

טעמו וראו

A taste of the
Rebbe's teachings

Shemot



The Advisors' Dilemma

When Pharaoh suggested to drown the newborns, what were his advisors to do? Object and face the consequences, or agree and work with the circumstances?

When faced with a moral dilemma, do you make do with the situation or take a principled stand?

A fascinating lesson from Bilaam, Job and Jethro.

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Part 1 - Pharaoh's Consultation

Source 1

Exodus 1:8-14, 22.



A new king, who did not know of Joseph, came to power in Egypt. He said to his people, “The Israelites are becoming too numerous and strong for us. We must deal wisely with them. Otherwise, they may increase so much, that if there is war, they will join our enemies and fight against us, driving us from the land.”

The Egyptians appointed conscription officers over the Israelites to crush their spirits with hard labor. The Israelites were to build up the cities of Pithom and Rameses as supply centers for Pharaoh. But the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more the Israelites proliferated and spread. The Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians started to make the Israelites do labor designed to break their bodies. They made the lives of the Israelites miserable with harsh labor involving mortar and bricks, as well as all kinds of work in the field. All the work they made them do was intended to break them.

...Pharaoh then gave orders to all his people: “Every boy who was born must be cast into the Nile, but every girl shall be allowed to live.”

חומש שמות, פרק א'

ח וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ, עַל-מִצְרָיִם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע, אֶת-יוֹסֵף. ט וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-עַמּוֹ: הִנֵּה, עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--רַב וְעָצוּם, מְמַנּוּ. י הֲבֵה נִתְחַקְמָה, לּוֹ: פֶּן-יִרְבֶּה, וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ, וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ, וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ.

יא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ עָלָיו שְׂרֵי מִסִּים, לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוּ בְּסִבְלָתָם; וַיָּבֹאוּ עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת, לְפָרְעֹה--אֶת-פִּתּוֹם, וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס. יב וַכֹּאשֶׁר יַעֲזֹב אֹתוֹ, בֶּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֹן יִפְרֹץ; וַיִּקְצֹוּ, מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. יג וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּפָרֶךְ. יד וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעִבְדָּה קָשָׁה, בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבָנִים, וּבְכָל-עִבְדָּה, בְּשָׂדֵה--אֶת, כָּל-עִבְדֹתָם, אֲשֶׁר-עֲבָדוּ בָהֶם, בְּפָרֶךְ.

כב וַיִּצְוּ פָרְעֹה, לְכָל-עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר: כָּל-הַבֶּן הַיְלֹוֹד, הַיִּזְאָרָה תִשְׁלִיכֻהוּ, וְכָל-הַבַּת, תַּחֲיֶינָהּ.

Source 2

Talmud, Tractate Sotah 11a



Pharaoh consulted with three people [as to what should be done with the Israelites.] Bilaam, Job, and Jethro. Bilaam, who advised [to enslave the Israelites and kill all sons born to them], was later killed. Job, who remained silent, was punished by suffering. Jethro, who fled, merited that his children's children served in the High Court in the Temple.

סוטה י"א א'

אמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי סימאי, שלשה היו באותה עצה: בלעם ואיוב ויתרו. בלעם שיעץ, נהרג. איוב ששתק, נידון ביסורין. יתרו שברח, זכו מבני בניו שישבו בלשכת הגזית.

Source 3

Midrash Sifri, end of Deuteronomy



The verse states: And no prophet arose in Israel like Moses. This intimates that there was indeed a prophet like him among the nations. Who? Bilaam, son of Beor!

מדרש ספרי, סוף פרשת ברכה

לא קם נביא בישראל כמשה - אבל באומות קם. ואיזה? זה בלעם בן בעור!

Source 4

Numbers 31:1-2, 7-8



G-d spoke to Moses, saying, "Take revenge for the Israelites against the Midianites."

They mounted a surprise attack against Midian as G-d had commanded Moses and killed all the adult males ...They also killed Bilaam, son of Beor, by the sword.

חומש במדבר, פרק ל"א

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. ב נָקֶם, נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאֵת, הַמִּדְיָנִים;

ז וַיִּצְבְּאוּ, עַל-מִדְיָן, כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה, אֶת-מֹשֶׁה; וַיַּהַרְגוּ, כָּל-זָכָר. ח ...וְאֵת בְּלַעַם בֶּן-בְּעוֹר, הָרְגוּ בַחֶרֶב.

