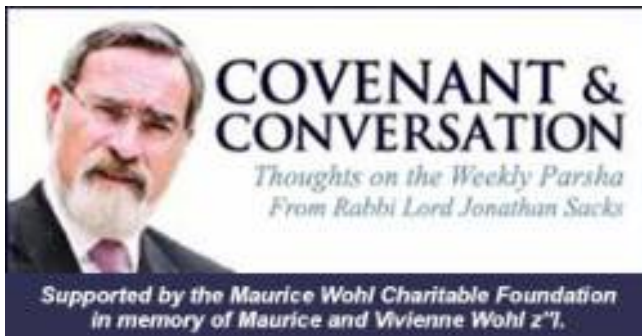


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### Women as Leaders

This week's parsha could be entitled "The Birth of a Leader." We see Moses, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, growing up as a prince of Egypt. We see him as a young man, for the first time realising the implications of his true identity. He is, and knows he is, a member of an enslaved and suffering people: "Growing up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people" (Ex. 2:10).

He intervenes – he acts: the mark of a true leader. We see him intervene three times, twice in Egypt,

once in Midian, to rescue victims of violence. We then witness the great scene at the Burning Bush where God summons him to lead his people to freedom. Moses hesitates four times until God becomes angry and Moses knows he has no other choice. This is a classic account of the genesis of a hero.

But this is only the surface tale. The Torah is a deep and subtle book, and it does not always deliver its message on the surface. Just beneath is another far more remarkable story, not about a hero but about six heroines, six courageous women without whom there would not have been a Moses.

First is Yocheved, wife of Amram and mother of the three people who were to become the great leaders of the Israelites: Miriam, Aaron and Moses himself. It was Yocheved who, at the height of Egyptian persecution, had the courage to have a child, hide him for three months, and then devise a plan to give him a chance of being rescued. We know all too little of Yocheved. In her first appearance in the Torah she is unnamed. Yet, reading the narrative, we are left in no doubt about her bravery and resourcefulness. Not by accident did her children all become leaders.

The second was Miriam, Yocheved's daughter and Moses' elder sister. It was she who kept watch over the child as the small ark floated down the river, and it was she who approached Pharaoh's daughter with the suggestion that he be nursed among his own people. The biblical text paints a portrait of the young Miriam as a figure of unusual fearlessness and presence of mind. Rabbinic tradition goes further. In a remarkable

Midrash, we read of how, upon hearing of the decree that every male Israelite baby would be drowned in the river, Amram led the Israelites in divorcing their wives so that there would be no more children. He had logic on his side. Could it be right to bring children into the world if there were a fifty per cent chance that they would be killed at birth? Yet his young daughter Miriam, so the tradition goes, remonstrated with him and persuaded him to change his mind. “Your decree,” she said, “is worse than Pharaoh’s. His affects only the boys; yours affects all. His deprives children of life in this world; yours will deprive them of life even in the World to Come.” Amram relented, and as a result, Moses was born.<sup>1</sup> The implication is clear: Miriam had more faith than her father.

Third and fourth were the two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who frustrated Pharaoh’s first attempt at genocide. Ordered to kill the male Israelite children at birth, they “feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live” (Ex. 1:17). Summoned and accused of disobedience, they outwitted Pharaoh by constructing an ingenious cover story: the Hebrew women, they said, are vigorous and give birth before we arrive. They escaped punishment and saved many lives.

The significance of this story is that it is the first recorded instance of one of Judaism’s greatest contributions to civilisation: the idea that there are moral limits to power. There are instructions that should not be obeyed. There are crimes against humanity that cannot be excused by the claim that “I was only obeying orders.” This concept, generally known as “civil disobedience”, is

usually attributed to the nineteenth century American writer Henry David Thoreau, and entered international consciousness after the Holocaust and the Nuremberg trials. Its true origin, though, lies thousands of years earlier in the actions of two women, Shifra and Puah. Through their understated courage they earned a high place among the moral heroes of history, teaching us the primacy of conscience over conformity, the law of justice over the law of the land.<sup>2</sup>

The fifth is Tzipporah, Moses’ wife. The daughter of a Midianite priest, she was nonetheless determined to accompany Moses on his mission to Egypt, despite the fact that she had no reason to risk her life on such a hazardous venture. In a deeply enigmatic passage, we see it was she who saved Moses’ life by performing a circumcision on their son (Ex. 4: 24-26). The impression we gain of her is a figure of monumental determination who, at a crucial moment, had a better sense than Moses himself of what God requires.

