

“Being Fruitful” During Famine

PARSHA INSIGHTS - MIKAITZ (5759)

YOSEF AND THE MITZVAH TO REPRODUCE - Did He Hold Like Bais Shamai or Bais Hillel?

Raish Lakish, a famous Talmudic sage, proves a certain *halacha* [law] from one of today’s verses. “A person is forbidden to have marital relations during years of famine” (*Gemara Taanis* 11A). The basis for this is Yosef’s conduct in today’s *parsha* [Torah portion]. We are informed that two sons were born to Yosef BEFORE THE FAMINE BEGAN in Egypt (41:50). *Raish Lakish* is explaining the Torah’s emphasis on the timing of the births. The mention that he bore his children PRIOR to the famine shows that one may not engage in relations in times of hunger. *Rashi* on the *Gemara* clarifies that one is supposed to personally feel the anguish suffered by the local population. “Business as usual” is unacceptable in such circumstances.

The *Gemara* adds, however, that one who has not yet fulfilled the *mitzvah* [commandment] of “*pru urevu*” [the obligation to produce a minimum number of children] IS allowed to have marital relations during a famine. Recall that this topic is in the *Mishna* and *Gemara Yevamos* 61B. *Bais Shamai* uses *Moshe Rabainu* [Moses our teacher] as an example. He had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, and only then did he separate from his wife.

☞ (This “divorce” is an explosive topic that we have discussed before.) Copies of this essay are available by clicking the following link, or online at TorahMax.com under: “Sefer Vayikra”, “Parshas Tazria”, “[The Sin’s On His Head](#)” - R. Moshe Heigh.

Bais Shamai states: This shows that the minimum requirement for *pru urevu* is two sons. On the contrary, *Bais Hillel* maintains that bearing a son and a daughter constitutes fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. The evidence is Hashem’s creation of human beings - Adam and Chava. *Bais Shamai* would hold that a son and daughter are insufficient (because two sons are necessary), and *Bais Hillel* would say that two sons are not yet enough (since there must also be a female).

Yosef evidently abstained from conjugal relations during the famine. If we take the entire *Gemara Taanis* into account, we must conclude that he had already completed his *mitzvah of pru urevu*. Otherwise, as stated above, he would have been allowed to procreate even during those years. It seems, therefore, that his view was that of *Bais Shamai*. Two sons must be the proper fulfillment of *pru urevu*. Otherwise (if Yosef had NOT YET done this *mitzvah* sufficiently), he would have been allowed to have relations even during the famine, as the *Gemara* stated. We will see later that the *Kli Yakar* approaches the topic this way.

The *Or Hachaim* on our *pasuk* [verse] is bothered by this. Can we not assume that Yosef kept the *halacha* like the opinion of *Bais Hillel*, that a son and a daughter are needed for *pru urevu*? Since Yosef had only two sons and no daughters at the time the famine started, he SHOULD have been allowed to have marital relations during the time of hunger! Why does the *pasuk* emphasize that his children were born BEFORE the famine, implying that he would not be permitted to reproduce during the famine? The *Or Hachaim* does not want to make the assumption we did before, that Yosef observed the *mitzvah* like the opinion of *Bais Shamai*. So what is the meaning of the *Gemara* which declares (using Yosef as an example) that one must abstain from relations during a famine? Yosef himself was allowed!

Or Hachaim answers that of course the *halacha* is true - one who already has the prescribed number of children must hold back from relations. However, this *din* [law] itself did NOT apply to Yosef, since he did not have a daughter yet. In other words, we CAN derive the *din* from our *pasuk*, but it did not limit Yosef himself from having relations. It only pertains to people who have already fulfilled *pru urevu*.

The remarks of the *Kli Yakar* are also quite fascinating. How does the *Gemara* reach its conclusion, that one is not allowed to engage in marital relations during famine years? The terminology of the *pasuk* gives it away. The Torah stresses that his sons were born BEFORE THE FAMINE. It could have said the same thing in a more direct way, that they came into being DURING THE YEARS OF PLENTY, which preceded the time of hunger. Since the event is described this way, we learn the *halacha* forbidding relations when food is scarce. They HAD TO be born (conceived) BEFORE the famine. Recall that the *Or Hachaim* assumes Yosef would keep the *mitzvah* of having children according to *Bais Hillel*, that one needs a son and a daughter. Accordingly, Yosef himself was allowed to have relations with his wife during the famine, since he still lacked female offspring. (The *Or Hachaim* probably assumes this because of the fact that we *poskin* [render a *halachic* decision] like *Bais Hillel*.) The *Kli*

Yakar, on the other hand, senses that we can lend some support to *Bais Shamai's* opinion from this *Gemara Taanis*. How is this so?

Let us use our imaginations for a few moments. If the Torah had not told us WHEN Efraim and Menashe, Yosef's sons, were born, one could have reached the following conclusion. It must be that the name אפרים "Efraim" has something to do with being fruitful, like the word פרי "pri", which means fruit. Notice that three letters of Efraim's name אפרי actually spell the Hebrew word for fruit. If no time of birth had been stated, one could have assumed that they were born DURING the famine, not before it, and this would also explain the name "Efraim". This title could have hinted to Yosef's unusual status during the years of scarcity, that he had plenty of fruit and grain. In other words: If the Torah had not told us the time Efraim came into existence, I would have made the following supposition: Yosef named his son "Efraim" because the word hints to fruits, which Yosef alone had plenty of in the famine years. But now that we know Efraim was born BEFORE the famine, a time when EVERYONE had an abundance of fruit and other food, what could be the reason for the name Efraim? It cannot be implying that Yosef alone had plenty of fruit, because so did everyone else! It must be that Yosef was alluding to his fulfillment of being FRUITFUL and multiplying with the birth of his second son, Efraim. Which opinion holds that Yosef did, in fact, complete his *mitzvah* of *pru urevu* when Efraim was born? *Bais Shamai*, naturally, who holds that two boys are required.

This, says the *Kli Yakar*, clarifies the declaration Yosef made regarding Efraim's name. "The name of the second one he called Efraim, 'Because Hashem **made me fruitful** in the land of my affliction'" (41:52). What is the significance of this phrase? Yosef was expressing gratitude to Hashem that he had kept the *mitzvah* of *pru urevu* properly. How so? He bore two sons, LIKE THE OPINION OF *BAIS SHAMAI*. This would not be so according to *Bais Hillel*, that a son and a daughter are needed.

The *Kli Yakar*, therefore, views the entire episode differently from the *Or Hachaim*. The *Or Hachaim* proclaimed that Yosef was allowed to have relations during the famine, assuming he would act according to *Bais Hillel*. This is because he still had no daughter. The whole *din* of abstaining applied to others, not Yosef himself. But the *Kli Yakar* interprets Yosef's naming of Efraim to have to do with fulfillment of *pru urevu*. If so, Yosef had already observed this *mitzvah* with the birth of his second son, based on the opinion of *Bais Shamai*. Consequently, he was required to hold back from relations during the famine. The *din* which the *Gemara* learns DID also apply to Yosef himself.

It is always worthwhile to investigate the *halachic* observances of our forefathers and mothers. Today's discussion has provided us with some intriguing thoughts regarding the *mitzvah* of *pru urevu* as it applied to Yosef *Hatzadik* [Joseph the righteous man].

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