Source 5

Job 1:13-16



One day, as his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the she-asses were grazing alongside them when Sabceans attacked them and carried them off and put the boys to the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." As he spoke, another came and said, "God's fire fell from heaven, took hold of the sheep and the boys, and burned them up; I alone have escaped to tell you."

ספר איוב, פרק א'

יג וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וּבָנָיו וּבָנוֹתָיו אֹכְלִים
וְשֹׁתִים יַיִן בְּבֵית אָחִיהֶם הַבְּכוֹר:
יד וּמִלֶּאֶךָּ בָּא אֶל־אִיּוֹב וַיֹּאמֶר
הַבָּקָר הָיוּ חֹרְשׁוֹת וְהָאֲתָנוֹת
רְעוֹת עַל־יְדֵיהֶם: טו וַתִּפֹּל שְׁבָא
וַתִּקְחֶם וְאֶת־הַנְּעָרִים הִכּוּ לְפִי־
חֶרֶב וְאִמְלָטָה רַק־אֲנִי לְבַדִּי
לְהִגִּיד לָךְ: טז עוֹד זֶה מְדַבֵּר וְזֶה
בָּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים נָפְלָה מִן־
הַשָּׁמַיִם וַתִּבְעַר בְּצֹאן וּבַנְּעָרִים
וַתֹּאכְלֶם וְאִמְלָטָה רַק־אֲנִי לְבַדִּי
לְהִגִּיד לָךְ:

Source 6

Midrash Pirkei D'rabbi Elazar, chapter 40



Rabbi Levi said: That staff which was created in the twilight before the first Shabbat was delivered to Adam. Adam delivered it to Enoch, Enoch to Noah, Noah to Shem, Shem to Abraham, Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, and Jacob brought it down into Egypt and passed it on to his son Joseph. When Joseph died and they pillaged his household goods, it was placed in the palace of Pharaoh. Jethro was one of the magicians of Egypt, and he saw the staff and the letters which were upon it, and he desired it in his heart and he took it and planted it in the midst of his garden. No one was able to pull it out.

פרקי דר"א מ'

ר' לוי אומר, אותו המטה שנברא בין השמשות נמסר לאדם הראשון מגן עדן, ואדם מסרו לחנוך, וחנוך מסרו לנח, ונח לשם, ושם מסרו לאברהם, ואברהם ליצחק, ויצחק ליעקב, ויעקב הוריד אותו למצרים, ומסרו ליוסף בנו. כשמת יוסף ושללו ביתו, נתנה בפלטרין של פרעה, והיה יתרו אחד מחרטומי מצרים, וראה את המטה ואת האותות אשר עליו, וחמד אותו בלבו, ולקחו והביאו ונטעו בתוך הגן של ביתו, ולא היה אדם יכול לקרב אליו עוד.

When Moses came to his house, he went into the garden, and saw the staff and read the letters on it, and he put forth his hand and took it. Jethro watched Moses and said, "He will redeem Israel from Egypt." Therefore, he gave him Zipporah his daughter as a wife.

כשבא משה לתוך ביתו, נכנס
לגן ביתו של יתרו וראה את
המטה וקרא את האותות אשר
עליו ושלף ידו ולקחו וראה
יתרו למשה ואמר זה עתיד
לגאול את ישראל ממצרים
לפיכך נתן לו את צפורה בתו
לאשה, שנ' ויואל משה לשבת
את האישה.

Part 2 - The Ill-Fated Advice

The Sicha, Part 1

The Rebbe: What Was Their Sin?



The Talmud relates in Tractate Sotah:

“Pharaoh consulted with three people [as to what should be done with the Israelites.] Bilaam, Job and Jethro. Bilaam, who advised [to enslave the Israelites and kill all sons born to them] was later killed. Job, who remained silent, was punished by suffering. Jethro, who fled, merited that his children’s children served in the High Court in the Temple.”

The heavenly consequences for each of the three attitudes—Bilaam’s suggestion, Job’s silence and Jethro’s escape—raises questions:

“Bilaam advised [to enslave the Israelites and kill all sons born to them] and was later killed.”

Bilaam served as an advisor to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Thus, it was his moral obligation to advise Pharaoh with Egypt’s best interest in mind. The negative impact his suggestion would have on the Israelites should not be his concern. Pharaoh did not ask for his advice in benefiting the Israelites. To the contrary: Pharaoh was concerned about the high Israelite birthrate and the potential crisis it would bring. It was therefore Bilaam’s obligation to devise a plan that would counter the threat. If he was fulfilling his duty as advisor to Pharaoh, the question arises: Why did he deserve such a severe punishment? Why was he punished altogether?

