

Parshat Shemot - Dvar Torah

Shabbat Shalom.

I would like to dedicate this Dvar Torah to my wife Debbie and to all of the terrific women in this wonderful shul of ours I do this not only to score very valuable points with the fairer sex, but more importantly, because they truly deserve it. For while Moshe is the hero of Sefer Shmot, it is the women mentioned in this week's Parsha who are the real heroines. It was their initiative, their dedication and mesirat nefesh, that saved Moshe and Bnei Yisrael in Egypt. In the Talmud, Mesechet Nida, we are told that "Hakadosh Baruch Hu- The Holy One, Blessed Be He, gave women more understanding than men" In fact, my wife has also repeatedly told me that . And it is their greater understanding and resourcefulness that leads to life being saved.

Let me begin with Moshe's sister, Miriam. Pharaoh had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys should be cast into the Nile River. According to the Talmud, Mesechet Sotah after this decree Amram, Miriam's father, divorces his wife, Yocheved. He reasoned that it was better this way to avoid the murders altogether than to bear children for Pharaoh to kill. Amram was the leader of the Sanhedrin at the time and the entire nation followed his lead. It was Miriam, then, who changed her father's mind and convinced him that he was acting foolishly and was being even stricter than Pharaoh, since Pharaoh had only prevented Hebrew males from growing up while Amram's divorce plan would prevent Hebrew girls from being born as well. Amram accepted his daughter's argument, and took Yocheved in a second marriage, setting an example for the rest of the nation to follow. It was only after that that Moshe was born.

Let's not forget the midwives, Shifra and Puah. Who were ordered by Pharaoh to murder all of the baby males on their birth stools. Rashi identifies these midwives as Hebrew women, none other than Yocheved and Miriam, whom Pharaoh diabolically wished to co-opt into this service against their own people. The Ababanel and R. Shmuel Dovid Luzzato, on the other hand, interpret the text to mean that they were Egyptian midwives who were to service the Hebrew women. In an act of tremendous courage, the midwives did not listen to Pharaoh's edict. The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, tells us that besides not killing the babies, they actually fed and protected them. At his whim, Pharaoh could have put them both to death for disobedience. When confronted, they gave the excuse that Jewish women did not really need midwives, and by the time the midwives arrived, the babies were already born. These true heroines understood that they should not follow the despotic laws of Pharaoh, but rather, they should follow the higher ethical law of their Creator. Their understanding, of course, stemmed from their being women - but it may have also stemmed from the fact that their profession is intrinsically associated with bringing new life into the world, not destroying it. The Torah states that because the midwives feared God, Hashem rewarded them with houses, which Rashi explains to be the houses of priesthood and kingship that would come from them. This is a fitting reward for the protectors of the household and guardians of the future of Israel.

But in my opinion the greatest heroine in this week's Parsha is Pharaoh's daughter, identified by the Midrash as Batyah, literally, daughter of God. She is, perhaps, one of the most unexpected heroines in the entire Torah. Even from the evil Pharaoh himself, a great heroine was born. Moral courage can sometimes be found in the heart of darkness. Without her, Moshe might not have lived and there may not have been an Exodus story.

After concealing Moshe's existence for three months, Yocheved feared that keeping him any longer would lead to his certain death, so she set him afloat on the Nile in a basket, hoping that someone might see him and take pity on him. Pharaoh's daughter

then came down to the river to bathe. When she saw the basket in the water, she sent her maid-servant to take it. The Midrash explains that the word "maidservant" or "amah" can be translated as "arm." Batya reached out her arm to retrieve the basket in which Moshe was floating. The basket was an impossibly long way from her arm. Nevertheless, Batya reached for it. It didn't cross her mind that her hand could never reach the basket. She just knew what had to be done, and she did it. Contrary to her father's unjust and inhuman orders, she rescued the Hebrew child. By doing this courageous act, she had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Disobeying a royal command would be serious enough for an ordinary Egyptian, perhaps doubly so for a member of the royal family. And she was not alone when the event happened. Her maids were with her, and she faced the real risk that one of them would report her actions. She clearly risked her life in the face of the wrath of Pharaoh should he learn of her willful and traitorous deed.

And when Miriam suddenly appears, as if out of nowhere, and offers to call a Hebrew woman to nurse the child, I believe that Pharaoh's daughter must have realized that she was the child's sister, and she would have the child's mother be the nursemaid. It was a plan brilliant in its simplicity. With the real mother being able to nurse the child, the danger would be minimized. Batya would not have to explain how the child had suddenly appeared and Moshe's family would be spared the risk of bringing him up, as they could say that the child is not a Hebrew and that the mother is not the mother, but only a nurse. Pharaoh's daughter instantly agreed. And then, when Moshe matured, and was brought to Pharaoh's daughter, she adopted him as her own son and named him Moshe. Pharaoh's daughter had not simply had a moment of compassion when she took him from the water. She had remembered him, and felt a sense of responsibility towards him. She then brought him up as her own son, showing courage of the highest level. The kindness of Pharaoh's daughter was rewarded by Hashem. Although Moshe had many names, the only one in which he is known in the whole Torah is the one given to him by the daughter of Pharaoh. As it says in Shemot Rabbah, even Hakadosh Baruch Hu did not call him by any other name. And Vayikra Rabbah tells us that Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to the daughter of Pharaoh, "Moshe was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not my daughter, but I shall call you my daughter" - or Batya. The Midrash also tells us that she was rewarded by being saved from the plague of the first born and being allowed to enter Gan Eden while still alive.

The courage shown by the heroines of this week's Parsha can also be seen in heroines during the Holocaust, such as Miep Gies, the Austrian woman who hid Anne Frank and her family from the Nazis during World War II, knowing that what she was doing was illegal, and that it put her life in grave danger. In explaining the motivation for her actions, Gies states, "permanent remorse about failing to do your human duty, in my opinion, can be worse than losing your life." It is interesting to note that, like Shifrah and Puah, who were rewarded with life, through the legacy of descendants and like Pharaoh's daughter, who was given her own longevity. God has rewarded Gies with long life for her actions, as Mrs. Gies was almost 102 years old when she passed away in January 2010. May we all similarly be rewarded with long lives, in the merit of our own courageous actions and in the merit of the wonderful women in our community. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom again