

דרכים בפרשה וארא

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ואלה שמות בני לוי לתלדתם גרשון וקהת ומררי ושני חיי לוי שבע ושלשים ומאת שנה (ו:טז)

"These are the sons of Levi in order of their birth: Gershon, Kehos, and Merari; the years of Levi's life were one hundred and thirty seven years."

In Parshas Shemos (2:11), the Torah tells us that although Moshe Rabbeinu was brought up in the splendor of the palace, he still remained the son of Amram and Yocheved. ויצא אל אחיו וירא בסבלתם, and he went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. As Rashi explains, his intention in going out was to see their suffering and grieve with them. Despite his royal upbringing, he was still able to identify with the pain and suffering of his brethren. This ability to be a נושא בעול, a carrier of someone else's burden, was the hallmark of Moshe Rabbeinu, defining who he truly was. But where do such instincts come from? How is it that a child raised in his parents' home for such a short period of time can be imbued with such love and feeling for another Yid?

Time and time again, we find instances in the Torah where we see the concept of spiritual DNA at work. By the story of Dinah going out, Rashi notes that like mother like daughter. Most famously, the Ramban advises every Yid to pay close attention to the actions of our Avos, because Maaseh Avos Siman Labanim.

With this in mind, we can better understand how Moshe Rabbeinu came to possess the very character trait that would stamp him as the future redeemer of Klal Yisroel. The pasuk tells us that the names of the children born to Levi were Gershon, Kehos, and Merari. The Shelah HaKadosh notes that these names were inspired by the times in which they were living. Gershon, meaning a stranger there, because they were now in the land of their exile and servitude. Kehos, meaning sour, and Merari, meaning bitter, because of the harsh and bitter enslavement that the Yidden were forced to endure in Mitzrayim.

The Shelah asks an obvious question. Of all the people naming children, why was Levi the one giving names based on the difficult circumstances? What did Levi even know about such suffering? Did he ever lift a brick in his life? Was he ever afflicted by the crack of a whip because he was unable to keep up with the impossible demands of a taskmaster? As a member of the shevet of Levi, he and his entire shevet had the privilege of learning Torah all day, without rolling up their sleeves to join in the backbreaking labor.

The answer is that it was specifically Levi who named his children in this way because he possessed a unique ability to commiserate with his brethren and truly feel their pain. This was Levi's way of sharing in the suffering of the rest of Klal Yisroel. Each time he called one of his sons by name, he was reminded anew of the hardship and affliction. Even within the walls of the Beis Medrash, Levi carried the pain of his brothers with him.

Taking this a step further, we can see how this trait of being attuned to the suffering of others became embedded in the spiritual DNA of future generations.

By contrast, let us consider another episode in this week's parshah.

Confronted with the first makkah brought upon his nation, Pharaoh was prepared to let the Yidden go. After all, a country cannot survive without water, and blood is certainly no substitute. The pasuk describes how all the fish in the river died, the river became foul, and Mitzrayim could no longer drink water from it. Blood was everywhere throughout the land of Mitzrayim.

On the verge of conceding, Pharaoh's necromancers interjected, "We can do that too." Upon witnessing what appeared to be the same feat, Pharaoh's heart was hardened once again, and he refused to send them out.

The Meshech Chochma points out that the next pasuk seems unnecessary. ויפן פרעה ויבא אל ביתו ולא שת לבו גם, לזאת, Pharaoh turned away and came to his palace, and he did not take this to heart either (7:23). What changed when he entered his home?

The Meshech Chochma reveals a striking chiddush. Although all the water in the entire country had turned to blood, inside Pharaoh's palace there was water.

The Midrash relates that Egyptians were able to purchase water from Yidden. The Meshech Chochma explains that Pharaoh, having raised Moshe Rabbeinu in his home, had effectively paid for water many times over.

Perhaps as Pharaoh walked away from Moshe, reality set in. "I cannot run a country without water. What was I thinking? Of course I must let them go." But the moment he entered his palace and saw that for him there was water, the principle of out of sight, out of mind took over. Once he saw that his own needs were met, he no longer took to heart what the rest of his nation was enduring. Why should he care if all of Mitzrayim lacked water, if in his own home everything was fine?

Maaseh Avos Siman Labanim. It is embedded within our DNA to care for others and to feel their pain. While it may not always be easy to walk in someone else's shoes, we can ask ourselves whose footsteps we choose to follow: Moshe Rabbeinu or Pharaoh.

מרדכי אפפלי, Good Shabbos,