

## ***D'var Torah on Parashat Vaera: Women are our Jewish Foundation***

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The drama and stories of *Parashat Vaera* (Exodus 6:2–9:35) are dominated by Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and the troubles of the first seven plagues. Every year at *Pesach* we remind ourselves and our families of how the Israelites suffered under the cruel Pharaoh. Moses requested that his people be allowed to depart Egypt to go home, but Pharaoh refused. According to our story his refusal resulted in the ten plagues, seven of which are recounted in this *parashah*. First, the Nile turned red like blood, then frogs overran the land. Lice covered humans and their animals, flies infested Egyptian homes, livestock was killed by disease, painful boils appeared on humans and their stock, and hail beat down and devastated the land. We know the story, so we're aware that after three more plagues (not related in this *parashah*), Moses is finally able to take his people out of Egypt and make the long wilderness trek. Leaving Egypt and making the trek is a foundational event of Judaism. Because of their departure, wilderness journey, and release from life as slaves, the Israelites receive the law at Mount Sinai, make a covenant with God, and ultimately lead to our lives today.

*Parashat Vaera*, like other portions of the Torah, glosses over information about an important portion of the people: the women. Behind the scenes, and often mentioned without names or details, is a frequently unstressed truth: The Exodus story, our foundational story, is only possible because of the courage, faith, ingenuity, and vision of women.

When one looks for the involvement of women, whose role is frequently downplayed in the Torah, we readily see how ingenious women acted against authorities, sustained hope, shared their strength, and made it possible for the Israelites and future generations to survive. The response of women to Pharaoh's ruling to kill all male Israelite newborns illustrates this importance. Jews exist today because a few women acted and kept the nation strong long enough for Moses to lead his people away from Egypt.

Who are these women? We have:

The midwives, Shifra and Puah, who Rashi suggests are actually Yocheved and Miriam. Pharaoh feared that a growing Hebrew population would threaten his kingdom (Exodus 1:22), so he ruled that every newborn Hebrew baby boy be killed. Because they feared God more than they did Pharaoh (1:17–21), Shifra and Puah did not kill the baby boys, explaining to Pharaoh that Hebrew mothers were so strong and vigorous that they arrived too late for the births and had no opportunities to put the boys to death (1:18–19). Their actions saved Moses and multiple other infant boys. Shifra and Puah, the midwives, don't receive enough credit for their important act of civil disobedience.

Yocheved, mother of Miriam, Moses, and Aaron, is the first woman mentioned by name in *Parashat Vaera*. She is named when she remarries Amran (Exodus 6:20) in response to Miriam's prediction that her mother will give birth to a child who will save the Israelites. Yocheved conceived and gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. She bravely defied the Pharaoh's ruling when she hid him for three months. No longer able to keep him with her, she placed the boy in a waterproofed basket, nestled the basket in reeds near the edge of the Nile River, and set his sister Miriam the task of watching him. In taking these steps to save Moses' life against Pharaoh's decree, Yocheved demonstrated her courage, cleverness, ingenuity, and trust in God.

Miriam, older sister of Moses, watched over Moses as his basket rested in the Nile. When the basket and the crying baby were discovered by Pharaoh's daughter and her maidservants, Miriam offered to

find a Hebrew wet nurse to feed the baby and arranged for Yocheved to take the position. Miriam's strength and support for Moses continued as the Hebrews left Egypt. She led the women and gave confidence to the community when Moses hesitated due to his expectation that the Pharaoh would not listen to him (Exodus 6:12) or would ignore Moses due to his speech defect (6:30).

Bat Pharaoh, daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, is never named in the Torah. Pharaoh's daughter showed great courage, an act of rebellion, compassion, and strength as she openly went against her father's ruling that all Israelite baby boys be killed. She adopted baby Moses, brought him into her privileged home, and educated him in Egyptian ways. Her influence and training likely prepared Moses to be more successful at dealing with Pharaoh when the plagues occurred.

Although *Parashat Vaera* primarily relates the actions of men, modern comments make note of the importance of women to the Exodus story. The Exodus, a foundational part of Jewish history, could not have occurred without the critical acts of Shifra, Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, and Bat Pharaoh, all of whom enabled Moses' survival and his development into the Hebrews' leader. These women, with their moral and spiritual standards, their beliefs, and their accomplishments are not the focus of the *parashah*, but we recognize in their actions an important foundation to what had to occur for Judaism to grow.

Women's League, its Sisterhood Affiliates, and its members might be compared to these downplayed, but caring, ingenious women behind Moses; the incompletely mentioned women who played such an important role in our history. For more than a century, Sisterhood Affiliates have been pioneers of Jewish women's leadership, active in fundraising, philanthropy, education, and social activism. Women and their work are solid anchors of synagogue community life, yet what women accomplish has often been accepted as "just what Sisterhood Affiliates do", or even worse: overlooked.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, early Jewish women's groups raised funds for Jewish charities, worked on social problems such as the needs of new immigrants, and gathered socially which helped build stronger communities. When Mathilde Schechter began what became the Women's League for Conservative Judaism in 1918 it was strongly focused on Jewish education and enhanced Jewish life at home. Women's roles in education and as hospitality leaders in synagogue communities expanded and continued to be their most important charge for decades. Over fifty years after the start of Women's League, in the 1970s and 1980s as society and its norms changed, Sisterhood Affiliates shifted to a greater emphasis on social advocacy and synagogue leadership in addition to traditional service roles in their communities. Work done by women became essential to a successful future for Conservative Judaism. Women's League programs helped shape American Jewish communal structures long before women held formal synagogue leadership roles. Women who learn organizational leadership through Women's League share those skills outside of Sisterhood Affiliates and continue to do so in new and creative ways for local congregations and major Jewish organizations.

Today women are no longer primarily in roles behind the scenes. In addition to their traditional roles in education, hospitality, fundraising, and community building, women now hold major synagogue leadership roles that are central to the development of congregations and Jewish life. Women's League provides opportunities to learn, participate in, and practice a variety of organizational skills in addition to presenting a variety of academic Jewish studies. Women congregational leaders apply knowledge and skills often learned and practiced in their Sisterhood Affiliates and Women's League

experience. As Mathilde Schechter began, Women's League continues educating and building a Conservative Jewish future, doing so today from the front of the line.

Today's women leaders are also no longer typically nameless. Congregations know who their women leaders are. According to a September 2025 opinion piece in *eJewish Philanthropy*, about 50% of the presidents of Conservative congregations are women; around 25% of Conservative rabbis are women; and 50% of Conservative rabbinical and cantorial students are women. Like every student in the five Conservative seminaries, those very women benefit from the strong support of the Women's League Torah Fund campaign. With such training the role, the importance and recognition of women's leadership continues to expand.

Mathilde Schechter did not plan the important role that women hold in today's Conservative synagogues, but her goal to Jewishly educate women using an organized structure (such as that of Women's League) opened doors that resulted in great benefit to congregations across Conservative Judaism. Over one hundred years after its beginning, the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, its members, and Sisterhood Affiliates are strong pillars on which Conservative Judaism relies. Our predecessors Yocheved, Miriam, Mathilde, and many others provided us with the power to nurture, empower and inspire future Conservative Jews. Let's keep moving ahead! We are the Women's League for Conservative Judaism!

Suggestion from the author: personalize this *d'var* by referring to women leaders in your congregation and Sisterhood Affiliate, particular women who have transitioned from Sisterhood Affiliates to congregational leadership.