

## Every son that will be born – into the River shall you throw him. (1:22)

At first glance, we view Pharaoh's evil decree to drown the Jewish male infants as his way of protecting himself and his people from the presaged birth of the Jewish redeemer. How foolish he was to even dream that he could stand up to Hashem. Ironically, it was Pharaoh's own daughter who rescued Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and the future Jewish leader and redeemer grew up and was raised in Pharaoh's palace. This is the accepted reason the commentators give. In his paranoia and narcissism, Pharaoh thought that he could prevent the inevitable. Alternatively, we might suggest another reason for murdering the Jewish infants. They were the future of Judaism. Without children to carry on, the Jewish People had no future, and, without a future, the present would be, at best, tenuous. By murdering the Jewish infants, Pharaoh succeeded in demoralizing the Jewish People. They were to be the last generation of Jews. Thus, it is no wonder that the people were broken and dispirited. They had no hope, because in their minds they had nothing for which to hope.

The *Baal Haggadah* interprets *amaleinu*, "our toil," as *eilu habanim*, referring to the Jewish male infants, whom pharaoh had thrown into the river. In the *Orchos Chaim*, *Rabbeinu Chaim m'Lunil* writes: "They (the children) were the *amal*, toil, because Pharaoh commanded that they be killed. Thus, their birth was for naught." The *Malbim*, *zl*, writes, "*Amal* is when the labor/activity is for no purpose." *Amal* is defined as purposeless, meaningless activity. By destroying the Jewish infants, Pharaoh was causing their birth to be without meaning and purpose. The obvious question about this definition of *amal* is from the opening *pasuk* of *Parashas Bechukosai*, *Im bechukosai teileichu*, "If you follow my laws" (*Vayikra* 26:3). The *Toras Kohanim* comments, *Shetiheyu ameilim baTorah*, "That you will toil in Torah." The meaning of following in Hashem's laws is toiling in Torah study. Certainly, one who studies Torah does so for a sublime purpose. Torah study is not an arbitrary activity that one undertakes as a pastime. It is purposeful and meaningful, comprising the lifeblood of our nation.

*Horav Baruch Mordechai Eizrachi, Shlita*, explains that *amal* (according to *Ri Lunil* and *Malbim*) is defined as an activity whose purpose is not actualized, does not achieve fruition. One can hardly make such a statement with regard to Torah study in which every moment expended earns infinite, eternal reward. On the contrary, nothing is further from *amal*/toil than Torah study. The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that the term *amal* concerning Torah study means the reason for the fruits of his labor; i.e., one's toil catalyzes his success in Torah – a concept which is not applicable to Torah. His success in Torah is pure *siyata diShmaya*, Divine Assistance. While, indeed, one merits Divine Assistance as a result of his toil, it is not directly catalyzed by the toil. Thus, his learning is purely for the purpose of serving Hashem. Hashem determines the reward/fruition/actualization of his efforts, aka *amal*, toil. We now have a novel understanding and appreciation of *ameilus baTorah*.

Pharaoh might have been the first despot to use the slaughter of children as a means of destroying

Jewish hope, but he surely was not the last. Let me expound on this concept. Growing up post-World War II was quite different than it is today, some seven decades later. The character of the Jewish community was unlike that of contemporary times. Our parents and grandparents, who had miraculously survived the inferno of the Holocaust, did not emerge unscathed. Many were mere shells of their original selves; they were young men and women who, in the span of a few years, aged beyond anything we can imagine. They lived through, and survived, a nightmare that remained deeply imbedded in their minds and etched on their hearts.

I remember *davening* in our small *shteibel* in the basement of an apartment building on Chicago's north side. The *Rav* was the world-class *talmid chacham* and *posek*, *Horav Tzvi Hirsh Meisels, zl*, the *Veitzener Rav*. He had met a number of his congregants in Auschwitz; my father was one of them. The congregants, who were Holocaust survivors, manifested an unusual attitude toward us – the children in the *shul*. Some were very patient and kind, showering us with candies. Others had no patience. If our noise level exceeded a whisper, we were quickly given a stern look. Yet others just stared at us – some lovingly, others just staring, causing us to wonder what it was they were staring at. Some of these men had been blessed to start a family over again. Others were not as fortunate and were compelled to live out their twilight years alone, with nothing but sad memories.

Growing up, we never understood what was coursing through the minds of these holy men, broken shards of a once glorious Jewish life. We pray that no Jewish man or woman ever confront the adversity which they endured and the memories that went with them to the grave. We cannot fully understand. Because we cannot understand, I was inspired to write this after reading a story by Rabbi Yechiel Spero (*One Shining Moment*), which evoked these memories and thoughts.

*Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* is the most propitious time for *davening* to Hashem. It is then, when our lives hang in the balance, that the *kavanah*, intention/devotion, that might be lacking during the rest of the year reigns in full force. The greater the purity and innocence of the petitioner, the more powerful and effective are his prayers. Therefore, when thousands of pure Jewish children assemble in prayer to beseech Hashem on behalf of *Klal Yisrael*, it is an awe-inspiring event without peer.

The *Tehillim asifah*, gathering, takes place in the large *Bobover bais hamedrash* in Boro Park, attended by thousands of children and broadcast to many locations where other children gather to pray in unison. These some 50,000 voices (throughout the world) represent an unparalleled prayer service, rendered by pure hearts pleading to Hashem on behalf of *Klal Yisrael* that, in His infinite compassion, He have mercy on His children.

It did not take long before not a single empty seat could be found. This event was for children, but a small area was designated for invited adults, who joined this unique once-a-year congregation. As those in charge were seeing to last-minute arrangements, they noticed an elderly man with a flowing white beard who had placed himself directly behind the lectern where the *chazzan* leading the service was to stand. Had he been a young man, they would have politely asked him to find

another seat. This man, however, was neither young, nor did he appear to be the type of person who would leave just because this seat was in an area designated for children. This had to be executed tactfully, in order to move the man while preserving his dignity.

The man in charge of the program went over and respectfully informed the gentleman that this area was reserved specifically for children. They would be happy to find him a suitable seat in an adult-friendly section of the *shul*. The man listened – smiled – but demurred moving. He had selected this seat by design and was not budging. Something told the man in charge to smile and let it go – allowing the man to sit in the seat which he had selected for himself. He was about to return to his many other duties, when the elderly man removed two old yellowed brittle snapshots from his pocket, showed them to the man, and began to relate a most heartrending tale.

“These are my two sons who were murdered by the Nazis, *yemach shemam*. The Nazis entered our small town and systematically went about killing everyone – my two sons included among the martyrs. Somehow, I was able to elude their bullets and escape. All I have to remember of my children are these pictures.” The man’s emotion-laden words came slowly, as the tears that he had long held back began to flow down his cheeks. One could see that he was reliving the pain with every word that he said.

“I am certain that at such a gathering, with so many beautiful *Yiddishe kinder*, that my two sons are also here. I just want to spend some time with them.”

This man carried his pain with him in his pocket, day after day, year after year; it never left his heart. When asked if he would like to lead some of the verses of *Tehillim*, he said that he would rather *daven* with the children. He wanted to be with his sons.

Our children are our future. When we see an older man or woman who is alone, we should remember this story and remember that others, too, may have their own stories.