

The young painter, Yaakov Stark, covered the interior with a combination of traditional motifs, like the symbols of the 12 tribes of Israel, and with the new icons of the Zionist movement, stars of David and menorahs, woven together like a mosaic in shades of blue and green. He included a biblical passage expressing the Jews' longing to return to Zion, using a Hebrew font that mixed Arabic calligraphy with Art Nouveau. Stark's masterpiece of early Zionist art turned the building from a mere bastion of traditional craftsmanship into something else—a strange, even unsettling amalgam of styles, the physical expression of the conviction of the Syrian worshipers and the Eastern European artist that though they had never met before, and had recently arrived from vastly different places in a city where they had never been, they were all home. There is no other synagogue like it.

Stark died a century ago, shortly after completing the synagogue, impoverished and all but unknown. Now, after a saga involving clashing art restorers, an Israeli court, and the office of the prime minister, one of Israel's most exquisite buildings has re-emerged after decades of neglect, and with it the reputation of the artist who did so much to make it beautiful.

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Yaakov Stark moved from Galicia to Jerusalem in





1905, at age 24, with the trickle of Jewish idealists making their way into Turkish Palestine in those years. He earned a meager living drawing postcards and providing occasional illustrations for magazines. He was penniless most of the time; one of the scant records of Stark's brief life is a note from a shopkeeper demanding payment of a 15-franc debt.

Stark was an early member of the Bezalel art school, which was (and still is) just down the street from the synagogue. The academy was founded by the Lithuanian-born sculptor Boris Schatz, the father of Israeli art, a larger-than-life figure around the dusty backwater that Jerusalem was at the time. Schatz's goal, as he explained it, was to "find an original Hebrew line, to lay the cornerstone of the Hebrew style." He was known for flourishes like biblical robes and a pet peacock.

Schatz considered it crucial to meld the new "Hebrew" art with the old world of traditional Judaism, if possible by bringing art into the Orthodox synagogues and study halls of Jerusalem. This, it seems, made the Ades project too good to turn down for his disciple Stark, even though the synagogue couldn't pay.

A similar project undertaken around the same time by Schatz's protégés at the famous Hurva Synagogue in the Old City—a synagogue run by Jews of European descent, unlike the Middle Eastern Jews of Ades—ended when the synagogue's sexton denounced the paintings as idolatrous and defaced them. The Aleppo Jews were more open-minded. Stark spent years on the synagogue murals, finally completing them in 1912.



*New restoration of the murals at the Ades Synagogue, Jerusalem. (Photo: Matti Friedman)*

That same year, a group calling itself The Association of Artists and Painters in Jerusalem, which included Stark, printed an ad in a local newspaper announcing its mission: "to develop the artistic sentiment of beauty among the Jews of our city." They believed esthetics to be indivisible from the ideas of Zionism; there was no point in returning to the Land of Israel to create something ugly.

The Jerusalem artists' guild was worried about the appearance of unprofessional painters, "workmen who are not at all expert in this profession, will not only compete with the artists who know their jobs well, but will also ruin the taste of our brothers the residents of Jerusalem, and accustom our eyes not to drawings of beauty and skill but to tasteless drawings corrupt in appearance. The newly rebuilt Jerusalem," the statement continued, "must be beautiful to all, from the inside and out."

Two years later, in 1914, world war broke out. Tourism to the Holy Land dried up, and with it orders for artwork. Stark found employment painting houses, and when that wasn't enough he lived on handouts from Jews in America. He often couldn't pay rent for the room he shared with his wife and daughter. In 1915, three years after completing the murals, he contracted pneumonia and died; he was 34.

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In the fall of 2009, the art historian Nirit Shalev-Khalifa was driving away from Jerusalem on the highway to Tel Aviv highway when her cell phone rang. It was a tour guide who had just been to Ades, where she had seen a man painting over the Stark murals. The congregants said it was a restoration.

