

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



ORDINARY HEROISM? Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

What is the difference between heroism and ordinary goodness? Is heroism, like the miraculous, necessarily unexpected? Is a hero someone who behaves better than we could reasonably expect ourselves to behave in the same situation, or better than we expected them to behave? Can it be heroic to simply do one's difficult but obviously correct duty?

These questions are addressed by R. Eliezer son of R. Eliyahu Ashkenazi (1513-1586) in his commentary Maasei Hashem.

ואמנם ענין אומרו "ויעשו להם בתים"
פירש רש"י על פי האגדה "בתי כהונה ובתי לוויה"
שכן אמרו רז"ל (סוטה יא, ב; שמ"ר א, יג) גם כן ששפרה ופועה היו יוכבד
ומרים
ויש אומרים יוכבד ואלישבע
וכבר יפלא מאד זה כפי הפשט
שהיאך יעלה על לב שפרעה יצוה לעבריות שהם בעצמם יהרגו ילדי
העבריים
ועוד יש לשאול
מה שנאמר "ותיראן המילדות את הא-להים"
ועוד "וייטב א-להים למילדות"
וכן חזר לומר "ויהי כי יראו הילדות..."
ואם היו הצדקניות ההם
מה זאת החזקת הטובה על שיראו את הא-להים
והלא דין הוא
שאמרו "יהרג ואל יהרוג!?"

*However, with regard to Scripture saying "He made for them houses"
Rashi explains via the Aggada that this means "Houses of priesthood and
Levitehood"*

*as the Sages said as well that Shifrah and Puah were Yocheved and
Miriam,*

or some say Yocheved and Elisheva.

*But this is astounding if considered in terms of peshat,
as how could Pharaoh even have considered commanding Jewish women to
themselves kill Jewish children?!*

We can further ask:

*When Scripture writes "The midwives feared Elokim"
and further "Elokim did good for the midwives"*

*and it also recapitulates "When it happened that the midwives feared . . ."
if the midwives are properly identified as those righteous ones (i.e. Yocheved
and Miriam or Elisheva),*

why are they owed gratitude for fearing G-d

*when (their refusal to kill the male Jewish infants) was simply rational
law,*

as the Sages said: "Let oneself be murdered rather than murder"!?

R. Ashkenazi suggests that for Egyptian midwives to defy Pharaoh was heroic, but for Jewish midwives, how could Pharaoh even consider that they would obey?! And if they were righteous Jewesses, why do they deserve any reward for obeying? What is heroic for those who have the choice of ignoring G-d is mere logic for those who inescapably fear Him.

A harsher version of R. Ashkenazi's thesis is that all sin reflects a lack of belief, and so is tantamount to denial of the Creator. This thesis is often attributed to the Holocaust martyr R. Elchonon Wasserman. R. Ashkenazi himself is gentler, and has no difficulty understanding why Egyptian midwives deserved gratitude for their resistance. Yad Vashem reflects more his attitude, and I think this is a good thing. But it deserves recall that R. Elchonon returned to Europe from an American fundraising trip in full awareness of the looming

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danger, and there is also value in the stern expectation of proper behavior regardless of cost.

The midrash seems to be more tolerant yet, and to heap rewards on Yocheved and Miriam for refusing to commit mass infanticide. One textual motive for this is the peculiarity of “he made for them houses” – what sort of reward is that (noting that meanwhile the Jews are building cities for Pharaoh)? It seems that these must be genealogical or symbolic houses, and furthermore, that these must have significance later in the narrative. And so the midwives become the mothers of Jewish Houses, ala Ravenclaw.

There are many nonphilosophic difficulties with this approach, however. Yocheved is not the mother of all Levites, and it requires much exegetical effort to make Miriam the mother of the Davidic line. Deborah Klapper noted to me that “houses” in the rest of Chumash are by definition patrilineal. (I afterward found the same point in Chiddushei HaGriz.) And grammatically, the verse reads “He made for (third person masculine plural) houses,” so the houses seem unrelated to women at all.

Other midrashim and commentators accordingly understand the verse entirely differently. G-d did not make houses for the midwives; rather, Pharaoh made houses for the Jews. How was this a response to the midwives failure to obey orders? Pharaoh built Jewish housing in the midst of Egyptian neighborhoods, so that the cries of Jewish infants would betray them to his loyal people, who would then throw them in the Nile. More radically, he built the Jewish housing amidst houses with Egyptian infants, so that the Egyptian infants would cry and stimulate sympathetic crying by the Jewish infants. Thus Pharaoh made even babies take part in his genocidal conspiracy, and ensured there would be no innocence at all left in Egypt.

This may seem outlandish, but in fact it responds to a deep textual problem later in Shemot. When G-d kills the Egyptian firstborn, He is פוֹטֵחַ, He passes over, the Jewish houses and their firstborns. This image of selectivity fails utterly if the Jews are geographically isolated, and we have been told previously that the Jews all lived in Goshen! The solution is that Pharaoh at least built Jewish young couples housing, or Jewish maternity wards, in the heart of Egypt. (For those wondering how G-d rewarded the Egyptian midwives – He made the Jews extraordinarily fertile, which in turn raised the midwives’ incomes.)

R. Ashkenazi himself develops a wonderfully creative composite approach. Working again with strong assumptions about human motivations, he argues that no king wishes to commit genocide against his slaves, as that would diminish his stature and harm his economy. Rather, Pharaoh must have been concerned with overpopulation. As Jewish fertility increased, Jews spilled out of Goshen into Egypt proper. Pharaoh therefore decreed that all Jewish male infants born outside Goshen should be killed, and he built Jewish housing amidst Egyptian neighborhoods to ensure that his decree would be enforced.

I believe that historical experience raises serious questions about R. Ashkenazi’s assumptions. Sometimes – maybe always – the urge to genocide is obviously counterproductive from a rational perspective, and people in the throes of hatred take no heed of economic, political, or military consequences, even if their rhetoric seems to suggest otherwise.

The question I want to raise is whether it is easier or harder to defy an evil social order when it is rationally grounded. Which way are the midwives more heroic – if Pharaoh is rationally (albeit murderously) attempting to maintain his slave population below the threshold at which it will constitute a potential threat, or if he is engaged in a rationally unjustifiable genocide?

My sense is that many human beings, myself among them, find it harder to resist irrational rather than rational appeals to evil (although we often seek to rationalize irrational evil). This may be because reason creates a neutral space that lets us play out the confrontation so that it is less a test of wills. To resist a charismatic requires not objective argument but the claim that I am at least as worthy and as reliable a judge of value as you – it requires ego and self-confidence that has no external source of validation.

Ego and self-confidence are therefore necessary components of moral strength, and in many cases the source of true heroism. As with physical musculature, of course, they are also the source of the dangers they are needed to resist. It is vital that educators, and parents, not fall prey to the delusion that there is any single set of characteristics, or type of human character, that guarantees righteousness.

Who is the true hero? The one who conquers their own tendencies when those tendencies lead to moral or ethical weakness. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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