

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the first was Shifrah and the name of the second was Puah. (1:15)

Jewish enslavement did not occur overnight. The Egyptians could not have controlled the Jews had the Jews not willingly given up their sense of dignity and their sense of pride, essentially becoming “honorary Egyptians.” *Horav Tzvi Elimelech, zl, m’Dinov*, explains that Pharaoh knew that the Egyptian midwives were not going to listen to his order to kill the Jewish male babies. Their high moral values would not have permitted them to commit such a heinous act. In that case, why did he bother?

The Torah tells us that the names of these women were Shifrah and Puah. *Rashi* teaches that they were none other than the mother/daughter team of Yocheved and Miriam, who just happened to be the mother and sister of Moshe and Aharon. Pharaoh knew that these women were too Jewish to comply with his murderous demands. Therefore, it was necessary to weaken their defenses. He had hoped that giving them Egyptian names would slowly assimilate them into Egyptian society. They would no longer feel like outcasts and would become “one” with the Egyptians. This was Pharaoh’s error. The women did not accept their *goyish* names. They retained their names, Yocheved and Miriam, regardless of what Pharaoh was calling them.

This tiny step by an individual Jew has been transformed into one large step for Judaism. The closer one gets to the *goyim*, the more he distances himself from Judaism. Unfortunately, it can lead to a gradual erosion of one’s value system; a lessening of his commitment; a decrease in his ethical behavior. At first, it might seem to be entertaining. Regrettably, it is playing with the devil. A Jew’s small increments of acculturation add up to larger and more emphatic assimilation, until he has strayed too far and has become too different to seek an avenue of return.

When Yosef ascended to the Egyptian monarchy, Pharaoh changed his name. He knew that this is how it begins. He plotted to initiate a few more not-so-subtle changes, like an Egyptian wife, so that before long, Yosef would be fully acculturated. This would lead to his assimilation into Egyptian society and ultimately the extinction of his spirit. *Horav Elchonon Wasserman, zl*, would say that in *Shema Yisrael* when the Torah speaks of “turning away” (*v’sartem*) to follow foreign gods, “turning away” does not mean that a Jew has gone so far as to embrace idols actively. This exhortation is even more stringent, for indeed at the moment in which one begins to turn away from Torah, he is already attaching himself to foreign gods.

This is how it all began in Germany. In the eighteenth century, Jews, people such as Moses Mendelssohn, craved a relationship with – and recognition from – secular society and its prevalent culture. He sought a way to submerge Judaism into a culture in which secular studies and culture dominated, and religious observance was nothing more than an adjunct to maintaining a separate identity. His creed of, “a Jew at home and a gentile outside,” became the clarion call for the early

assimilationists.

Haskalah, Enlightenment, was invested with an aura of intellectualism, making it fashionable and desirable. His marked shift from the centrality of Torah began his journey of *v'sartem min ha'derech*, "turning away from the path," on the road to complete assimilation. As a result, his disciples – including, even his own children – eschewed the Torah, apostatizing themselves and drinking from the baptismal font.

We have a *mesorah*, tradition, that has continued uninterrupted – a chain that stretches from *Har Sinai*. Deviating from the words of the Torah, as interpreted by the Sages of each and every generation, is the beginning of *avodah zarah*, idol worship. When Jews lose their self-pride as a result of their spiritual weakness, it results in "turning away" to foreign gods. This spiritual weakness was the backdrop of Orthodoxy in this country prior to, and immediately following, World War II. It was the European *Roshei Yeshivah*, survivors of the European Holocaust, who reshaped Orthodox thought in America, teaching the people that decisions and actions must always be contingent upon – and formulated in accordance with – Torah dictate.

The Orthodox community was, regrettably, neither recognized nor respected by the acculturated Jews. Thus, it had very little political and economic clout of its own, which compelled Orthodox Jewry to coalesce with the secular Jewish groups of the time. The *gedolim*, Torah giants, imbued that generation with a fiery zeal for Torah, charting a different course, setting Torah standards for the schools which they established and inculcating the next generation with a fierce pride in being labeled a Torah Jew. Within a short time, Torah perspective became paramount among Orthodox Jews. With renewed pride, they were able to stand resolute in the face of their adversaries, who correctly perceived the challenge to their decades of religious dominance in this country. We have never looked back.