By this time the murals were grimy and in disrepair. The congregation was never rich and never saw itself as a museum. There were always more pressing needs. The paint was faded and peeling in places, and some sections had been painted over altogether long before. Little remained of the artwork's original splendor. Khalifa was one of the foremost experts on the murals and was in touch with all of Israel's conservation arms and restoration experts, but this was the first she had heard of a restoration. It didn't sound right. She made a quick U-turn and headed back toward Jerusalem.

By the time she walked through the synagogue's iron gate, pocked with shrapnel from a British bombardment in 1917, it was time for afternoon prayers. She walked upstairs to the women's section and scanned the walls. The painter was no longer there, but she saw that part of the mural had been covered by a crude approximation of Stark's original

in shiny acrylic. It was, she remembers, “a catastrophe.”



Stark used a Hebrew font that mixed Arabic calligraphy with Art Nouveau. (Photo: Matti Friedman)

Someone at the synagogue, she discovered, had brought a painter, not a professional restorer, to “renew” the art. The painter’s ad-hoc method was to glue canvas on the mural and recreate the original on the canvas, believing this would preserve what was underneath. But the glue posed an immediate danger to the murals.

Experts from the Israel Museum and the Ben-Zvi Institute, created to preserve the heritage of Middle Eastern Jewry, became involved, without success; the synagogue rebuffed the experts’ attempt to intervene. Ades isn’t public property, and they didn’t want outsiders meddling in their affairs. Israel’s antiquities laws were no help, because they apply only to artifacts that predate 1700. The work continued, and eventually the entire southern wall had been covered with new paint. It looked, Khalifa said, like a cheap wedding hall.

This had been going on for months by the time an official in charge of historic buildings at the Jerusalem municipality happened upon a forgotten bylaw passed in the 1980s, designating 42 buildings as slated for conservation—including, crucially, the interior. One of them was Ades. The art experts went to court, and a judge issued an order finally stopping

the work. Khalifa believes this saved Stark’s masterpiece.

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On a recent Tuesday morning, a small group of men sat on the benches at Ades, drinking coffee, chatting, and chanting psalms, as they do every day. Ades is less a synagogue on the Western model, opening at set prayer times, than it is like a mosque in an Islamic city—a place that is always open, where you can find a conversation, a drink, and respite from the street.

Today the synagogue’s rabbi is Yosef Shayo, 62, a bearded man with a black skullcap. The Shayos are one of the old Aleppo Jewish families. The rabbi’s father, Ezra, was the rabbi before him.

Shayo has watched the synagogue change with the neighborhood over the decades. The old men he remembered as a child studying mysticism in the middle of the night disappeared; an outbuilding next to the main synagogue was taken over by “drug addicts learning Kabbalah,” that being a small but recognized section of Jerusalem’s social landscape. Some people abandoned tradition, and others came back.

Some things didn’t change: The synagogue still chants the Sabbath prayers according to the *maqam* melodies of Arab music, a different *maqam* for every week’s Torah portion. Ades is considered the most important center for the Jewish liturgy of Aleppo and the Middle East, and the midnight *bakashot* prayers in wintertime draw the best cantorial talents and a capacity crowd.

Shayo grew up with Stark’s murals and with the congregation’s memories of the Galician painter: An “impoverished wretch,” in Shayo’s words, so meticulous that he “didn’t leave a millimeter unpainted.”

Shayo believes that Stark was a Freemason, and that he incorporated Masonic symbols into the artwork—he pointed to snakes, Zodiac signs, and a strange menorah with two downward-angled bars through the candelabra. This was a matter of concern for the congregation’s leadership at one time, the rabbi said, but it doesn’t bother him: He consulted with Israel’s Sephardic chief rabbi and was assured that Freemasons posed no threat anymore. (Khalifa, for her part, says there isn’t proof that Stark was a Mason, though she says it’s not impossible.)