I have saved until last the most intriguing of them all: Pharaoh’s daughter. It was she who had the courage to rescue an Israelite child and bring him up as her own in the very palace where her father was plotting the destruction of the Israelite people. Could we imagine a daughter of Hitler, or Eichmann, or Stalin, doing the same? There is something at once heroic and gracious about this lightly sketched figure, the woman who gave Moses his name.

Who was she? The Torah does not mention her name. However the First Book of Chronicles

(4:18) references a daughter of Pharaoh, named Bitya, and it was she whom the Sages identified as the woman who saved Moses. The name Bitya (sometimes rendered as Batya) means “the daughter of God”. From this, the Sages drew one of their most striking lessons:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: “Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.”<sup>3</sup>

They added that she was one of the few people (tradition enumerates nine) who were so righteous that they entered paradise in their lifetime.<sup>4</sup>

So, on the surface, the parsha of Shemot is about the initiation into leadership of one remarkable man, but just beneath the surface is a counter-narrative of six extraordinary women without whom there would not have been a Moses. They belong to a long tradition of strong women throughout Jewish history, from Deborah, Hannah, Ruth and Esther in the Bible to more modern religious figures like Sarah Schenirer and Nechama Leibowitz to more secular figures like Anne Frank, Hannah Senesh and Golda Meir.

How then, if women emerge so powerfully as leaders, were they excluded in Jewish law from certain leadership roles? If we look carefully we will see that women were historically excluded from two areas. One was the “crown of priesthood”, which went to Aaron and his sons. The other was the “crown of kingship”, which went to David and his sons. These were two roles built on the principle of dynastic succession. From the third crown – the “crown of Torah” –

however, women were not excluded. There were Prophetesses, not just Prophets. The Sages enumerated seven of them (Megillah 14a). There have been great women Torah scholars always, from the Mishnaic period (Beruriah, Ima Shalom) until today.

At stake is a more general distinction. Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron in his Responsa, *Binyan Av*, differentiates between formal or official authority (*samchut*) and actual leadership (*hanhagah*).<sup>5</sup> There are figures who hold positions of authority – prime ministers, presidents, CEOs – who may not be leaders at all. They may have the power to force people to do what they say, but they have no followers. They excite no admiration. They inspire no emulation. And there may be leaders who hold no official position at all but who are turned to for advice and are held up as role models. They have no power but great influence. Israel’s Prophets belonged to this category. So, often, did the *gedolei Yisrael*, the great Sages of each generation. Neither Rashi nor Rambam held any official position (some scholars say that Rambam was chief rabbi of Egypt but most hold that he was not, though his descendants were). Wherever leadership depends on personal qualities – what Max Weber called “charismatic authority” – and not on office or title, there is no distinction between women and men.

Yocheved, Miriam, Shifra, Puah, Tzipporah and Batya were leaders not because of any official position they held (in the case of Batya she was a leader *despite* her official title as a princess of Egypt). They were leaders because they had courage and conscience. They refused to be

intimidated by power or defeated by circumstance. They were the real heroes of the Exodus. Their courage is still a source of inspiration today.

## QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. How did the choices and different characteristics exhibited by each of these women influence Moses as he grew into his unique leadership position?
2. What do you think are the moral limits of power?
3. With all the stories in the Torah, what is unique about the story of Batya?

## NOTES

1. Shemot Rabbah 1:13.
2. There is, of course, a Midrashic tradition that Shifra and Puah were other names for Yocheved and Miriam (Sotah 11b). In seeing them as separate women, I am following the interpretation given by Abarbanel and Luzzatto.
3. Vayikra Rabbah 1:3.
4. Derech Eretz Zuta 1
5. Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, *Responsa Binyan Av*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., no. 65.



## Forgetting - And Remembering - Joseph

As we begin a new book, we are introduced to a new king - and to a storyline that seems, to modern Jewish readers, all too familiar. The new Pharaoh is acutely aware of the presence of the Jews in his kingdom; so aware, in fact, that he feels he must devise a "final solution" to deal with them. The Jews, he says, are a fifth column; they are not loyal citizens, they can't be trusted. If Egypt is threatened by any external force, the Jews will quickly join the enemy and destroy the Egyptian way of life.

