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Behind Every Good Man

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In loving memory of

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

Shemos

Behind Every Good Man

I once attended a bris, a circumcision, at which only the parents and a few other individuals were in attendance. Somebody asked if you need a minyan, a quorum, of ten Jewish men in order to do a bris.

It's definitely better to have a minyan there. But in actuality, it's possible—and necessary—to carry out a bris even when there is no minyan present. And we learn this rule from this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we read a very strange and perplexing story.

Now we all know how the Book of Shmos (Exodus) begins—how Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses) was born and how he was put into the river in a little basket, and then rescued by the daughter of the Pharaoh, raised in the royal palace and then fleeing as an adult to the land of Midyan.

The story continues that when he got to Midyan, Moshe became a shepherd for Jethro (Yisro) and even married his daughter—and one fine day, while herding Yisro's sheep, G-d reveals Himself to Moshe from the famous Burning Bush and says to him: I hear the cries of the Sons of Israel in Egypt and how much they are suffering there, and therefore, I want you to go there and take my People Israel out of Egypt.

At first, Moshe didn't want this mission. But in the end, G-d told him that he had to go. And so he takes his wife and two kids, puts them on the donkey, and off they go to Egypt.

Now here comes the part of the story that many have not heard.

So Moshe and his family travel along, and they stop at an inn on the way to Egypt. And there, the Torah (Shmos 4:24) tells us, "and the L-rd met him and sought to put him to death." G-d wanted to kill him!

Rashi explains that it was actually some kind of giant snake that G-d sent to kill him. Another commentator, the Even Ezra, says that "an illness came upon Moshe... that seized him with trembling."

In any case, he was in mortal danger—until his wife Tziporah took a tzur, a sharp flint made of rock—and circumcised their son, thus causing the danger (snake, illness or whatever), to go away and thus save her husband's life.

That's as far as the story goes. But Rashi explains what was really going on here.

On the day that Moshe was supposed to go back to Egypt, it was the eighth day after the birth of his son Eliezer (Rashi, Tractate Nedarim 32). And Moshe faced a dilemma. He didn't know what he was supposed to do. If he circumcised his infant son and headed out on the road, it would be dangerous for the baby's health. And if he waited until the baby got better, then he'd be delaying his mission to Egypt at G-d's Command.

Moshe's question essentially was, "What's more important? Circumcising my son or going to save the Jewish People from Egypt?" So Moshe decided that it's more important to do what G-d told him at the moment to do, and to go back to Egypt. And so he did not circumcise his son.

But if so, asks the Rebbe, how can it be that G-d "sought to put him to death" when Moshe had been sent by G-d Himself to save the Jewish Nation? If he were killed, how would he be able to fulfill his mission?

Let's say that, on a personal level, Moshe Rabbeinu was not fit to be a leader—still, would that be reason to disrupt his mission, a mission that pertains to 600,000 Jews? Especially when G-d told Moshe explicitly, "Go, and I shall send you to the Pharaoh"?

We might say that the answer lies in the entire saga of the mission: From the very first moment that G-d suggested the mission to Moshe of redeeming the Jewish Nation from Egypt, Moshe refused to go, using various excuses.

For starters, he said, "Who am I and what am I?" Then he argued, "What if they ask me what G-d's Name is?"—after which he complained that they would not believe in him anyway.

Then he argued, "I am not a man of words." And finally, he said to G-d, "Send it in the hand of the whom You shall send"—meaning, send someone else!

For seven days, he negotiated with G-d, not wanting to go until finally, "G-d's Wrath flared up against Moshe" and G-d finally just ordered him to go to Egypt and take the Jewish People out.

So what did Moshe Rabbeinu do? He didn't go straight to Egypt to fulfill his mission. Instead, he went back to Yisro and asked him for permission to go. And even Yisro told him, "Go in peace!"—or, as we say in Yiddish, "Gei gezunterheit!"

So then Moshe decided to take his wife and his two sons with him to Egypt.

Now, anyone with a family knows that when you have little kids in the house, it's really hard to travel—and we're not talking about flying or taking the family minivan! You can just imagine what it must have been like with donkey and carts. You have to bring along diapers and bottles, and you have to stop every five minutes because this one is hungry and that one is thirsty. Still, Moshe Rabbeinu decided to take his family with him to Egypt—and it goes without saying that this would only delay and lengthen the trip.

So on the way, they stop in an inn.

Now seemingly, if G-d had told him to go to Egypt and Moshe understood that he could not circumcise his son because it was forbidden for him to delay until the baby was healthy, then why did he suddenly stop at an inn?

The Midrash quotes the verse, "And he was on the road at an inn," and asks, "If he was on the road, why does it say he was at an inn?" The Midrash then explains, "This teaches us that Moshe went back and forth from the road to the inn and from the inn to the road, wondering whether he should continue to Egypt to redeem the nation or not."

But what really was behind all the foot-dragging was that Moshe was not yet convinced that he wanted to go to Egypt. Because what he really should have done was (as commentator Akeidas Yitzchak puts it) "to circumcise him and leave him there with his mother" and go on alone immediately to Egypt—and that's what triggered G-d's wrath.

The one who saved the situation was specifically Tzipora. When she saw that Moshe was in mortal danger, she perceived that it was because he was tarrying on the road as a result of bringing his family along. So she got up, circumcised her son, and said to her husband, "You do G-d's Command immediately and go right away to Egypt to redeem the Jewish Nation, and I'll stay here with the kids until the baby gets better."

