

## **Because the Hebrew women are unlike the Egyptian women ... before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth. (1:19)**

Pharaoh had instructed Shifrah and Puah, the Jewish midwives, to murder the male infants. They, of course, did not listen to the evil despot, claiming that by the time they arrived at the homes of the Jewish women, the children had been born. *Horav Shabsi Frankel, zl*, quotes an original thought from his father-in-law, *Horav Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer, zl*, which presents us with a deeper meaning to the dialogue that ensued between Pharaoh and the *me'yaldos*, midwives.

Understandably, these holy women were not prepared to commit the unthinkable. Their task was to bring on life, not to shorten it. They had a logical response to Pharaoh's accusation. He cites the *Echad Mi Yodea*, "Who Knows One?" a song which is recited at the end of the *Seder*. This song culminates (with *Chad Gadya*, which follows it) the *Seder* ritual. After spending hours intensely transmitting the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, our exodus from Egypt, we involve ourselves in a most important examination: Why were we, the Jewish people, privileged to experience the liberation from Egypt? Furthermore, will we once again be worthy of experiencing redemption at the End of Days? The song intimates our singularity, our distinctiveness, for the past and for the future.

It begins, "Who Knows One?" Of course, Hashem is our answer. Our belief in the Almighty elevates us above the rest of the world. This litany continues with each number representing our uniqueness in ancestry, commitment to Torah study and *mitzvos*. One entry, however, begs elucidation: *Tishah mi yodea*, "Who knows nine?" *Tishah yarchei leidah*, "Nine months of birth" (*leidah* means birth, although, in this context, it is translated as pregnancy). The question is obvious: What is so special about our people that we specify that we have nine months of pregnancy? This is a period of time that applies to all women across the board. Furthermore, why does the *paytan*, ritual poet, author of the *Haggadah*, use the word *leidah*, which means birth, as opposed to *ibur*, which means pregnancy?

The *Rav* cites *Ramban* (*Shemos* 1:10) who explains that while Pharaoh personally had no problem with wholesale genocide of the male infants, he knew that it would engender a negative reaction from his populace. They would not buy into it. They were, after all, a cultured nation who would never resort to such violence and bigotry. He commenced his plan by conscripting the "immigrants" as workers. This was part of the acceptance policy levied against foreigners to a country. Obviously, in short time, the Jews discovered that Pharaoh was acting as a despot whose true intentions were to eliminate the Jewish people.

Pharaoh presented the midwives with a cunning rationale (according to *Rav Yosef Nechemiah*). He said, "The Jews do not really want more children. Why would they choose to bring them into a life of servitude? The women became pregnant as a result of passion. If a woman's fetus were to be stillborn, she would not be distressed. In other words, Pharaoh alluded to the idea that these were

unwanted pregnancies. They would actually be performing a service to the parents by “limiting” their families. (Pharaoh’s diabolical intention has, unfortunately, found purchase in today’s irreverent society.)

The midwives replied with a lesson concerning Jewish marriage and family life. In the Jewish tradition, marriage is a means to fulfill Hashem’s command that we propagate in order to establish the foundation for future generations. [This concept applies to any form of propagation, including programs such as spiritual outreach. By helping a Jew return to the fold, we participate in his spiritual rebirth.] Jewish women are unlike Egyptian women, whose desire is purely physical and selfishly motivated. The Jewish woman marries for a purpose, to give, to produce, to participate in structuring the Jewish nation. She lives for her children. The love Jewish women have for their children begins at conception, because they sense the seeds of the future *Klal Yisrael* implanted within them. They pine for the moment when they can devote themselves wholly to their children. Thus, every child is of unique significance, even if it means bringing him/her into a life of servitude. They are carrying out Hashem’s Will. That is all that matters.

This concept is alluded to with the words, *tishah yarchei leidah*. For the Jewish people, the nine months of pregnancy are nine months of birth. The love they have for their child begins at conception, as if the baby had already been born.