The Sky’s the Limit

And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river; and her maidsens walked along by the river-side; and she saw the ark among the flags, and sent her handmaid (‘amatah) to fetch it. (Shemot 2:5)

This week’s parsha, Shemot, begins the second of the Torah’s five books and introduces us to Israel’s greatest leader ever – Moshe. Moshe is the main character of the Torah, which concludes with his death. This week’s parsha describes the beginning of his life, including his birth.

At the beginning of the parsha, we read about Pharaoh’s decree to kill all male Israelite children. This decree forced Yocheved, Moshe’s mother, to hide him after birth and eventually to leave him in a basket in the Nile, hoping that perhaps he would be miraculously saved. Her efforts bore fruit; Pharaoh’s daughter finds the infant Moshe and takes him to the palace.

The Talmud offers two interpretations of the words, in the above-quoted verse, “and she sent ‘amatah”. Rabbi Nechemiah explains it in the straightforward manner – she sent her handmaid to draw Moshe from the water. Rabbi Yehuda says that she stretched out her arms to take the child, and that her arms miraculously extended in the process. Whereas R. Nechemiah’s explanation makes sense, R. Yehuda’s comment raises questions: if the princess knew that her arms were too short, why did she raise them in the first place? How could she know that a miracle would occur?

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha explains: “This teaches us a great thing about serving God – a person should not hold back at all from doing what is right and good, even if it seems that he will never be able to achieve what he sets out to do. If a person truly focuses his whole heart and soul on his actions, nothing in the world can stand in his way… so, too, here, (Pharaoh’s daughter) did what she could by stretching out her arms, even just a few feet, and a miracle happened and they kept extending.”

According to ‘Reb Bunim’ Pharaoh’s daughter teaches us never to be deterred by impossible tasks. A person’s desire to complete a task, even if it is difficult or impossible, is more important than the task itself. The push to the finish line is itself the finish line, as Rav Kook writes: “the foundation of perfection to desire and always strive for perfection” (Oroth-Teshuvah 5:6).

However, another possible explanation is that Pharaoh’s daughter was not simply being unrealistic. Perhaps she did not want to rely on miracles, but really and truly believed that she could draw that basket from the water. The extension of her hands was not a supernatural act, but a completely physical, natural one. This approach is explained by Rav Kook in a major passage from his work ‘Or’ot ha-Kodesh’, where he links a person’s breadth of knowledge with his desire and ability. Rav Kook relates how a person’s intelligence is the root of his will. A person must first and foremost determine what he strives for; the deeper and fuller his knowledge, the better defined his desire and will. As Rav Kook himself puts it: “Clear knowledge, when it stands upon a firm foundation, generates will. As the desire to do good is clarified, it becomes stronger; as it becomes clear that the good is truly good, the desire for it grows stronger.” This means that knowledge and will are unlimited concepts. A person’s intelligence and desires, when they are rooted in an eternal and unlimited source, have an effect even on a person’s physical capabilities. The stronger a person’s strivings, the more power and capability of bringing those strivings to fruition they reveal. Our limited, human capacity does not accurately reflect the true power hidden within us, but only our weak desire to fulfill our limited potential and our longing for a statured life. Human longing for this type of restriction finds expression in a poem by Rivka Miriam Rochman entitled “They Have No Measure”: “These are the things that have not measure: laughter, blue, and the moment. The blue comes to me from distress. From the bell, laughter comes to me. An amount comes from within itself – don’t come near! I whispered, blocking – I want to be limited – restricted like a noise, finite as though finished. I do not want to be without measure. I am still standing. I send my voice before me, like a barricade. And laughter, blue, and the moment are sent to me, giving me, without measure.”

Pharaoh’s daughter, Batya, was not like that. She proudly carried her name, which means ‘daughter of God’, which evokes the infinite and strives for eternity. She wished to live without boundaries, without measure, and her striving for the infinite pushed her entire being past its physical limits.

Batya fills the whole world. There is no place that her hand cannot reach, and no mountain she cannot climb. She does not look for volunteers to ascend the heavens or cross seas on her behalf; she goes herself, as though they were at arm’s length. This lends new meaning to the verse: “It is not in heaven, that you should say: ‘Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us? and make us to hear it, that we may do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say: ‘Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?’ But the word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.” (Devarim 30:12-14)

Rabbanit Penina Neuwirth, Moriah Congregation, Betach Tikva

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha was a major figure in Chassidut who lived from 1767 to 1827. He attracted thousands of students to Przysucha during the years of his leadership, including many non-Chassidim and even some Maskilim. R. Simcha Bunim was an enlightened individual; he worked as a wood merchant and as a pharmacist.

Orot ha-Kodesh is a four-volume work on Jewish thought, particularly on man, God, and the world, collected from the works of Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael. It was edited by his student, Rav David Cohen (‘The Nazi’) from eight notebooks in which Rav Kook would write his thoughts in a free-flowing manner, without order. The first volume deals mainly with epistemology, the second with theology, and the third with ethics.