

"But the midwives feared Hashem, and they did not do as the king of Egypt had instructed them; rather they kept the children alive." (1:17)

The heroic behavior of the two midwives, who *Chazal* identify as Yocheved and Miriam, is unquestionably a classic illustration of self-sacrifice. Ignoring a king's decree is a great risk at any time, especially during times of such a tumultuous political climate. Yocheved and Miriam accepted this challenge and excelled. In describing their heroism the *Torah* emphasizes that the motivation for their behavior is reflected in the *pasuk* "*The midwives feared Hashem.*" Their self-sacrifice did not emanate from an innate compassion which prohibited them from executing brutal genocide against the infants in order to save their own lives. Rather, their actions were rooted in pure "*yiras shomayim*" (heavenly fear and awe). Their awe of Hashem was so profound, that they preferred to die, rather than to perform an act which was the antithesis of Hashem's Will. They were, in turn, rewarded by Hashem for their sacrifice by becoming the progenitors of the houses of priesthood and of royalty. The *Kohanim*, *Leviim* and *Davidic* dynasty would descend from them. These "houses" embody the meaning of true "*yiras shomayim*".

In analyzing the magnanimous deeds of these righteous women, we should note that there is a distinction between an act of kindness which is motivated by "*yiras shomayim*" and one which is the result of a natural tendency towards compassion. When one acts in accord with his natural tendencies, he does only as much as those inclinations dictate, often helping the individual in need in the most convenient way. On the other hand, one who assists in response to "*yiras shomayim*" performs this deed in the most thorough manner. We may suggest that had the midwives' act been motivated by natural compassion, they would not have further jeopardized their lives by supplying food and water to the infants. That they extended themselves to such a degree is indicative of a kindness stemming from a lofty level of "*yiras shomayim*." The only way to properly execute deeds which develop the desirable character traits is through the guidance of the Torah, motivated by "*yiras shomayim*".