When the botched restoration began at the initiative of some in the congregation, the rabbi was unhappy:

"I said, this is wrong. This isn't Stark. We have a pearl in our hands—why alter it?"

After the court halted the work, the section of the prime minister's office in charge of heritage sites stepped in. The government ended up paying for a professional restoration of the murals, which lasted two years. The ceiling remains to be restored and is concealed in the meantime under a coat of light-blue paint. And other eyesores are waiting to be replaced, like the cheap window frames and old air-conditioning units that mar the walls.

Jewish culture has always expressed itself in words more than in art or architecture: The nomad's instinct is to build small and cheap, and this turns out to be hard to shake even after a few static generations. Israeli Judaism is varied and thriving but has nothing to compete with the great buildings of Christianity or Islam. Jerusalem's best attempt at a monumental house of prayer, the modern "Great Synagogue" on the outskirts of downtown, evokes not the Great Mosques of Cairo or Istanbul but rather a temple in suburban New Jersey, circa 1981.

This being the case, said Khalifa, the art historian, Israel's best claim to a masterpiece of Jewish religious architecture is Ades.

She paused, as if to concede the modest size, the battered table with a coffee pot and stacks of dirty paper cups, a few packages of Kleenex on a bench, the other human traces of the irrepressible religious life played out beneath the artwork every day for more than a hundred years.

"We are who we are," she said, "and this is our Sistine Chapel."

*Matti Friedman's work as a reporter has taken him to Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Moscow, and Washington, DC, and to conflicts in Israel and the Caucasus. His first book, The Aleppo Codex, won the 2014 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, and his second, about Israeli infantrymen holding an isolated outpost in Lebanon, will be published next year. He lives in Jerusalem.*

### Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st Aliya: The Jews had been in Mitzrayim since 2238. The Parsha begins as Pharaoh orchestrated the oppression of the Bnai Yisroel. Starting in 2362, with the birth of Miriam, the oppression began in earnest as newborn males were drowned in the Nile. The heroism of the two Midwives was rewarded.

2nd Aliya: Moshe's birth and "basket river cruise" is detailed. He was adopted by Basya, the daughter of Pharaoh, and raised by his own mother, Yocheved.

3rd Aliya: Moshe killed the Egyptian but was turned in by his own people. Forced to flee, he ended up in the house of Yisro. Moshe married Tziporah, Yisro's daughter, and Gershon, his first son, was born. The year was approximately 2428, and Moshe was 60.

4th & 5th Aliyot: Moshe received his mission at the Burning Bush. The Medresh says that the entire conversation lasted 7 days. At its conclusion, Moshe, armed with the power of Hashem's promise and the three "signs", was prepared to confront Pharaoh.

6th Aliya: Moshe asked Yisro for permission to go on his mission. Along the way, Hashem attempted to kill Moshe, but Tziporah saves him by giving their son a Bris Milah. Aharon went to greet Moshe, as per G-d's commandment. Moshe and Aharon met with the Elders and received their support.

7th Aliya: Moshe and Aharon unsuccessfully confronted Pharaoh. Pharaoh punished the Jews by refusing to supply straw for the making of bricks. The Jewish officers were held responsible and were beaten by the Egyptian overseers. The Jewish officers confronted Moshe and Moshe then confronted G-d. Hashem reassured Moshe that his mission would be successful.

Sephardim: Haftarah: Yirmiyahu 1:1 - 2:3  
Ashkenazim Haftarah Shemos Yishayah 27-28

### EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"Before the midwife comes to them they have given birth." (Shemot 1:19)

The book of Shemot begins with the heroic deeds of the Jewish midwives that saved the lives of the Jewish babies despite the evil decree of Pharaoh. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef zt"l, in one of his largely attended classes, tells an amazing story about his wife Margalit A"H that occurred after she passed away.