To the contrary: Bilaam deserves a medal! He faithfully and fearlessly discharged his duty to counsel Egypt. We should not forget that Bilaam was a prophet. The Torah says that he knew G-d’s will and had visions of prophecy comparable to the prophecies of Moses, the greatest prophet of all time. He surely understood the risk-factor involved with harming the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Nonetheless, he fulfilled his obligation as Pharaoh’s advisor and advised him with Egypt’s best interest in mind.

Yet, the Talmud is highly critical of his decision and says that he was punished with death. How does this square with Torah’s aim of truth and justice?

We can pose the same question about Job, who “remained silent and was punished with suffering”:

Job clearly did not want to harm the Israelites. However, fearing Pharaoh’s wrath, he chose to remain silent. Why does he deserve to be punished? He did not cause the Israelites any harm!

On the other side of the coin, if the Talmud is critical of Job, it should have put it differently:

Pharaoh consulted with three advisors. It is highly plausible that he would have followed the majority opinion. Thus, had Job sided with Jethro (who spoke well of the Israelites and had to subsequently flee Pharaoh’s wrath), Pharaoh would have followed their advice and abolished the decree against the Israelites. Since Job remained silent, the two opinions of Bilaam and Jethro remained equal and Pharaoh made his own decision.

Our criticism of Job should be (not that he remained silent but) that he didn’t speak positively of the Israelites and seek to abolish Pharaoh’s decree. Yet the Talmud chooses to say, “he remained silent.” Instead of criticizing him for not defending the Israelites, it criticizes him for his silence – although the former seems to be more damning.

Bilaam’s Great Mistake: Failing to Speak His Mind

The explanation:

Bilaam was punished because his advice was harmful (not to the Israelites but) to Egypt. Harming the Israelites was not in Egypt’s best interest, because “anyone who causes harm to the people of Israel, causes harm to the pupil of G-d’s eye.”

In other words: Our criticism of Bilaam is not for proposing to harm the Israelites. Bilaam would have had a ready defense: “In my capacity as Pharaoh’s advisor, I was committed to Egypt’s wellbeing.” Our criticism of Bilaam is that his

suggestion to Pharaoh was against Egypt's best interest.

A regular person could not have been any wiser than Pharaoh. But Bilaam was a prophet and knew G-d's will, so he should have told Pharaoh outright: "You are correct in your assumption that the Jewish birthrate might be dangerous, but harming them is even more dangerous, because you would be causing harm to the pupil of G-d's eye."

Being committed to Egypt's wellbeing as Pharaoh's advisor, he should have told him the full truth. He should have done so even if it wasn't what Pharaoh wanted to hear, and even though he would be subsequently forced to flee (to save his life for opposing the wishes of Pharaoh).

So this is the criticism of Bilaam: He was so intimidated by Pharaoh that he failed to recognize the truth and instead tried to please his master, telling him what he wanted to hear and what he thought was actually in Egypt's best interest, when it was, in fact, profoundly destructive to Egypt, Pharaoh and his army.

Job's Great Mistake: Trying to Please Everyone

The criticism about Job is similar.

The task of an advisor is to give an opinion – whether it is popular or not. If you are committed to your duty as an advisor, you take a side, irrespective of the attractiveness of your opinion.

Now, some people prefer to please everyone, but that is not always possible. When one side says, "throw the newborns into the river," and the other side says, "don't touch the pupil of G-d's eye," there is no middle-ground with which to please both. In that instance, he chooses to offer no opinion at all. Thus, he will be able to comfortably approach both sides and say, "Consider me your good friend; I said nothing against you." Job is comfortable with the Talmud's account of his silence. Now, he cannot be accused by Bilaam of contradicting him, nor can he be accused by Moses; he said nothing that would harm the Jewish people...

Thus, although we can justifiably criticize Job for not having supported the Israelites (potentially abolishing the decree or at least removing any blame from himself), there is a much stronger charge: How could he remain silent? If you were—by Divine providence—appointed as an advisor, you need to find the strength to convey your

opinion! If you don't have that strength, resign and head home...

Therefore, the Torah of Truth views Job's silence as worse than his lack of interest in the plight of the Israelites. In a certain sense, it is worse than misguidedly advising Pharaoh to harm the Israelites.

