



# Good news or bad news?

*Should we memorialize the tragedies or find inspiration from the miracles?*

## What Stories to Tell?

Good news or bad news? In recent weeks, whenever I deliberate a topic for a sermon, I am faced with this dilemma.

The headlines in the news are all about the war. Ten million people have been displaced from their homes, tens of thousands and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people are besieged under shelling, and the list goes on.

On the other hand, there are inspiring stories – but you need to search for them.

Two weeks ago, a phone call came to an Israeli mohel, Rabbi Naftali Cohen, telling him that a Jewish baby had been born in Odessa. All the Mohel's in Ukraine had fled the country and there was no one to perform a bris. The mohel replied that his own wife had given birth to a son only a week earlier, so they should try to locate another mohel — but he added that if no one agreed to make the trip, they should let him know.

Nobody else wanted to go.

On Thursday, the day before the bris, they got back to him and informed him that they had already arranged a flight ticket to Chisinau

(Kishinev) in Moldova, and from there he would be taken by car to Odessa. His wife gave her blessing for the journey, and he set off.

Everything went well until they reached the Ukrainian border. The border agents were shocked that he was trying to enter Ukraine. When his bag was checked, they found his bris instruments. That was somewhat suspicious, but what really caught their attention was the powder which is used to stop the bleeding at the bris; they thought it was drugs.

The Ukrainian border guards held him there in the cold for close to five hours, and then he saw a group of five policemen approaching him with handcuffs. He thought they were there to arrest him; he started yelling at them in Hebrew, "What do you want from me? It's not for me! It's all for Elijah the prophet!" As it is well-known, it is customary to reserve a chair for Elijah the Prophet, who visits every bris.

To his relief, they returned the bag and everything that was in it and allowed him to cross the border. He arrived in Odessa on Friday afternoon, he made the bris in the nick of time, and returned safely to Israel after Shabbat.

## **The Bride over the Funeral**

What indeed, should be our focus? The stories of pain and suffering, or the happy stories, the inspirational ones?

We find the answer in the Talmud: "Our sages taught: the deceased is removed from before a bride" (Ketubot 17a).

During the Talmudic era, it was customary for family and friends to gather at the bride's house, and from there, lead the bride with a live orchestra and a procession to the groom's house, where the wedding would take place.

This teaching refers to the case in which a bride is being led to the

wedding, and suddenly, from the other direction, a funeral procession comes along. The road is too narrow to allow both processions to pass, so the question is asked: Which procession should clear the way for the other? The Talmud says, “the deceased is removed from before a bride,” the funeral procession must clear the way for the bride. The happy and the positive takes precedence.

We find the source for this behavior in this week’s Torah portion, Parshas Shemini.

The portion begins with the inauguration of the Tabernacle. After many weeks of building the Tabernacle, the People of Israel brought the final product to Moses. For one week, he erected the Tabernacle each morning, sacrificed the sacrifices and dismantled it in the evening, doing so to teach the priests and levites the Tabernacle service.

Then came the eighth day. On that day, Aaron was the one to offer the sacrifices, and finally, fire came down from Heaven on the altar, demonstrating that the Divine Presence rested among the Jewish people. The Torah says: “And all the people saw, they rejoiced, and they fell on their faces.” It was a great celebration, and everyone was excited.

Then something terrible happened.

The two sons of Aaron the high priest, Nadav and Avihu, were supposed to be the leaders of the next generation, the successors to Moses and Aaron. They were the future of the Jewish people.

In their enthusiasm, they entered the Tabernacle without permission and burned incense before G-d, and they died on the spot, in the Tabernacle.

Moses immediately called his two cousins, Mishaël and Elzaphan, and

instructed them to “carry your brother from the sanctuary outside the camp.”

The Rebbe once asked (Likkutei Sichos vol. 17 pg. 102):

This verse seems superfluous. Why should the Torah tell us that Moses ordered Nadav and Avihu taken out of the Temple? It is a matter of course that if, G-d forbid, a person dies, he is carried out and brought to burial! The Torah writes only things that are unique, things that convey something novel. Why is it important to know that they were taken out and even who took them out?