One day on Ereb Pesah, a man from the southern part of Israel comes to me with a little boy of about six years old. He told me to please bless his child because he was born "because of you and your wife." I asked him what he meant, "because of me and my wife?" So he told me a story that took place about four years after my wife had passed away (5754/1994). This man was requested by the Israeli government to give a model Seder to hundreds of new Olim (immigrants) that just arrived in Israel.

Everything was arranged. However, just before the holiday, his wife, who was pregnant, started to feel labor pains and it was time to give birth. They arrived at the hospital, but due to the upcoming Pesah holiday the hospital was left with only one midwife.

The woman was told that she would have to wait her turn to give birth, because there was someone before her giving birth! When she saw that she had to wait, she told her husband to go and do the model Seder. There were over three hundred people waiting for him to teach them how to do the Seder. She said not to worry for in the merit of his doing such a big misvah she would be all right. Well, he listened to his wife and with tears in his eyes he went to teach all of these people how to do a real Seder.

Upon his return to the hospital his wife told him that right after he left she suddenly saw a woman dressed in white like a nurse, and she told her, "Listen to me. My name is Margalit. I am the wife of Rav Ovadia Yosef. I have come from Heaven to help you. Do not worry and do not be afraid, I am with you and I will help you." Within a few minutes his wife gave birth to a healthy boy, and the Rabbanit vanished and went away. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Reuven Semah

"And Moshe said, [when he saw the burning bush] 'Let me turn and see this great vision.'" (Shemot 3:3)

Moshe saw a bush burning in the wilderness and realized it wasn't getting consumed. He decided to investigate this wondrous event and, according to the midrash, he either took three steps in that direction or turned his neck towards the bush. Because of his willingness to see what was taking place, Hashem appeared to him and appointed him the leader of the Jewish people. He took the Jews out of Egypt, brought down the Torah, taught it to them, and led them for over forty years. All this because of three steps, or just turning his neck.

We have seen many wondrous acts in our lifetime. At the time, they may not seem as miraculous as a burning bush, but when we stop and think about them, they are just as marvelous. They all point to a Creator Who rules the world, and Who has a plan for everything in this world. How often do we turn our necks or take a few steps to stop and see? How often do we think about the message being transmitted to us? The one who is fortunate to look a second time, to act upon it, may be getting his or her calling from Hashem! May we open our eyes and turn our necks at the right time to hear what is being told to us. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

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**[MishnaBerura.com](http://MishnaBerura.com), [LearnTorah.com](http://LearnTorah.com)**  
**Becoming A "Gadol"**

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells the story of Moshe Rabbenu, who, though born to a Jewish mother, was raised as an Egyptian prince in Pharaoh's palace. We read in this Parasha, "Vayigdal Moshe Vayese El Ehav Va'yar Be'siblotam" – "Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers, and he looked upon their suffering" (2:11). At some point, Moshe looked outside the palace window and saw his brethren, Beneh Yisrael, suffering at the hands of the Egyptian taskmasters. Rather than remain in the luxurious comfort and security of the royal palace, Moshe left the palace to observe the pain and persecution of the Hebrew slaves. The Midrash tells that Moshe actually went into the mudpits to join the slaves in their backbreaking labor.

This account is introduced with the phrase, "Vayigdal Moshe," which literally means, "And Moshe grew up." Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk (1717-1786) commented that this term actually refers to more than simply Moshe's age. It means not only that Moshe became older, but that Moshe became a "Gadol" – he became great, he achieved spiritual greatness. Rabbi Elimelech asserted that the primary ingredient of spiritual greatness is empathy, genuinely feeling the pain and suffering of one's fellow Jew, what the Sages refer to as "Noseh Be'ol Habero" – "bearing the yoke of one's fellow." What made Moshe Rabbenu a great man was not his scholarship, deep connection to God, or unmatched humility – though undoubtedly he possessed all these traits, as well. Rather, he was a "Gadol" primarily because he had this quality of empathy. He could not allow himself to enjoy the comforts of royalty while his brethren suffered from persecution.