Anything is better than a policy of pleasing everyone. Job understood that drowning the Jewish newborns would harm the Israelites and harm Egypt as well, and he still remained silent – irrespective of his duties as senior advisor to the king and one of the three individuals to whom the question was posed. Even if he wouldn't have been one of the three, the obligation would rest on him to protest. Yet he would take pride in his decision to remain silent, because it allows him to profess good terms with Bilaam and Moses in unison.

This, the Talmud says, is worse than ignoring the Israelites' plight.

Part 3 - Jethro Takes a Stand

The Sicha, Part 2

What Was Jethro's Calculation?



Now let's take a look at Jethro:

Jethro is mentioned third in the Talmud's account – after Bilaam, who suggested to drown the newborns, and Job, who remained silent. At that point, Jethro understood that he wouldn't be a tiebreaker; at most, there would be two equally supported opinions: Jethro versus Bilaam. No doubt, Jethro knew Pharaoh's personal preference; after all, he fled after conveying his opinion.

With that in mind, his choice to oppose Bilaam seems irrational.

If he knew that his opinion would not sway Pharaoh, perhaps it would have been better that he remain silent regardless of his personal opinion. He could have thereby remained Pharaoh's advisor and retained the ability to aid the Israelites in other matters. Pharaoh indeed commanded the killing of all boys, but girls were to be kept alive. Had Jethro remained among Pharaoh's close circle of advisors, he could have ensured the spiritual wellbeing of the girls, in keeping kosher, Jewish education and so on. But because he opposed the proposed killing, he was forced to flee – leaving the Israelites helplessly in Pharaoh's hands... How was that beneficial to the Israelites?

You may argue: How could Jethro possibly agree in good faith to Pharaoh's plan to drown the boys? But did he really have any better option? He should have, at least, remained to seek out the welfare of the girls – to save the girls and their parents. This would also allow him to protect them from slave labor and tend to their needs in general. Seeing no possibility to abolish the decree, he should have used his knowledge of Jewish law and his own logic to make a calculation:

He has an important job with Pharaoh, the ruler of the world's greatest superpower. He is one of three senior advisors; clearly, Pharaoh values his advice. If so, there is no reason for him to uselessly support a minority opinion and then flee to Midian, leaving Pharaoh and Bilaam alone (with Job remaining silent). This would mean totally abandoning the Israelites in Egypt!

In different terminology: You may want to remove yourself from anything that does not coincide with Torah's values, in order to demonstrate your commitment to Torah. But that means you are willing to abandon the education of all Israelite girls in Egypt, the kosher food of all Israelites in Egypt and the potential of alleviating their suffering – just for your own honor; just to demonstrate how principled you are!

Perhaps you should bend your principles for five minutes? It will make no practical difference; the majority opinion is against you either way. But by remaining on Pharaoh's good side, you will retain your post as senior advisor and you will be able to look out for the Israelites 'from the inside.'

Be Principled and Take a Stand

But no matter how powerful this question may be, the Talmud doesn't see it that way!

Jethro didn't need to think twice. He knew exactly what he was supposed to do. He knew that his would be a minority opinion and he would need to flee (as he indeed did), but nevertheless, when Pharaoh asked for his opinion, he did what an upright human being does: he said the full truth, without machinations. What about exchanging the life of the boys for the wellbeing of the girls? Jethro says that it's not for him. He is bound by his ethics.

Being an upright person, he understood his duty as an advisor. Remaining silent wasn't an option, nor was playing games. Our sages said, "Do not measure the various mitzvos of the Torah against each other." Likewise, they said, "Why is one person's blood redder than another's?" The baby boy's life is not worth more than the baby girl's...You have no right to negotiate with human lives.

With all three options, Torah illuminates the way for us as Jews (as the verse says, Mitzvot are our candle and Torah is our light). The only path that leads directly to the High Court in Jerusalem—and the only path that is seen favorably for all eternity—is to follow Torah's statutes without regard to their popularity, and without regard to your supposed impact.

This mode of conduct brings about two results: Pharaoh and his cohorts lose their influence, and "the People of Israel leave exile triumphantly" and moreover, "with great wealth."

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מיזם של "משרד השלוחים"

נוסד בימי השבעה לזכרון ולע"נ הרב גבריאל נח זוגות רבקה הי"ד
שלוחי הרבי במומבאי, הודו