Rashi explains that there is a very important lesson here: “As a person who tells his friend, ‘move the dead from in front of the bride, so as not to disturb the joy.’” Moses ordered his cousins to take the sons of Aaron out of the Tabernacle so as not to ruin the joy of the bride.

Who is the bride that Moses is so careful not to disturb? The people of Israel. We learn this in Bamidbar, where the Torah says, “And on the day Moses finished [kalos] to erect the Tabernacle.” Rashi says that the Torah chose the word *kalos*, which can also be read as “brides,” to indicate that “the day the Tabernacle was built, Israel was like a bride entering the chuppah” (Naso 7:1).

Therefore, in our Torah portion, Moses instructed the Levites to remove the sons of Aharon from the Temple — so as not to disturb the joy of the “bride,” the people of Israel, on the day of the Tabernacle’s dedication.

## **When Was the Wedding?**

But something doesn’t fit.

Ten months before the construction of the Tabernacle, on the first Shavuot in the desert immediately after the Exodus from Egypt, was the giving of the Torah, and the Sages likened the giving of the Torah

to a wedding as well!

In the Book of Shemos, in the story of the giving of the Torah, the verse states, “And Moses brought the people forth toward G-d.” Rashi says: “This tells us that the Shechinah went out to meet them like a bridegroom going out to a bride” (Yisro 19:17).

And so, the question arises: when did we marry G-d? At the giving of the Torah or at the inauguration of the Tabernacle?

## **The Explanation**

Everyone who has ever attended a Jewish wedding knows that the chuppah ceremony has two elements: *kiddushin* and *nisuin*. At first, the rabbi recites two blessings over glass of wine; those are called “*birkos eirusin*, engagement blessings.” Then, the groom betroths the bride with a ring in front of two witnesses, and the Ketubah is read. Then, they fill a glass of wine again and recite seven blessings, called “*birkot nisuin*, marriage blessings.”

This is because there are two stages to a Halachic marriage.

“Kiddushin” is when the groom gives the bride a ring and she is thereby ‘consecrated’ to him. At that point, she is considered to be in a binding relationship, and if one of them regrets the union, they will need to obtain a divorce. Later, there is the second part called “*Nisuin*, marriage,” which is when the couple moves in together and are considered fully married.

During the era of the Talmud, a young couple would perform the *kiddushin* —the groom consecrated the bride with a ring — as a form of engagement. About a year later, when they were ready to move in together and he was ready to support her, they would perform the *nisuim*; the groom would write a ketubah, the couple would be placed under a canopy, and the final seven blessings would be recited on a glass of wine.

In the Middle Ages, there were many cases in which the grooms fled between the engagement and the marriage, leaving women in limbo, unable to marry other men. Therefore, they enacted the current day custom to do both the *kiddushin* and the *nisuim* only at the wedding itself. In order to make a distinction between the two elements, we read the ketubah in the middle.

## **The Two Stages**

This is what happened in the desert (see Maharsha Kesubos 7b):

At the giving of the Torah, G-d betrothed the Jewish people. He then gave them a ketubah — the two Tablets. A verse about the Tablets also has a reference to “bride,” much like the verse mentioned above:

“And He gave to Moses, when He finished [*kichaloso*] ... the two tablets of the covenant...” Rashi points out that the word can also be read as a reference to a bride (Tisa 31:18).

Whereas the “marriage,” the great wedding, took place at the inauguration of the Tabernacle; that was when they inaugurated the new home for the “young couple,” G-d and the Jewish people. (Notably, Rashi says there that they are compared to a bride *entering the chuppah*).

The giving of the Torah was the beginning; it brought us into a binding relationship. But the real deal took place when the Tabernacle was built; only when the people of Israel live with G-d in their midst, so to speak, can it be truly called a marriage — an equal partnership.

## **Wedding Anniversary**

The date of the “wedding anniversary” between G-d and the Jewish people was Rosh Chodesh Nisan, which falls out next shabbos. Everyone is invited to celebrate our wedding anniversary with G-d. Just as in every anniversary, the husband feels obligated to give his wife a gift, so too, I’m sure that G-d will give each and every one of us

a present from His great and generous hand.