Yosef died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef. And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and leave the land." (Shmot 1:6-10)

As is often the case with hatred, there is something irrational in this argument. The new Pharaoh claims to be worried that, in case of war, the Jews will take advantage of the situation and bolt. But if the Jews are too numerous, and that is the source of the threat, why should Pharaoh be worried that they will leave? This sounds like a solution, not a problem.

Moreover, how can Yosef, the man who saved the Egyptian economy from collapse and an entire generation from starvation, have been forgotten? Yosef had filled the royal coffers and turned Egypt into a regional superpower; even a new Pharaoh should have been appreciative. Some posit that this new Pharaoh was from a different genealogical line, or perhaps even a foreigner who had conquered Egypt. Either way, the Jews, a distinct and insular minority, were now singled out for special treatment.

Unlike this new Pharaoh, there were those who remembered Yosef, and acted courageously in the face of personal danger, as Yosef had done generations earlier: The midwives. When ordered by Pharaoh to murder all newborn Jewish males, the Torah attests to the source of the courage and morality of these brave women:

The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. (Shmot 1:17)

The language is reminiscent of someone else who deeply feared God despite the personal consequences:

After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Yosef and said, "Lie with me." But he refused. He said to his

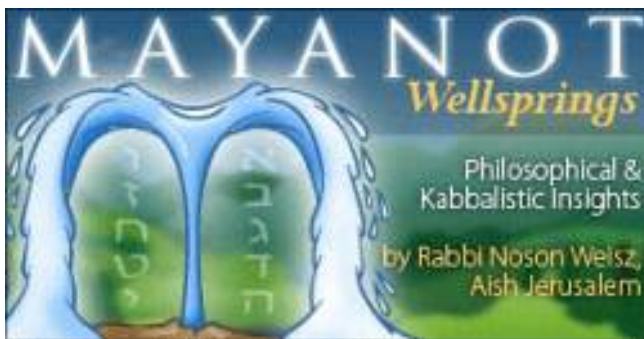
master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. No one wields more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" (Bereishit 39:7-9)

As a reward for his religious conviction Yosef soon found himself in prison, in an even more dire predicament than mere slavery. But his descendants, and all of the Children of Israel, knew the rest of the story as well: That slave-turned-prisoner soon became empowered, respected, and free. Yosef's meteoric metamorphosis was their inspiration; it was the microcosm of their own collective redemption. Even when Yosef seemed to suffer a setback due to his morality, that setback was temporary, and it set the stage for Yosef's great leap of fortune: One day an imprisoned slave, and the next, a mighty, free man.

Yosef's life in Egypt stood as an example for all the Children of Israel who suffered through the dark period of slavery and abuse in Egypt. His incredible rise to power made belief in redemption possible. Even if there would be setbacks, they knew that they, too, would be free. But even more than the belief in their freedom, what they learned from Yosef was how to achieve that freedom: The Israelites learned from Yosef that the path to freedom is paved with morality. So long as they followed Yosef's lead and remained attuned to the voice of God, they, like Yosef, would be redeemed.



Perhaps this is precisely what bothered Pharaoh about this peculiar people: He did not suspect them of dual loyalty because he understood that they had loyalty to only one King, they obeyed only one set of rules, and they answered to only one authority: They were loyal to God, and to one another. Pharaoh's "amnesia" was very selective: He chose not to remember Yosef, and not to remember God (Shmot 5:2) - but neither God nor Yosef were forgotten. The Children of Israel remembered them both.



## Faith Among the Pyramids

*And these were the names of the Children of Israel who were coming to Egypt; with Jacob, each man and his household came. Reuben, Simeon...(Exodus 1:1)*

The commentators all remark on the fact that this passage beginning the Book of Exodus is almost a word-for-word repetition of a passage toward the end of the Book of Genesis (47:8) and is therefore entirely superfluous.

The consensus that emerges from the various opinions offered is that the reason for the repetition is to describe the Egyptian exile from

its very inception, and it is at this point that the exile truly begins.

As long as Jacob and his sons were alive the sojourn in Egypt did not feel like an exile. The collective merit of these great *tzadikim* was sufficient to prevent any harsh measures being imposed against the Jewish people. Until they all passed away at the end of Genesis, Jews lived in Egypt much as they would have lived in Israel. They were totally enveloped in the atmosphere of holiness generated by these great people, and they were free of foreign oppression. Only when all these greats were gone did the people realize in full that their presence in Egypt was an exile.

