



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Shemot

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Shemot

**How To Balance Family And  
Work? Be An Animal!**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Shemot > How To Balance Family And Work?

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The New York Times* last week ran a story entitled: “Wall Street Mothers, Stay-Home Fathers – As Husbands Do Domestic Duty, These Women Are Free to Achieve.” The article revolved around the balance – or tension – between a demanding family life and an excessive work life.

The first time in history that this tension comes up is in this week’s Torah reading, which recounts Jewish family life in Egyptian bondage. The tale begins when Pharaoh, feeling threatened by the ever-expanding Jewish population oppresses them with excessive work. It happens gradually – first soft words, than hard labor, ending up with a quota demand that can only be achieved by working 20-hour days.

How did the Jews in Egypt – literally enslaved by their jobs and facing circumstances much more threatening than Wall Street – balance this with caring for their families? How did they even have families when they were so overworked and so poor?

By having their wives unleashing a secret weapon. By having their wives become ... “animals” (in every positive sense of the word).

Through a very unusual approach, this sermon answers the question for all overworked, modern-day toilers: When work-life and family-life are at odds, when stress and tension rule the day, what is the solution? The answer will surprise you.

## HOW TO BALANCE FAMILY AND WORK? BE AN ANIMAL!

### 1. Are You Comfortable? (Joke)

One sunny day, Moshe was crossing Main Street, when suddenly a car came out of nowhere and ran him over. Thank God, he was only slightly injured.

When the ambulance arrived, the attendant put a blanket over Moshe and a pillow under his head and asked:

“Sir, are you comfortable?”

Moshe looked up from the pillow and replied, “Vell, you know, I make a pretty good living.”

### 2. Comfortable Thoughts

As with all good humor, a deep truth is conveyed beneath the laughs and within the smiles. Indeed, what constitutes a joke is the sense of a magnified truth – a truth blown out to ridiculous (ergo laughable) proportions.

So it is in our case with Moshe. When Moshe hears the question, “Are you comfortable?” he (despite his condition) immediately associates comfort with being able to support himself and provide for his family.

And we all laugh, because we can all relate to Moshe’s way of thinking. At the end of the day, we all strive to be able to provide comfortably for our families, to ensure that our children and our loved ones have everything they need and as little stress as possible.

In this sense, our professional work-lives exist primarily to provide sustenance and comfort for our families. Sure, our work is also about accomplishment, achievement, and making a positive mark on the universe, but all of that is secondary to ensuring that our children have clothing to wear and that the fridge is stocked with food.

Would anyone commit to a job if they knew that it would harm their families? I think not. And yet...

### 3. Domesticity vs. Achievement

Last week, *The New York Times* featured a story entitled “Wall Street Mothers, Stay-Home Fathers – As Husbands Do Domestic Duty, These Women Are Free to Achieve.”<sup>1</sup>

Without getting into the nuts-and-bolts of the article, let me just focus on the underlying theme – the tension between one’s home-life and one’s work-life.

And herein lies the question: What to do when the family life and work life are at odds?

This is no hypothetical question. Often times – and we all have experienced it – there is a conflict between family and work. Say, your wedding anniversary overlaps with an important business trip, or putting your kids to bed conflicts with meeting a pressing deadline.

What to do when, as *The Times* put it, “domestic duty” and being “free to achieve” are at odds? How to resolve any such conflict without stress and tension?

On one hand, everything you do is for your family; on the other hand, you don’t want to neglect your family while you are busy providing for them.

That would be ironic indeed – working 20-hour days to provide for your kids, then coming home and finding that your kids don’t even know who you are. It would be like a rabbi working on a sermon about how to balance home-life and work-life, while simultaneously yelling at his son to stop screaming because he’s trying to work!

How to strike that balance that allows one to succeed professionally without compromising family life? And how to accomplish this without the prerequisite stress and tension that often accompanies such a volatile intersection?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/us/wall-street-mothers-stay-home-fathers.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1387350319-Z4qTclKDv9CC4c7sgxmJeg>

## 4. Success In Egypt

As always, we turn to our blueprint – the holy Torah – for guidance and inspiration. And, as Divine Providence would have it, the opening chapter of this week’s Torah reading discusses exactly this tension between family life and work life.