There are many ingredients that come together to produce a cake, but not all are indispensable. If a person forgets to add vanilla extract, the cake can still be a success. But if somebody bakes a cake without flour, there is no cake. The project never gets off the ground.

The same is true of "Gadlut." Many different "ingredients," religious qualities, go into the achievement of greatness. But we see from the Torah's description of Moshe Rabbenu that the "flour," the most critical and indispensable ingredient, is empathy, feeling the pain of one's fellow Jew in distress.

It is important to distinguish between the terms "sympathy" and "empathy." To "sympathize" means to pity somebody, to acknowledge that he finds himself in an undesirable situation. But we speak here of something much more – empathy, feeling as though one's fellow's suffering is his own. Rav Avraham Pam once paid a Shiva visit to a couple who tragically lost a child. He sat in front of the mourners and cried incessantly for twenty minutes, without uttering a word. This is empathy – when one senses the pain as though the tragedy actually occurred to him.

God Himself taught us what empathy means. We read later in the Book of Shemot (24:10) that when God revealed Himself at Mount Sinai, Beneh Yisrael were offered a glimpse into God's heavenly abode, as it were, and they beheld a sapphire brick. The Sages explain that God placed a brick near His "Throne" during the period of Egyptian bondage as a symbol of His empathy for Beneh Yisrael, who spent all day, every day, producing bricks. This is what it means to empathize – to feel unable to go about one's normal routine while other people suffer, to genuinely sense pain on account of the suffering endured by his fellow. And this was the quality that rendered Moshe a "Gadol."

We live today in a very selfish, self-absorbed and self-centered society. People today don't want to be bothered by the distress of others; they don't want the misfortunes of other people to disrupt their fun and enjoyment. This is diametrically opposed to the Torah's outlook, according to which the most basic and primary value is that of empathy, feeling for the suffering of other people.

Unfortunately, there are so many Jews in our community and around the world facing problems – illness, the inability to find a suitable spouse, financial hardships, and so on. The very least we can do is to carry the names of such people in our pockets to pray on their behalf, to place other people's problems at the forefront of our consciousness. There were Gedolim in previous generations who would sleep on the floor, rather than in their bed, when there was a Jew in their community in distress. At very least, we must offer much-needed friendship and comfort to the people we know who are experiencing hardship.

If a person hears that his father's home burned down on the West Coast, and there are no flights so he cannot travel to be with his father, he will still feel his father's pain. Knowing that his father has lost everything and is now homeless and penniless, he would not celebrate at a wedding or party. This must be, at least in small measure, our feelings toward our

fellow Jews in distress. This is the most basic responsibility of the Jew, the foundation upon which we can then build in our efforts to become true "Gedolim."

### Rabbi Wein LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

We currently find ourselves at the beginning of the month of January, which is the first month of the secular year. January derives its name from the pagan god Janus, who was given two faces, one looking in one direction and the other in the opposite direction. It became the symbol of the past and the future, the old year and the new one, of looking back and looking ahead at the same time.

This symbolism was adopted by some of the emperors of Europe – notably, the Hapsburgs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Romamovs of the Russian Empire among others. They employed two headed eagles facing in opposite directions to indicate their seemingly great past and hopefully their even greater future.

In fact one could say that all of human life is based on this trait of looking back and looking ahead at one and the same time. The problem always arises as to the emphasis given to looking back or to looking ahead. Without being able to look back, individuals and nations lack the experience and background in dealing with current events. However, without looking ahead one becomes a captive of the past and runs the risk of being completely irrelevant to the actual world and its constant change.

This problem, of a proper balance between the past and the future, is especially acute in current Jewish society – particularly in the growing section of Jewish society dedicated to observance of Torah commandments and values. Much of this world lives almost solely in the past while another substantial section of our Jewish society looks only to the future and has little knowledge or concern for our past.

