


**CHABAD**  
  
**RESEARCH UNIT**

שבת..... *for Friday nights* ..... קדש

Friday 20 December 2013 - 17 Tevet 5774  
 Sedra Shemot

**THROWN INTO THE RIVER**

**T**HE SEDRA<sup>1</sup> TELLS OF THE HARSHNESS OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN aggression against the Jewish people. First they were enslaved. Then there was a new, cruel decree: “any boy who is born should be thrown into the river” (Exodus 1:22).

The Sages explain that, like everything in the Torah, this command to throw the Jewish children into the Nile can be understood on several levels. One, of course, is the literal meaning of the physical threat. Another level of meaning has direct relevance to us today.

In Egyptian life, the River Nile was seen, quite naturally, as the source of the great prosperity of the land. With reliable regularity the Nile would overflow its banks, providing water for the irrigation for the fertile Nile valley, the basis of the Egyptian economy. For this reason the river was worshipped as an idol.

The idea that the Jewish children should be thrown into the Nile therefore implies a change in the orientation of the Jewish people and of their perspective on the world. They had come from the Land of Israel where the crops depended on the infrequent and irregular rainfall. Everyone was aware that G-d controlled the rain. So people prayed to G-d... Now however in Egypt, they were being “thrown into the River”.



**In Loving Memory of Menashy ben Yechezkel Ezra ז"ל**  
**24 Tevet - Dedicated by his Family שי'**

Instead of seeing G-d as the source of their prosperity the Jews would now perceive only apparently reliable, natural forces. They would feel themselves to be totally dependent on the natural, regular flow of the Nile rather than on G-d, the Creator of the Universe.

They would no longer pray to G-d to help them in their endeavours to make a living. They would simply rely confidently on the natural power of the Egyptian river<sup>2</sup>. This would be a deeper, spiritual level of slavery. It would affect not the bodies of the Jews, but their souls...

The physical slavery of Egypt is a thing of the ancient past. However, the threat of the *spiritual* form of slavery is still with us. So every year we read again the account of how we became slaves in Egypt, and the way Moses inspired in us an important change of perspective: the awareness that Nature is merely an instrument of G-d, Who alone rules the world.

Through this knowledge, both then and now, we gain our freedom.

#### **MOSES MAIMONIDES – THE “RAMBAM” (1135-1204)**

This Monday (20 Tevet) will be the 809th anniversary of the passing of the Rambam (initials of **Rabbi Moses ben Maimon**). Born in Cordova, Spain, and living in Egypt, the Rambam provides a wonderful example of a Jewish Sage, master of many areas of knowledge: medicine, science, philosophy, and above all, the deep wisdom of the Torah in all its facets.

The Rambam wrote *Mishneh Torah*, which is an orderly presentation of all the teachings of Jewish Law contained in the Talmud and later writings. This became one of the three main sources of the Code of Law by Rabbi Josef Karo which defines Jewish practice today. Tens of thousands of people round the world study three chapters of this book daily, so as to complete it within a year. Others study one chapter a day, and many people, particularly women and girls, read his introduction to this work called *Book of the Commandments*, which contains a brief definition of each of the 613 Commandments of the Torah.

The Sedra is about the birth of Moses. On the Rambam's grave in Tiberias is inscribed: "From Moses to Moses there was no one like Moses".

1. Exodus 1:1- 6:1. 2. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 1 p.14.

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### SEDRA SHEMOT

#### **KEEPING JEWISHNESS ALIVE**

Sammy and his friend David were talking about the Entrance Exam they had just taken to see if they would be accepted to the Maimonides Jewish High School.

"I'm pretty sure I passed," Sammy said hopefully. "The only thing I found hard was the maths part, but I think I was okay."

Just then Robin joined them. He listened to them talking about the exam, which he had also taken. He kicked at a stone on the ground.

"You know there's someone trying to persuade my parents to send me to a completely different kind of school. You know I study music in the evenings..."

Sammy and David nodded. Robin's violin playing was the pride of the neighbourhood. He had won competitions and had even been on the radio.

"My music teacher is saying that I should go to a school where music will be the main focus. My parents say they want me to be good at music, but they also want me to study Jewish things. I don't know what to think."

Nor did Sammy and David. They enjoyed Robin's violin playing very much, and they were always happy when he won a music prize and was mentioned in the local paper.

“You know what I keep thinking about,” said Robin. “Do you remember what Rabbi Fine was saying in assembly, about Pharaoh’s decree for the Jewish children?”

“About how the boys were to be thrown into the Nile, and girls should be kept alive?” said David.

“Yes. But he explained that Pharaoh wanted to keep the Jewish girls alive in order to raise them in the Egyptian way of life. He wanted them to forget that they were part of the Jewish people and just become exactly like the Egyptians.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” asked Sammy. “No one wants to do that to us!”

“Listen,” said Robin. “I don’t want to forget that I am Jewish, even if I do become a famous musician. If my music teacher gets her way I won’t get any Jewish education at all.”

“Couldn’t you study extra Jewish things in the evenings?” asked David. “Surely lots of people do that.”

“You’re right,” said Robin, “and that may be the solution. But the ideal would be a Jewish school with a strong focus on music!”

“Maybe your parents could get the headmaster of the Maimonides School to arrange extra music lessons for you,” said David. “My father said he seems like a person who wants to give each person the best education possible. And you could do extra music in the evenings...”

The three boys walked on. Thousands of years after going free from the slavery in Egypt, some of the same issues were still relevant. But if they were conscious of them, that was at least part of the battle won.

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