As we begin, we find that Jacob’s extended family has settled nicely in Egypt. A few years back, they were what today the United Nations would call a “refugee people,” driven by famine from their homes in Israel to seek sustenance in a foreign land. In more relatable terms, they were the greenhorns that arrived on the shores of America – a new land, with new customs and new language.

Only here, instead of arriving in 20th century America, the Jews arrived in Egypt of 3,000 years ago. Instead of the Lower East Side on the Hudson River, it was the Middle East Side on the Nile River.

Of course, as Jews have always done throughout history, the Jews in Egypt built up large and beautiful families; they built up highly successful businesses; and they built up powerful communities.

In the beginning, all was good. The Israelites’ success was the Egyptians’ success. As the Midrash<sup>2</sup> shares with us, and as history has proven time and again, when the Jewish people are successful, so are the nations that harbor them. And the opposite is true as well – when nations that harbor them persecute them, so they too come to experience persecution. I’ll refer you to Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Rome, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Germany, present-day Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Turkey ... and the list goes on!

And this is exactly what happened in Egypt: A new Pharaoh rose to power, and he was insecure. He felt threatened by these Jews, so:

*He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are. Get ready, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase, and a war befall us, and they join our enemies and depart from the land.”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Mechilta Exodus 14:5. Zohar II 6a. See Chagigah 13b. Toras Chaim Lech Lecho 92a.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 1:9-10.

For some reason, this Pharaoh just didn't get the Jews. He didn't understand that Jews don't like war, they do not enjoy strife, and they do not lust for blood or political power. There is one country on earth that we Jews have sought to return to and to make our home, and that is the Land of Israel; in every other country we have ever visited, we were very happy to be materially and spiritually successful without compromising the government or the law of the land. Indeed, we have helped to uphold both.

Why the Pharaoh – and for that matter why Achashverosh, Haman, Hitler and their ilk – never understood this, I do not know. Perhaps insecure people cannot imagine that we are here for a purpose other than threatening them; we are here to change the world! Or perhaps they felt threatened by that very thing and by our desire to bring God into the equation.

Either way, we see from history that when the Jews inevitably reach a certain measure of success, the Pharaohs of the world begin to scheme shrewdly...

## 5. A Pyramid Scheme

When the Torah says that Pharaoh dealt “shrewdly” with the so-called “Jewish problem,” it means that Pharaoh, along with his ministers, created a systematic approach to undermining the Children of Israel – a kind of pyramid scheme, so to speak.

The Jewish bedrock, as Pharaoh knew well, is the Jewish family. And what does one do when one wishes to destroy a family? One looks for and attacks the perceived weak points, accentuating and accelerating the stress on them.

One major stressor on any family is work and money. And thus, like an overly demanding, unreasonable, oppressive boss, Pharaoh began the process of increasing the financial burdens of the Jews to unbearable heights, with the end-goal of destroying the family fiber and essence of Jewish life.

Pharaoh thought that by overwhelming the men with tax burdens and hard labor, they would no longer have children because 1) they didn't have the time or energy for marriage or marital relations, and 2) they could not "afford" to have and support children. This was Pharaoh's initial plan to undermine and corrode the foundation of Jewish life.

## 6. Step by Step

The opening of the Book of Exodus<sup>4</sup> relates the step-by-step process. (I paraphrase):

- First, the Egyptians appointed tax collectors over the Jews, to afflict them with tax burdens, and they forced the Jews to build store cities for Pharaoh, namely Pithom and Raamses. But *"as much as they would afflict them, so did they multiply and so did they gain strength."*
- Next the Egyptians enslaved the Children of Israel.
- Then they embittered their lives, forcing them to make bricks and work in the fields and with all manner of hard, back-breaking labor.

The Talmud,<sup>5</sup> the Midrash<sup>6</sup> and various commentaries elaborate greatly on all the nuances of these accelerating forms of oppression. But no matter how tight the checkbook got, and no matter how overworked and exhausted the people became, the Jewish spirit did not die. On the contrary - as the Torah states, *"as much as they would afflict them, so did they multiply and so did they gain strength."*

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<sup>4</sup>Exodus 1:11-16.