One of the many adverse effects of the Holocaust in the Orthodox Jewish world has been the construction of an Eastern European past that is based on romantic fantasy and invention. And it is to this imagined and unrealistic past that the current problems and issues of our society are compared to and measured.

It is of little wonder that a great deal of dysfunction, disharmony and radically opposing views and contentious personalities dominate the scene. Those that worry about the future, whether of individuals, families, the Jewish state, or the Jewish people as a



whole, are oftentimes accused of lacking faith. Since the future is inscrutable, we need not deal with it. God will somehow help us then as He has in the past.

We immerse ourselves in the past... unfortunately in a past that never was. This type of mindset affects all of our educational systems. It creates unreasonable demands upon children and students and imposes an education on the masses meant for the elite and the exceptional. It imagines that somehow everyone in Europe before the war that destroyed Jewish life there attended yeshiva, studied Talmud and was meticulously observant of all of the minutiae of Jewish law.

In making the exceptional the norm, which it never was in the past, many problems that now exist in our current society are not only unsolved but in fact are exacerbated. Being fixated on the past, especially on an imaginary past, carries dangers with it.

In a fit of rabbinic exegesis, I would suggest the following. We have just completed reading the book of Bereshith in our Shabbat morning services. At the conclusion of this holy book, our father Jacob blesses his two grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, Menashe and Efrayim. He places his right hand on the head of Efrayim and in his blessing he mentions Efrayim first before Menashe.

By the very nature of the linguistic derivatives of their names, Efrayim represents the future growth of the Jewish people in Egypt and thereafter. Menashe represents the past with all of the problems, disappointments and afflictions that the house of Jacob suffered in the land of Canaan. Apparently Jacob wishes us to emphasize the future while at the same time not allowing us to forget the real past that we have experienced and overcome.

The Jewish people are big on memorials. We never let go of our past and in fact are constantly reinventing it to fit current political and religious correctness. That is not always a negative thing. But our main emphasis should be on constructing our future. We should be imagining what the Jewish world and the State of Israel will look like a century after us and spend less time on reconstructing what we think the Jewish world looked like a century before us.

Knowing our history is essential for vital Jewish life to continue. Nevertheless falling into the trap of being academics of the past and thus disregarding the construction of our future is, in my opinion, futile and dangerous. The trick is to look forwards and

backwards – especially forwards - at the same time, without injuring our necks and vision.

### **Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks On Not Obeying Immoral Orders**

The opening chapters of Exodus plunge us into the midst of epic events. Almost at a stroke the Israelites are transformed from protected minority to slaves. Moses passes from prince of Egypt to Midianite shepherd to leader of the Israelites through a history-changing encounter at the burning bush. Yet it is one small episode that deserves to be seen as a turning point in the history of humanity. Its heroines are two remarkable women, Shifra and Puah.

We do not know who they were. The Torah gives us no further information about them than that they were midwives, instructed by Pharaoh: 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live' (Ex. 1: 16). The Hebrew description of the two women as *hameyaldot ha-ivriyot*, is ambiguous. It could mean "the Hebrew midwives." So most translations and commentaries read it. But it could equally mean, "the midwives to the Hebrews," in which case they may have been Egyptian. That is how Josephus,[1] Abrabanel and Samuel David Luzzatto understand it, arguing that it is simply implausible to suppose that Hebrew women would have been party to an act of genocide against their own people.

What we do know, however, is that they refused to carry out the order: "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (1: 17). This is the first recorded instance in history of civil disobedience: refusing to obey an order, given by the most powerful man in the most powerful empire of the ancient world, simply because it was immoral, unethical, inhuman.

