

WOMEN'S LEAGUE SHABBAT 2016



Dvar Torah 2 **Parashat Bo** **The Women Were There Nonetheless ...**

Shabbat Shalom.

In reading Parashat Bo this morning, I am intrigued by the absence of women and their role in the actual preparations to depart Egypt. This is particularly striking because women – Miriam, Moses' mother Yocheved, the midwives Shifra and Puah, and Pharaoh's daughter – are so dominant in the earlier part of the exodus story. In fact, the opening parashah of Exodus is replete with industrious, courageous women. Why no mention of them here? And how do we reconcile this difference?

One of the ways in which moderns might interpret this is to focus on the context in which God commands Moses and the congregation of Hebrews – that is men – to perform certain tasks as they begin their journey out of Egypt. With great specificity God, through Moses, instructs the male heads of household how to prepare and eat the paschal sacrifice, place its blood on the doorpost, and remove all leaven from their homes. They are told how to ready themselves for a hasty departure.

Why such detailed instruction? It is plausible that, like slaves before and after, the Hebrews had scant opportunity to cultivate imagination, creativity and independent thought during their enslavement. The opposite in fact is true, for any autonomous thought or deed is suppressed because the slave mentality is one of absolute submission to the will of his master. So this might account for why the Hebrew slaves required such specific instruction. The implication is that among the downtrodden, the impulse for freedom needs some prodding.

But what does this mean to the narrative discrepancy about male and female Hebrew slaves that I mentioned earlier? I would like to suggest the following: the opening Exodus accounts about women, Miriam, Jocheved, Pharaoh's daughter and the midwives offer a somewhat different slave image. These women, indeed, demonstrate independence of thought, and are capable even of subversive activity. They reflect imagination and foresight, even under threat of death. They are industrious, imaginative and future directed. In their courageous actions to save the Hebrew male infants, they are creating a heroic legacy. Their actions are similar to those of the woman extolled in the book of Proverbs, the *ishet chayil*. The achievements of the *ishet chayil* are the focus of the Women's League/Torah Fund theme for this year, *Nat'ab karem* – She plants a vineyard. This accomplished *ishet chayil* is an enduring model for women past and present.

But because of their ability to transcend horrendous, even life threatening, conditions we might conclude that the women in the exodus story had proven themselves worthy of the description “free women,” even prior to their departure. They confronted annihilation alone, with no dictates from on high – they already had embarked on the journey to freedom.

I would like to offer here another interesting connection between this *parashat Bo*, the women of Exodus and the *ishet chayil* of Proverbs. Near the end of the parashah, in Exodus 12:42 we read: “That was for the LORD a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is the LORDS, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages.” In a rabbinic text from the fifth century, *Pesikta DeRav Kahana* 7:7, it is proposed that all firstborn Egyptians, *male and female alike* were killed in the tenth plague. But Pharaoh's daughter, whom the Rabbis called Bithiah, was spared from the death of the firstborn through the intercession of Moses who prayed to God to save his adoptive mother. In this prayer, Moses refers to her as an *ishet chayil* – citing Proverbs 31:18 – the woman whose “*lamp would never go out at night.*”

As textual evidence for this connection between Bithia and the *ishet chayil*, the midrash cites the atypical spelling of the Hebrew word for “night” as written in Proverbs – without the final *heh*, which is the same atypical spelling for night in Exodus 12:42. Thus we learn that – even according to Moses – the women of the exodus story are worthy of praise.

So we come full turn to the original observation about the women and their relative absence in this parashah. Instead, we find that while not front and center in the narratives about the actual departure from Egypt, women are indispensable, nevertheless, to the process. Theirs was an imagery of courageous activism, and like other women who have been our models throughout history, the Miriams, the Jocheveds, the midwives, could never have been wholly enslaved because of their desire and capacity to imagine the future. Their legacy endures.

And on this Women's League Shabbat, as we honor Mathilde Schechter as a visionary who “planted a vineyard” in 1918 by creating Women's League for Conservative Judaism, may we also honor those heroes from the Bible – those silent women from this parashah – as well as the others who were not quiet – who taught us to plant -- with forethought and vision, ensuring a robust harvest. Let us keep in mind the same image for our own creative, purposeful and future-facing endeavors on behalf of our families, sisterhoods and synagogue communities.

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