

January 14, 2012

SH'MOT (Names)

With the opening of Exodus, the Hebrews find themselves in a downward spiral of servitude and suffering. Their call to *HaShem* unleashes a struggle between the wellsprings of life and liberation that we recognize as *HaShem*, and the embodiment of tyranny and pointlessness epitomized by Pharaoh. This is not merely a contest between two unequal rivals, but the steady opposition of two incompatible ways of life. It is the struggle between life versus death, freedom versus tyranny, and ultimate meaning versus personal pleasure.

Pharaoh, fearing that the Hebrew slaves might rise up against him, ordered the death of all male children born in Goshen. But he did not imagine that the midwives would have *yirat shamayim* - the fear of heaven. These two women, Shee-frah and Poo-ah, weren't brave warriors or belligerent trouble-makers. They were a couple of midwives doing their job. Despite these instructions from the world's most powerful despot, "The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live."

Proverbs 9:10 tells us that "The fear of *HaShem* is the beginning of wisdom." But what is the nature of this "fear" that could motivate such courageous dissent? How can we explain their daring and disobedience? What is called "holy fear" or "noble fear" is not the fear of consequences; it is awe that emerges from the contemplation of *HaShem's* greatness, magnificence, and majesty. *Yira* involves marvel, wonder, and awe. It is the awe of greatness as opposed to mere fear of harm. It was this holy fear that moved these two brave women.

Such awe is different than our common fears. When one fears a person, one cannot remain calm, because fear is the opposite of being calm. However, awe of heaven brings calm to the soul. The midwives were calm because of their awe of heaven. They did not have any fear of Pharaoh's decrees. A soul that trembles before human displays of might, power, or influence is one that has not really apprehended the greatness of *HaShem*. This fear is really love. It is no wonder that the virtue of *yirat shamayim* is the foundation of the entire Torah. For the Hebrew midwives, fear of *HaShem* was a way of seeing Pharaoh for who he really was - simply another human being, seeking to silence his own fear and fragility by bullying the weak. It was their awe and wonder at *HaShem's* greatness that gave these women the strength to shine the light of heaven in a murky and hurting world.

Focus: Fear of heaven

Exodus 1:15-21

Isaiah 27:10-11

Acts 7:17-19 & Hebrews 11:23