

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [93]

"Your Decree is Harsher than That of Pharaoh!"

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a

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Background to Our Story

Miriam



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miriam>

Miriam (Hebrew: מִרְיָם) was the sister of Moses and Aaron, and the daughter of Amram and Jochebed. She appears first in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible.

Amram



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amram>

In the Book of Exodus, Amram is the father of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam and the husband of Jochebed.

Exodus 2:1-10

¹ A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. ⁴ And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. ⁶ When

she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" ⁸ And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."

? The above verses describe the birth of Moses. What calls for an explanation in the underlined verse (Exodus 2:1)?

Tzadik



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzadik>

In classic Jewish thought, there are various definitions of a tzadik. According to Maimonides (based on Tractate Yevamot of the Babylonian Talmud, 49b-50a): "One whose merit surpasses his iniquity is a tzadik."

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkah 45b) says that at least 36 Tzadikim Nistarim -- anonymous tzadikim -- are living among us at some times; they are anonymous, and it is for their sake alone that the world is not destroyed. The Talmud and the Kabbalah offer various ideas about the nature and role of these 36 tzadikim.

While the tzadik status, according to its above definitions, is not necessarily related to the ability to perform or call upon miracles, the term tzadik is often used loosely by the Talmud to indicate those who have achieved especially outstanding piety and holiness. In this context, the tzadik's prayers are considered especially potent, as the Talmud states: "A tzadik decrees and the Holy One (blessed be He) fulfills." (See: Shabbat 59, Moed Katan 16, Shabbat 63, Bava Metzia 85)

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a

תָּנָא: עֲמָרָם גָּדוֹל הַדּוֹר הַזֶּה. כִּיִּןן שְׂרָאָה שְׂאֲמַר פְּרַעֲהַ הַרְשָׁע: "כָּל הַבֵּן הַיֵּלֹד הַיֵּאֲרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ", אָמַר:
לְשׂוֹן אָנוּ עֲמַלִּין! עֲמַד וּגְיַרְשׁ אֶת אֲשֶׁתוֹ. עֲמַדוּ כּוֹלֵן וּגְיַרְשׁוּ אֶת נְשׁוֹתֵיהֶן.

אָמְרָה לוֹ בְּתוֹ: אַבָּא, קִשָּׁה גְזִירְתָּהּ יוֹתֵר מִשָּׁל פְּרַעֲהַ, שְׂפַרְעָה לֹא גָזַר אֱלֹהִים עַל הַזְּכָרִים, וְאִתָּהּ גְזִירְתָּ עַל
הַזְּכָרִים וְעַל הַנְּקִיבוֹת! פְּרַעֲהַ לֹא גָזַר אֱלֹהִים בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, וְאִתָּהּ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְלְעוֹלָם הַבָּא! פְּרַעֲהַ הַרְשָׁע,
סָפֵק מִתְקַיְיֶמֶת גְזִירְתּוֹ סָפֵק אֵינָהּ מִתְקַיְיֶמֶת, אִתָּהּ צָדִיק, בְּנֻדְאֵי שְׂגִירְתָּהּ מִתְקַיְיֶמֶת, שְׂאֲמַר: "וְתִגְזֹר
אוֹמֵר וַיִּקָּם לָךְ!"

עֲמַד וְהִחְזִיר אֶת אֲשֶׁתוֹ. עֲמַדוּ כּוֹלֵן וְהִחְזִירוּ אֶת נְשׁוֹתֵיהֶן.

Amram was the great man of his generation. Once he saw that the wicked Pharaoh said: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive" (Exodus 1:22), he said: We are laboring for nothing. Therefore, he arose and divorced his wife. All arose and divorced their wives.

His daughter, Miriam, said to him: Father, your decree is harsher for the Jewish people than that of Pharaoh, as Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, but you decreed both on the males and on the females. Additionally, Pharaoh decreed only in this world, but you decreed in this world and in the World-to-Come. Additionally, concerning Pharaoh the wicked, it is uncertain whether his decree will be fulfilled, and it is uncertain if his decree will not be fulfilled. You are a righteous person, and as such, your decrees will certainly be fulfilled, as it is stated with regard to the righteous: "You shall also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto you" (Job 22:28).

Amram arose and brought back, i.e., remarried, his wife, and all others arose and brought back their wives.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How does our story help shed light on the problem we had with the biblical text above (Exodus Chapter 2:1)?

? Why is it important for the understanding of the story to know that Amram was the great man of his generation?

? Why did Amram divorce his wife when he learned about Pharaoh's evil decree?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did all the Israelites follow suit and divorce their wives?

? How was Amram's decree harsher than Pharaoh's according to his daughter?

? *Please explain: "Pharaoh decreed only in this world, but you decreed in this world and in the World-to-Come."*

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Rashi explains that children who are killed in this world still have a portion in the World-to-Come, and therefore, failing to have children at all means not affording one's potential children this possibility. Some explain this as referring to the parents: By divorcing and purposely not having children, they are neglecting the mitzva to procreate, thereby denying themselves reward for this in the World-to-Come (*Iyyun Ya'akov; Ahavat Eitan*).

? How do we see in our story that Miriam was very respectful of her father even when challenging his judgment?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Amram bring back his wife?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did all the Israelites follow suit and bring back their wives?

Bonus ? What is Amram's way to cope with pain, helplessness and loss? What is Miriam's way to cope with pain, helplessness and loss?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text

! Yes, the pain is there and it is real, but there is more than pain in life!: Miriam's message of optimism and hope.

! Even when Pharaoh is in charge, he is not the only one in charge; you can also be in charge!

! By the Power Vested in Me! – Leadership, leadership, leadership.

! Speaking truth to power: when courage meets wisdom.

What does speak truth to power mean? Stand up for what's right and tell people in charge what's what. That's the idea behind the phrase speak truth to power, an expression for courageously confronting an authority, calling out injustices on their watch, and demanding change.