



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Some things can not be said

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In loving memory of

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

Shemos

Some things can not be said

Years ago, at a wedding, the chasan, the groom, got up to say a few words.

He began by saying that he wanted to thank his parents for raising him and bringing him to this point in life—and that he wanted to thank his Third Grade teacher. Not his Fourth Grade teacher or Second Grade teacher, but the Third Grade teacher.

The chasan continued to relate how when he was a little boy in the Third Grade, there was another kid in his class who was very gifted. Everyone also loved him. This kid had a good heart, and you could say that he was also the most popular kid in the class and, obviously, was also much loved by his parents.

One day, this kid showed up in class with a gift he had gotten from his grandfather: a very expensive watch. Of course, he showed it to everyone. Every kid in the class wanted to touch it and play with it. And so it passed from hand to hand.

The kid stepped out of the classroom for a moment. But when he came back... tragedy of tragedies! The watch was gone! Everyone looked all over the classroom. They turned over their desks. They shook out their backpacks and notebooks, but the watch was nowhere to be found—as if it had been swallowed up by the very earth.

The teacher got up, locked the door and told the entire class to stand in a line while he checked all their pockets and patted down their clothes. (Maybe he worked for the TSA.)

And so, all the kids stood in line and the teacher went from one to the next, thoroughly checking each one. Now the teacher came to the chasan, who was now telling this story—the little boy who had the watch in his pocket.

The boy began to shake in fear of the teacher finding the watch—if he did, it would simply be a disaster: all the kids in his class would make fun of him and hate him because they all loved the boy who owned the watch.

On top of all that, he'd get a reputation in the community as a thief, and what would his parents and uncles and grandfather and grandmother say? It would simply be awful. But it was too late now to confess that he was the one who had stolen the watch. It wouldn't save him from humiliation.

While he was thinking all this, the teacher was getting closer, with only one kid in front of him. His heart was ready to explode in fear and embarrassment.

And then came the moment of truth. The teacher got to him and began to pat him down. He put his hand into the future groom's pocket... and quietly took out the watch. He didn't say a word. He quickly hid the watch in his sleeve and dropped it into his own pocket without anyone noticing. The teacher then continued searching the rest of the line as if nothing had happened. He announced that he had not found the watch. At the end of the day, he called over the boy with the missing watch and told him that he had found it, and returned it to him.

Sometime later, the teacher called over the future groom and said to him: "Listen boy. This time I saved you. But don't ever do such a thing again!" It was this teacher whom the little boy wished to thank years later on his wedding day—for saving him for the rest of his life.

Now, people cry when they hear this story. Why? Because we have all had our moments of weakness, when we don't feel enough sensitivity for the pain and dignity of the other. Almost without a second thought, we humiliate and attack other people—not because we are evil but simply because don't take others' feelings to heart.

This week, we begin reading the Book of Exodus, the Book of Shmos—the saga of the Egyptian exile.

In the second half of this week's Torah portion, we read about how "Moshe was a shepherd," and we read about the debate between Moshe Rabbeinu and G-d, in which G-d asked him to go to Egypt and redeem the Jewish Nation.

Among other things, G-d tells Moshe, "Go forth and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them... 'I have surely remembered you... I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt' " (Shmos 3:16-17)—in other words, just show up and tell them that G-d sent you to be the redeemer. And the Torah (verse 18) continues: "And they will listen to your voice," they will believe you, "and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him... 'let us go for a three days' journey in the desert.' "

G-d explicitly tells Moshe that when he goes to the Pharaoh in the name of the entire Jewish Nation, he is not to go alone. Rather, he is to organize a distinguished contingent of all the "elders of Israel" and go together with them to submit to the Pharaoh the famous demand you've all heard and seen in all those movies: "Let my people go!"

And indeed, when Moshe returned to Egypt, the Torah tells us in detail (chapter 4, verse 29) what happened: "So Moshe and Aharon went, and they assembled all the elders of the children of Israel"—and they all listened to the good news from Moshe and believed him and were very happy.

