



WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Women's League Shabbat 2017/5777

P'ri Yadehah - The Fruit of Her Hands

D'var Torah

Parashat Shemot: On Account of the Righteous Women

Today's parashah, Shemot (*Names*) begins the second book of the Torah. It is a fitting parashah for Women's League Shabbat because in its focus on the birth pangs of the Jewish nation, it provides an unusually strong collection of women of high integrity, deeply committed to the perpetuation of their people.

Parashat Shemot begins with a recitation of the names of the sons of Jacob, which had been listed previously at the end of Genesis. Why the duplication? Did we forget about those we read just last week? The message perhaps may be one of continuity. The last chapter of the Patriarchal saga has Jacob moving the whole family to Egypt to join Joseph. The repetition of these names underscores the next chapter, where the Hebrews grow from a single family of 70 individuals into a nation.

The parashah starts with a list of Jacob's sons, but ironically, it seems to make a point of *not* identifying names that are key to the Exodus story. Pharaoh's name is never revealed, and Moses' parents also are not named. Rather, they are simply called "man of the house of Levi, [and his] wife, a daughter of Levi."

Perhaps the Torah wants us to view the story more globally. It is no longer about only Joseph or Jacob; it is now about a new Jewish nation.

Or maybe it is to highlight the importance of the people who *are* identified. When names are given in chapter one, it is noteworthy that prominence is given to women who are key to the unfolding of the Exodus saga. Indeed, the first names that appear are the two midwives, Shifra and Puah.

Pharaoh tries to diminish and control the Israelites by enslaving them, but the more he afflicts them, the more they increase. He commands Shifra and Puah to kill all the male Israelite infants, but they disobey Pharaoh's command. Rather than being killed by Pharaoh, the midwives are rewarded by God: "*God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied.*"

Years before Moses' act of rebellion against Pharaoh, women paved the way – women who dedicated themselves to life rather than to death, and were willing to risk everything to secure the future.

The second hero that we meet is Moses' mother, who we later learn is named Yocheved. This daughter of Levi hides her newborn son in a basket in the reeds of the Nile River. How fitting that the word the Torah uses for this basket is *teva*, the same word as the vessel built by Noah to save all of God's creations who will repopulate the earth.

Yocheved is described by the rabbis as having planted a vineyard. It is said of the *eishet chayil* of Proverbs that she "envisions a field and buys it; from the fruit of her handiwork – *mi p'ri yadeha* – she plants a vineyard." The rabbis explain in a midrash that the Yocheved is the original *eishet chayil* of the biblical poem. The work of her hands was not just a vineyard, but also her devotion to her child and his safety.

The next female hero of Shemot is Miriam, Moses' older sister who cares for Moses, follows him along the river, and persuades Pharaoh's daughter to bring his own mother to the palace to nurse him. Moses would not have survived without the ingenuity of Miriam and the love and protection of Yocheved.

This list of women heroes continues. Next there is Pharaoh's daughter who rescues Moses from the water, even though she knows that he is a Hebrew. She names him, adopts him, and raises him in the palace, all clearly against her father's murderous decree. The daughter of Pharaoh is not named in the Torah, but a midrash shows us how the rabbis viewed the princess: "Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, to Bitiya, daughter of Pharaoh, 'Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You too, are not my daughter, but I shall call you My daughter', as it is written: "These are the sons of Bitiya [which means] daughter of God."

The last hero named in Shemot is Tziporah, the daughter of Jethro whom Moses meets at the well in Midian and later marries. The commentators tell us that Tziporah actually saves Moses' life by performing a circumcision on their son Gershom. The rabbis tell us that by resolving Moses' breach of the covenant, God appoints Moses as His agent before Pharaoh, a role that distinguishes him as leader of the Israelite people.

So, as we read the parashah today, let us reflect on the many named and unnamed women who played heroic roles in the history of the Jewish nation. And let us reflect also on the women heroes and leaders of today. This year we begin to focus on the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Women's League. Our community started with the stories of women – heroes who made this organization of almost 500 sisterhoods possible. In 1918, one hundred women, many of them wives of prominent rabbis and scholars affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary, were determined to "perpetuate traditional Judaism in their homes, synagogues and communities, a task for American Jewish women." They created a community of Jewish women to share knowledge, spirituality and camaraderie. Building on the leadership of biblical heroes in Shemot, and Women's League founder Mathilde Schechter, women have become leaders in sisterhood, in their synagogue, in their communities and throughout the world. Today, twenty percent of conservative rabbis are women

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and many more serve as cantors, Jewish educators and scholars, executive directors, and synagogue presidents. Our members are teachers and tour guides, accountants and administrators, editors and engineers, mothers and grandmothers, sisters and daughters.

Parashat Shemot tells the story of strong women – Miriam, who herself becomes a great leader of our people, the midwives Shifra and Puah, the Pharaoh's daughter, Yocheved, and Moses's wife and hero in her own right, Tziporah. These are women of action, and their efforts changed the destiny of an entire people. They defied those more powerful and risked their own lives to accomplish their goals. These were great women of different ages and different skills. They each had an important role to play in our story. They could not have accomplished what they did alone; it is all of their actions together that result in the exodus from Egypt.

Today, Women's League needs women of all ages, all backgrounds, all experiences. Women's League needs you. The Talmud says that "Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation." What will future scholars say about the role that we play in Women's League today?

Shabbat shalom!

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