Moshe Rabbeinu, for his part, a man who spent the earliest years of his life in the house of his parents, Amram and Yocheved (he spent the bulk of his childhood in the Pharaoh's palace), and who became the leader of the generation; and on top of that, had G-d Himself reveal himself to him in a bush and tell him to go to Egypt; and despite all that, he still couldn't bring himself to fulfill G-d's duty—with only his wife Tziporah, a convert from the home of Yisro who had sampled every religion in the world; a woman who did not hear G-d's Command personally at all; it was specifically she who pushed Moshe forth to go to Egypt.

The story is told about a Chosid of the Alter Rebbe. His name was Yosef. He was a Torah scholar in his own right and a teacher too.

When he was once having a yechidus, a private audience with the Alter Rebbe, the Alter Rebbe said to him, "For the benefit of your soul, it would be better for you to be a wagon driver than a rabbi." Rabbi Yosef heard these words, but he didn't exactly understand what the Rebbe wanted from him.

Ten years passed. One fine day, a delegation arrived from a nearby city, offering him a position as rabbi in their town. Suddenly, Yosef remembered what the Alter Rebbe had told him over a decade ago—and he told the delegation that would not be accepting their offer.

It was then that Rabbi Yosef understood that now was apparently the time to become a wagon driver.

So, after one month of wavering and confusion, he decided that he would go and learn the trade. He approached some local wagon drivers and asked them to teach him the business. But they simply could not believe their ears. Nevertheless, one of them volunteered to teach him the tricks of the trade.

He took him to the stable and began showing him how to grease the wheels of the wagon, how to hitch up the horse, and so on. Rabbi Yosef, who had never been familiar with this kind of work, quickly got himself all dirty. And on top of that, one of the horses whipped him in the eye with his tail, almost costing him his eye.

And so, broken, depressed and dirty, Rabbi Yosef went back home. He walked into the house and found his wife crying. She had already heard that the whole town was talking about how her husband had lost his mind.

Rabbi Yosef went into his room and also burst into tears. But finally, he decided that he needed to tell his wife what had persuaded him to do this. He then came out and told his wife that the Alter Rebbe had told him over ten years ago that for the good of his soul, it would be better if he were to be a wagon driver, not a rabbi.

Now when his wife heard this, she immediately commented: "If the Rebbe told you to do it, then why are you crying? First thing tomorrow morning, I'm selling my jewelry so you can go buy a horse and wagon and go off and be successful!"

When Rabbi Yosef heard his wife's reaction, he was ashamed of himself. Here he was, the big devotee who had heard his master's very words with his own ears but who was unable to move himself to do what his Rebbe had told him to do—and his wife, a simple woman, immediately decided with no hesitation to sell her jewelry so as to fulfill the Rebbe's wishes.

And so Rabbi Yosef indeed became a wagon driver and got used to his work. Thus another ten years passed by.

One fine day, he was at an inn, and a person approached him looking for a wagon driver. The man asked him if he could take him the next morning. Rabbi Yosef said he'd be able to. The man asked him, "At exactly what time tomorrow morning?" Rabbi Yosef said, "After the morning prayers." But the man mockingly replied: "I'm not interested in your prayers! Exactly what time will it be?"

As it turned out, this traveler and the wagon driver were staying in rooms right next to each other. And that night, through his bedroom wall, the traveler could hear Rabbi Yosef praying and weeping to G-d

Now this traveler had a past life. As it turned out, he was Jewish, and he had once been married with a wife and kids and a Torah-observant Jew. But one day, he left it all, abandoning his wife and children, running away from home and going off to become friends with non-Jews and eventually becoming the personal assistant of an important nobleman.

But now, when this traveler heard Rabbi Yosef praying, a well of memories suddenly opened in his mind. He started remembering his parents, his family, his wife, and his children. Who knows what their situation is today? Are they even still alive? And if so, do they have some sort of income? What shame he brought upon them, he realized—and how much suffering he caused them.

He began feeling powerful feelings of remorse, and by the next morning, he came down with a very high fever. He called Rabbi Yosef and told him his entire life story, and asked him to help him find his way back home to his family and his Judaism. Rabbi Yosef stayed at the inn until the traveler got better, and helped him on his new path in life until he was reunited with his family.

Several months later, Rabbi Yosef traveled to Lubavitch, home to the Mittlerer Rebbe, who had succeeded the Alter Rebbe, who had since passed away.

When he went into the Mittlerer Rebbe's office for his private audience, the Rebbe told him: "My father just came to me, and told me that you completed your mission as a wagon driver. The entire purpose of becoming a wagon driver was to bring that one Jew back to his family and his people."

What this story teaches us is that behind every successful man stands a strong woman—starting with no less than Moshe Rabbeinu himself, and holding true to this very day.

And so, gentlemen, let us take our cue from this week's Torah portion and show more appreciation to the wives and the aspirations to which they inspire us—and for the clear, concise and firm decisions they make for us and our families.

You know, sometimes we think that changing the world means being a big shot or running for president or doing legendary things. The lesson from Tzipora is that all we need to do—or at least all that men need to do—is to simply, firmly and decisively do the right thing every time a moral decision comes up.

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