<sup>5</sup>Sotah 11a-b.

<sup>6</sup>On Shemot 1.

## 7. The Righteous Women

The Talmud relates that the reason Jewish life did not falter under all of this pressure was due to the *noshim tzitkonyot*, “the righteous women” who encouraged their husbands and ensured that the family would not fade. As the Torah relates:

When Pharaoh saw that no matter how much he enslaved the Jews – no matter how difficult he made their professional lives, no matter how much financial pressure he placed on them, they still multiplied, grew and thrived – he decided to resort to old-fashioned murder, thus attacking the Jewish family directly:

*Now the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one who was named Shifrah, and the second, who was named Puah. And he said, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall put him to death, but if it is a daughter, she may live.”*

In short: Pharaoh commanded the Jewish midwives, whose job it was to help bring new Jewish life into this world, to murder every newborn boy.

What was the midwives’ response?

*The midwives, however, feared God; so they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them, but they enabled the boys to live.*

*So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, that you have enabled the boys to live?” And the midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are experts (*chayot*); before the midwife has even come to them, they have already given birth.”<sup>7</sup>*

When Pharaoh commanded the midwives to murder the newborn Jewish children, they did not obey him. They feared God Almighty, they did not fear Pharaoh. So Pharaoh called them in and breathed fire-and-brimstone at them. “How dare you ignore my command! Why have you not killed these babies?”

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<sup>7</sup>Exodus 1:17-19.



To which the midwives respond with a rather cryptic sentence: *“Because not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are experts (chayot); before the midwife has even come to them, they have already given birth.”*

What does this mean?

## 8. The Meaning of Chayot

The Talmud<sup>8</sup> provides two interpretations of the Hebrew word *chayot*. The first translates the word *chayot* as “experts.” Thus the midwives were telling Pharaoh that the Jewish women were experts in childbirth, skilled in this life-affirming process, and therefore did not require the help of midwives in giving birth. So, Pharaoh, how can you blame us for not killing the children when we weren’t even there?

But the Talmud asks an obvious question: Does even the most skilled ob-gyn not need another ob-gyn to deliver her own baby? Does a midwife not need another midwife to assist her when she is giving birth? A midwife cannot deliver her own child!

Therefore, the Talmud provides another translation for the word *chayot* – “animals.” Yup, animals!

The midwives tell Pharaoh *“Because not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are animals (chayot)…”*

Huh? Jewish women, unlike Egyptian women, are animals?

This is derogatory, strange, and downright bizarre. But the Talmud doesn’t seem to think so. In fact, the Talmud brings proof from the Torah – from *Parshat Vayetzei* and *Parshat Vayechi* – where the children of Jacob are compared to animals: Judah to a lion, Dan to a snake, Naftali to a deer, Yissachar to a donkey, Joseph to a bull, Benjamin to a wolf...

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<sup>8</sup>Sotah 11b. See also Midrash Rabbah 1:16.

The commentaries<sup>9</sup> explain that just as animals in the wild need no midwives to give birth to their cubs, calves, kids and lambs, so too the Jewish women did not require midwives to assist in their birthing either.

This, if anything, makes the whole thing even more bizarre. Isn't it our role as Jews to transcend our animal instincts and realize our divine potential, for as human beings we have been created in the divine image?

What are the midwives really saying when they tell Pharaoh that the Jewish women are like animals?

## 9. The Maharsha's Answer

The great 16th Talmudic commentator, Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer HaLevi Eidels, known as the Maharsha, offers a beautiful answer.

He points out that human beings – unlike animals – are generally completely unnatural when it comes to two essential things: 1) childbirth, and 2) work. And let me reinterpret that in the relevant terms of today:

When a human being gives birth to a child it is highly painful, it is highly expensive, and it is full of stress: Is my doctor good? How many sonograms should I have? Will my insurance cover it – especially with this new Affordable Care Act? Can I eat sushi when pregnant? Should I get an epidural? Will I have to share a room in the hospital with a total stranger? Etc. Etc.

Don't you think childbirth, the greatest joy known to man, should be completely stress-free and all smiles? What's with this unnaturalness of pain and suffering?