The Torah suggests that they did so without fuss or drama. Summoned by Pharaoh to explain their behaviour, they simply replied: "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive" (1: 19). To this, Pharaoh had no reply. The matter-of-factness of the entire incident reminds us of one of the most salient findings about the courage of those who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. They had little in common except for the fact that they saw nothing remarkable in what they did.[2] Often the mark of real moral heroes is that they do not see themselves as moral heroes. They do what they do because that is what a human being is supposed to do. That is probably the meaning of the statement that they

“feared God.” It is the Torah’s generic description of those who have a moral sense.[3]

It took more than three thousand years for what the midwives did to become enshrined in international law. In 1946 the Nazi war criminals on trial at Nuremberg all offered the defence that they were merely obeying orders, given by a duly constituted and democratically elected government. Under the doctrine of national sovereignty every government has the right to issue its own laws and order its own affairs. It took a new legal concept, namely a crime against humanity, to establish the guilt of the architects and administrators of genocide.

The Nuremberg principle gave legal substance to what the midwives instinctively understood: that there are orders that should not be obeyed, because they are immoral. Moral law transcends and may override the law of the state. As the Talmud puts it: “If there is a conflict between the words of the master (God) and the words of a disciple (a human being), the words of the master must prevail.”[4]

The Nuremberg trials were not the first occasion on which the story of the midwives had a significant impact on history. Throughout the Middle Ages the Church, knowing that knowledge is power and therefore best kept in the hands of the priesthood, had forbidden vernacular translations of the Bible. In the course of the sixteenth century, three developments changed this irrevocably. First was the Reformation, with its maxim *Sola scriptura*, “By Scripture alone,” placing the Bible centre-stage in the religious life. Second was the invention, in the mid-fifteenth century, of printing. Lutherans were convinced that this was Divine providence. God had sent the printing press so that the doctrines of the Reformed church could be spread worldwide.

Third was the fact that some people, regardless of the ban, had translated the Bible anyway. John Wycliffe and his followers had done so in the fourteenth century, but the most influential was William Tyndale, whose translation of the New Testament, begun in 1525 became the first printed Bible in English. He paid for this with his life. When Mary I took the Church of England back to Catholicism, many English Protestants fled to Calvin’s Geneva, where they produced a new translation, based on Tyndale, called the Geneva Bible. Produced in a small, affordable edition, it was smuggled into England in large numbers.

Able to read the Bible by themselves for the first time, people soon discovered that it was, as far as monarchy is concerned, a highly seditious document.

It tells of how God told Samuel that in seeking to appoint a king, the Israelites were rejecting Him as their only sovereign. It describes graphically how the prophets were unafraid to challenge kings, which they did with the authority of God Himself. And it told the story of the midwives who refused to carry out pharaoh’s order. On this, in a marginal note, the Geneva Bible endorsed their refusal, criticising only the fact that, explaining their behaviour, they told a lie. The note said, “Their disobedience herein was lawful, but their dissembling evil.” King James understood clearly the dire implication of that one sentence. It meant that a king could be disobeyed on the authority of God Himself: a clear and categorical refutation of the idea of the Divine right of kings.[5]

Eventually, unable to stop the spread of Bibles in translation, King James decided to commission his own version which appeared in 1611. But by then the damage had been done and the seeds of what became the English revolution had been planted. Throughout the seventeenth century by far the most influential force in English politics was the Hebrew Bible as understood by the Puritans, and it was the Pilgrim Fathers who took this faith with them in their journey to what would eventually become the United States of America.

A century and a half later, it was the work of another English radical, Thomas Paine, that made a decisive impact on the American revolution. His pamphlet *Common Sense* was published in America in January 1776, and became an immediate best seller, selling 100,000 copies. Its impact was huge, and because of it he became known as “the father of the American Revolution.” Despite the fact that Paine was an atheist, the opening pages of *Common Sense*, justifying rebellion against a tyrannical king, are entirely based on citations from the Hebrew Bible. In the same spirit, that summer Benjamin Franklin drew as his design for the Great Seal of America, a picture of the Egyptians (i.e. the English) drowning in the Red Sea (i.e. the Atlantic), with the caption, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” Thomas Jefferson was so struck by the sentence that he recommended it to be used on the Great Seal of Virginia and later incorporated it in his personal seal.