Then comes another verse (chapter 5, verse 1): "And afterwards, Moshe and Aharon came and said to the Pharaoh..." Here, when the Torah tells us about Moshe and Aharon's visit to the Pharaoh's palace, it mentions only Moshe and Aharon—with no mention of the "elders."

But where were the elders? Where did they disappear? Here G-d had explicitly told Moshe Rabbeinu, "And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel..." It doesn't make sense to say that the verse now doesn't mention them because they weren't important enough.

So Rashi explains this problem: "The elders, however, slipped away one by one behind Moshe and Aharon until all of them had slipped away before they got to the palace, because they were afraid to go." Rashi says, yes, at the start of the way, there indeed was a very important and distinguished contingent. All the Jewish elders showed up in their fancy suits—the roshei yeshivos (the deans of the schools) and the community leaders. They were all there. But the closer they got to the palace of the kingdom, to the halls of power, doubts started to nibble away at their hearts whether the whole thing was appropriate and what would happen if the Pharaoh got angry.

At the beginning, everyone was excited about it. But when it got down to action, they suddenly got weak knees: One said he had an important meeting, another said he forgot something at home and was quickly on his way, and a third said he just got an important text message from his wife, who said that she needed him urgently at home. "They slipped away one by one," indeed. It wasn't a joint decision taken by all of them together but rather, each one of them wanted to save his own skin.

As the Midrash tells us: "When they arrived at the king's palace, they saw the Pharaoh's portal boiling like a pot—slaughtered people to one side, crucified people to another side, and chopped-off limbs to another side."

What this means that the Pharaoh was a monster: he kept piles of human arms and legs at the entrance to his palace to terrify his subjects into submission. And when a person sees something like that before his very eyes, it's no wonder he runs for it! So the Midrash continues: "Since the elders ran away, Moshe said to Aharon, 'They were not commanded from On High. We were commanded from On High. Let's go and carry out our mission, even if they kill us.' "

And Rashi continues, saying: "At Mt. Sinai, they were paid back—Moshe approached [the mountain] by himself and they did not approach; they were turned back." This means that when the time for the Giving of the Torah came, all the VIPs of the community showed up. They all wanted to get a good seat at "The Greatest Production in History!"—the revelation of G-d Himself upon Mt. Sinai.

Now, everyone knows what people will do to get a good seat. We all know what people are prepared to do to get a good seat, for example, at the inauguration of the new American President, or the Super Bowl, or my Shabbos table, of course. So you can only imagine what was going on the night before the Giving of the Torah. Everyone wanted to get in close and up front.

The Jewish elders, of course, considered themselves "close relatives of the family"—why, after all, they had been elders and leaders in Egypt for all those years before Moshe had shown up from Midyan! They had been there all along.

But then G-d said: Only those who were prepared to risk their own lives and go to the Pharaoh are invited to go up on Mt. Sinai—but all those who ran away are to remain below. "They were turned back."

In the Torah, however, all this is not stated explicitly... because the Torah did not want to embarrass the elders.

Instead, it only tells us what actually happened: “And afterwards, Moshe and Aharon came”— and anyone who studies and scrutinizes every word and letter in the Torah will read between the lines and understand what really happened. As the Rebbe would always repeat, the Torah doesn’t speak of Israel’s shame.

In life, there are things that don’t need to be said, and which cannot explicitly be said. There is an old Yiddish expression: “*M’darf alein farshtein*”—we must understand on our own. There are things that don’t need to be said, and which cannot be said out loud—they could humiliate another person, and this can cause damage. It could even cause anti-Semitism.

Like that sensitive, knowing teacher of long ago, who showed special understanding and sensitivity to a little boy, let us take this lesson from our Torah portion and try to be a little more sensitive to all those in our lives.

Let us try to find a better way to say it. And if we can’t, let’s better not say it at all. And if something must be said, say it in a way that saves the other from humiliation. Like the groom in the story, he or she will thank you for it.

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