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<sup>9</sup>See Rashi on the Talmud, *ibid*.

The other stressful and unnatural thing in our lives is our work. Why is work, accomplishment and achievement, accompanied by worry, tension, stress and pressure? Shouldn't working be only joyous and pleasant? It doesn't seem natural for work to be a pain. But if work is a good thing, why is it so hard to find a job, and why are jobs, once found, so stressful?

These two stress-points are unique and exclusive to the human being. Rocks don't stress out, and neither do plants – but they also don't work per se, or give birth.

Animals however do work, hunt, provide for their loved ones, and animals certainly give birth. Yet, for an animal these two things come naturally, without stress. There are no maternity wings and medical specialists in the animal kingdom, just as there aren't motivational speakers charging \$800-an-hour to get animals through a hunt. Why? Why are childbirth and work so stressful for humans but so natural for animals?

## 10. The Root in the Tree of Knowledge

The root is the Tree of Knowledge. Two repercussions and consequences resulted in eating the forbidden fruit: 1) painful childbirth, and 2) painful and stressful work (*"with the sweat of your brow you will eat bread"*<sup>10</sup>).

Prior to eating from the Tree, both childbirth and work would have come easily and effortlessly to the first couple. Once they transgressed and ate from the Tree, however, both giving life and earning a living became synonymous with labor. Now birth is called labor and back-breaking work is called labor, not pleasure.

In other words, this means that for human beings in their natural form – prior to eating from the Tree – both childbirth and working life came easily and smoothly; only after eating from the Tree did they become complex and complicated.

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<sup>10</sup>Genesis 3:16-19.

And this, says the Maharsha, were the accolades that the midwives Puah and Shifra were bestowing upon the Jewish women, when they told Pharaoh that, unlike the Egyptian women, the Jewish women were chayot, animals. The Jewish women had reached a point where giving life and earning a living – labor – came naturally to them, and there was nothing that the Pharaoh could do to destroy that!

And how does one reach such a level? The Maharsha says that when one performs the Will of Heaven, as the Jewish women did in Egypt, then one counteracts the unnaturalness of a human childbirth and work-life, and becomes one with the life force (*chaya*), as it existed prior to the Tree.

In other words, when you recognize that both your family life and work life are two dimensions of your divine mission, then they become two forces that complement each other and do not conflict with one another.

And we have the Torah which teaches us how to do this, and mitzvahs which provide the means for infusing both our families and our work with the Will of Heaven.

And now we know how to balance family and work life:

By becoming an animal!

## 11. In Conclusion: Working Model

I would like to leave you with this message for us today, close to the conclusion of 2013 – prefaced of course with that ultimate truth-amplifier, humor!

Goldstein goes to see his supervisor in the front office. “Boss,” he says, “we’re doing some heavy house-cleaning at home tomorrow, and my wife needs me to help with the attic and the garage, moving and hauling stuff.”

“We’re short-handed, Goldstein” the boss replies. “I can’t give you the day off.”

“Thanks, boss,” says Goldstein “I knew I could count on you!”

Yes, there are times we just want to hide ourselves in our work, when we are so bombarded with deadlines and commitments that we seem to be living in the office. Then there are times when our kids get sick and our boss is yelling and our cubicle is shrinking ... when we feel like the confines of Egypt are stifling us, enslaving us.

But then, we open the Torah and we remember: both having children and working to feed those children are part of our natural state and any stress is superimposed upon us by Pharaohs and superficial outside sources. When we recognize that our families and our jobs are part of our God-given mission, then the stress falls away, and we are like animals in the purest sense of the word – alive, natural, and easy. But when we see work as slavery and home life as a burden, then this indeed is called Egypt.

Of course, it's hard, but when we know *why* it's hard – that we are meant to perfect this world by performing the Will of Heaven – then we are truly free, no matter which present-day Pharaoh tries to destroy us with back-breaking labors.

Whenever there is stress between professional and personal life, remember that if you stay focused on the purpose of it all nothing can break you.

The Jews in Egypt remembered this. And if they didn't, their wives made sure they would never forget.

Now, as we sit here some 3,000 years later, the Jewish women once again have prevailed: We have not forgotten. And we never will.

Shabbat Shalom!