



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Serving G-d with Everything

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman who loved and supported Torah learning.

Shemos

Serving G-d with Everything

Tim Tebow, one of American football's biggest stars is a very religious person. His faith is very important to him and he's not embarrassed by it. Every time he scores a touchdown on the gridiron, he stops for a short prayer in a form that he's practically patented.

I don't need to repeat what it's called—you've all heard of it, right? That's right: Tebowing. And thousands of people across America are Tebowing nowadays thanks to Tim Tebow.

On top of that, when he wins a game, he raises a hand and points to the sky, saying that G-d is responsible for his victory and it's all thanks to Heaven.

In addition, instead of putting the usual stripes of anti-reflective black face paint under both eyes, Mr. Tebow turned his black stripes into a sort of billboard by writing a Biblical chapter and verse on his face under both eyes. Immediately after that, millions Googled the reference to find out what verse he was referring to, and why.

That there is a famous and respected athlete of faith who is proud of his faith is an amazing thing. It gives strength and courage to so many youth, who may be religious but are embarrassed to express it in public, to be proud of their faith.

The story is told of the Baal Shem Tov that he once hired a wagon driver to transport him to a certain city.

Now in those days in Poland, every kilometer or so along the roads would be a shrine at which point the non-Jews would stop to recite their prayers—the same way every major American highway has a rest stop at which travelers can take a break.

But when this non-Jewish wagon driver hired by the Baal Shem Tov passed the first such "prayer stop," he did not stop to pray.

Another distance passed, and again, at the next religious icon, the man did not stop to recite his prayers. The Baal Shem Tov turned to him and said that he had decided to return home —so the driver followed orders and turned the wagon around, and they headed back to town.

When they came back to their original starting point, the Baal Shem Tov informed the driver that his services would no longer be needed. He was now fired—because he had not stopped at the prayer spots of his own religion.

But the wagon driver asked him: "Wait a minute! You're Jewish? What do you care if I respect my own religion or not?" So the Baal Shem Tov answered, "If you do not feel obligated to your own religion, to G-d, what would keep you from murdering me?"

Not only that, but when we look at the history of converts who joined the Jewish Nation, we discover something interesting: The most famous and distinguished converts were not people who had no connection to religion and to whom the entire concept of G-d made no difference—rather, these were people who were very devout in their own religion, who sought out the truth and ultimately came to Judaism.

And this brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah of Shmos, we read about the first and most famous convert of all: Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe.

At the start of his path in life, Jethro was one of the Pharaoh's advisors. The Talmud (Tractate 11a) tells us that the Pharaoh, just like another evil individual in recent history, convened a conference at which they debated the "final solution"—what to do about the Jewish Nation, which was proceeding to dominate Egypt.

Participating in this conference were three top advisors to the Pharaoh: Bilam, Job and Jethro. Bilam advised that the Jews all be killed. Job remained silent. (In today's Congressional terms, you could say he voted "present.") And Jethro told Pharaoh that if he touches the Jewish Nation it's like touching the pupil of G-d's eye.

The Talmud tells us that Bilam, who had advised to kill the Jews, was himself killed at the hands of the Jews; Job who had stayed silent, was punished with suffering; and Jethro, who had defended the Jewish Nation merited that his descendants sat in the Lishkas HaGazis, the Hewn Chamber, the courtroom of the Sanhedrin "Jewish Supreme Court" in Jerusalem.

And, as we all know, when an advisor opposes the opinion of a dictator, the one way to remain alive is to flee—and that's exactly what Jethro did. He fled Egypt for the country of Midyan, an ancient civilization somewhere on what today is the Arabian Peninsula.

The Torah tells us that Jethro served as the "Kohein Midyan," the "Minister of Midyan." In plain English, that means he was the "Bishop," the head religious functionary, for all of Midyan.

And the Midrash tells us that Jethro had tried every form of idol worship in the world. He had studied and investigated every religion in the world that existed at that time—and ultimately, he came to the conclusion that Judaism is the one true religion, and he declared (Shmos 18:11), "Now I know that G-d is greater than all the [false] deities."

It was specifically a person who cared, and from a different religion, who ultimately converted to Judaism.

There's another fascinating story from the Talmud about a convert.

The Talmud tells us about a certain woman who converted to Judaism—a convert who is not as well-known as Jethro's. Her story occurred about 2,000 years ago.

At that time, there was a small kingdom in what today is northern Iraq. It was called Abiabene. One fine day, a Jew showed up in the Kingdom of Abiabene to do business, and he somehow got an audience with the Queen herself.

This Jew found himself telling the queen all about the Jewish Nation, the Land of Israel, the Jewish religion, the Holy Temple, and so on. The queen got very excited and decided to go up to the Holy Land herself to see this unique people with her own eyes.

So she arrived in Jerusalem, was very inspired by the Jewish Nation, and decided to convert—together with her son, who served as the king.

Now, she had arrived in the Holy Land during a year of famine, and she found much poverty and illness. And so, together with her son, she contributed towards helping the starving. She distributed a lot of money towards the purchase of bread and dried fruits from Cyprus to be distributed among the poor of Jerusalem. She also donated a golden chandelier to the Beis Hamikdash.

The Talmud also tells us that at the holiday of Sukkos, she built a big and tall sukkah in Jerusalem, and all the greats of Jerusalem came to visit her and wish her a happy holiday.

Recently, some archaeologists said that they discovered the palace of this queen in the ancient City of David in Jerusalem—and in addition, everyone visiting Jerusalem today can see the streets named after Queen Helene and her son King Munbaz right next to each other.

As we mentioned at the start of our talk, the athlete Tim Tebow was until recently using his face as a billboard, using the black paint to refer to various verses in Scripture—including Mishlei 3:6, which is the verse stating, "In all your ways, know Him."

If the entire innovation of the Chasidic movement can be boiled down to one sentence, it's this verse.

The Jew always knew that when he or she does a mitzvah, he connects with G-d. When he prays, then he connects with G-d. When a woman lights Shabbos candles, she forges a connection with G-d. That, the Jews always knew.

But Chasidism innovated that a person in all his actions, in eating and drinking, even then he is able to serve G-d. If he does this, and at the time remembers that the food that he's eating was given to him by G-d, then he is serving G-d even when he eats.

That you're serving G-d when you're doing a mitzvah is simple. No big deal there. The innovation, however, is that even when you're on the playing field, if you remember in the middle of all the action that your success in the game comes from G-d, then the game itself is a form of serving G-d.

"In all your ways, know Him," indeed.

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