The story of the midwives belongs to a larger vision implicit throughout the Torah and Tanakh as a whole: that right is sovereign over might, and that even God Himself can be called to account in the name of justice, as He expressly mandates Abraham to do. Sovereignty ultimately belongs to God, so any human act or order that transgresses the will of God is by that fact alone *ultra vires*. These revolutionary ideas are intrinsic to the biblical vision of politics and the

use of power. In the end, though, it was the courage of two remarkable women that created the precedent later taken up by the American writer Thoreau[6] in his classic essay Civil Disobedience (1849) that in turn inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King in the twentieth century. Their story also ends with a lovely touch. The text says: "So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them houses" (1: 20-21).

Luzzatto interpreted this last phrase to mean that He gave them families of their own. Often, he wrote, midwives are women who are unable to have children. In this case, God blessed Shifra and Puah by giving them children, as he had done for Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

This too is a not unimportant point. The closest Greek literature comes to the idea of civil disobedience is the story of Antigone who insisted on giving her brother Polynices a burial despite the fact that king Creon had refused to permit it, regarding him as a traitor to Thebes. Sophocles' Antigone is a tragedy: the heroine must die because of her loyalty to her brother and her disobedience to the king. The Hebrew Bible is not a tragedy. In fact biblical Hebrew has no word meaning "tragedy" in the Greek sense. Good is rewarded, not punished, because the universe, God's work of art, is a world in which moral behaviour is blessed and evil, briefly in the ascendant, is ultimately defeated.

Shifra and Puah are two of the great heroines of world literature, the first to teach humanity the moral limits of power.

[1] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, II. 9.2.

[2] See James Q. Wilson, The Moral Sense, New York, Free Press, 1993, 35-39, and the literature cited there.

[3] See, for example, Gen. 20: 11.

[4] Kiddushin 42b.

[5] See Christopher Hill, The English Bible and the Seventeenth-century Revolution. London: Allen Lane, 1993.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience. Boston: David R. Godine, 1969.

### AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

"So said Hashem: My first born son is Israel" (4:22)

This all-important declaration is now being proclaimed to the nations. To the wealthy and powerful and technically advanced nation of Egypt, this statement was a stunning affront. The despised Hebrews, with whom the Egyptians could not eat together "because it was an abomination to Egypt" (Beresheet 43:32), were now announced as the choicest of the nations.

In view of the fact that this statement is in the Torah, we understand that it chiefly is intended for Israel to know. Whether or not the nations hear this message, every Israelite must hear it and gain the knowledge that Israel is Hashem's first born son.

But for Pharaoh (and for the nations in general) it was not easy to concede that Israel was the chosen nation, and that the G-d of Israel (named Hashem) was the sole Deity. Egypt was a very important and powerful country, with its own gods; and any claim of superiority over Egypt and over its gods would meet violent reaction. "So said Hashem (the G-d of Israel): My first born son is Israel". These two principles were the most unwelcome words to Pharaoh's ears, and to the ears of the nations, "Hashem has chosen you as His particular treasure" (Devarim 14:2).

Not only is the nation collectively called "My son", but every Israelite is a son of Hashem. "You are sons to Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 14:1). "Beloved (Chavivim, plural) are Israel, for they are called sons of the Almighty" (Abot 3:14). "Is He not your Father?" (Devarim 32:6). The relationship denoted by "son" and "father" is the attitude of love. The son seeks to cause pleasure to his father, especially when he knows the extent of the father's love. Because all of Hashem's love is for Israel alone therefore Israel's love is for Hashem alone: "And you shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart" (Devarim 6:5).

The concept of Israel as Hashem's son requires also that Israel should consider Hashem as their Father. "Is He not your Father?" (Devarim 32:6). To this concept of Hashem as Father, the sons of Israel afterward added the concept of Hashem as King. Quoted from "A Nation Is Born" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZT'L

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