Thus we find the signs of oppression, the beginning of enforced labor, the edict imposed by the Pharaoh against the male children, related here.

By beginning again with the arrival of Jacob and his children, the historic span of this portion of the Torah manages to embrace the entire 210-year period of the Egyptian exile, as it ends with the description of Moses' first meeting with Pharaoh when he was 80 years old, just one year prior to the Exodus.

This emphasizes the fact that this entire period was part of the exile even though its initial years were painless.

## EGYPTIAN EXILE

The Egyptian exile is a very anomalous phenomenon among Jewish exiles. All the other exiles suffered by the Jewish people were clearly in retribution for their sins.

The Torah and the prophets are full of dire warnings about the consequences of Jewish sins and their correlation with the various exiles suffered by the Jewish people. But the Egyptian exile does not seem to be preceded by any Jewish sin.

This is emphasized by the way the Torah goes out of its way to describe its beginnings. The children of Israel arrived in Egypt as a small tribe of 70 individuals. They only became a nation in Egypt. Their exile in Egypt could not have been a consequence of national sin. So why were they in exile?

Surprisingly, if we examine the Torah concept of exile closely, we find that its correlation with the idea of punishment is merely coincidental. While no doubt if Israel were free of sin it would never have been forced to enter any of its other exiles beside the Egyptian one, nevertheless the understanding of exile as punishment is incorrect.

Indeed, Rabbi Dessler explains exile in terms of correction of faults of character rather than in terms of punishment.

### **THE PURPOSE OF EXILE**

Every exile is an existential test whose successful survival automatically corrects a basic flaw in the Jewish sense of identity and self-awareness. If there were no such character flaw, or if it were corrected by Jews themselves without the need of any outside pressure, the exile would be superfluous.

But whereas suffering that is a consequence of retribution and punishment is essentially negative,

the object of the suffering that is endured in exile is always positive.

The correct way to regard exile is to perceive it as a very powerful existential corrective tool. Jews necessarily correct a major national character flaw by simply enduring the suffering associated with exile.

Thus, even in the absence of sin, exile can be employed as the most effective method available to correct some fault in the character of the Jewish nation.

According to Rabbi Dessler, the Torah view of the very first exile, the 210-year sojourn in Egypt, is that it came to correct the character flaw of lack of faith in God.

The faith in God that resides in the hearts of the Jewish nation is an inheritance from the patriarchs. God Himself stated:

*Shall I conceal from Abraham what I do now that Abraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of God, doing charity and justice, in order that God might then bring upon Abraham that which he had spoken of him. (Genesis 18:17-19)*

Abraham grows into a great and mighty nation because God loves him, and this love is extended to Abraham because he knows how to pass on his belief in God and his adherence to His ways to his children. Thus, the tiniest flaw in Abraham's faith

is bound to appear in his children in magnified form, just as a tiny flaw in the roots of a plant will appear magnified in its shoots and branches.

### **TINY FLAW**

We find precisely such a tiny flaw in Abraham's faith in God. When God promised Abraham children, he accepted God's promise at face value with perfect faith.

*And he trusted God, and he reckoned it to him as a righteousness.* (Genesis 15:6)

Yet, when God promised to grant the land of Israel to his descendants for all time, Abraham was not as trusting. He asked God for a guarantee:

*How can I really know that it will be mine?* (Genesis 15:8).

Abraham could not guarantee his children would not sin, therefore, he found it difficult to believe that God could guarantee the inheritance of Israel to his children for all time. As the consequence of sin is exile, he found himself unable to accept God's promise at face value.

It was for this lack of faith that God imposed the edict of the Egyptian exile on his children. (See Rashi in the name of the Midrash.)

The first rung in the character of the Jewish nation must be unshakable faith in God. It is a greater necessity for a Jewish nation than a national homeland or an army. The purpose of the Egyptian exile was the development of such faith. Indeed, it was a precondition to forming the eternal contract with God at Mount Sinai.

But is Abraham's request for a guarantee truly a demonstration of a lack of faith as we understand faith? Isn't Abraham perfectly correct? Surely, we do have free will, and surely no one can guarantee that we will not sin, not even God, and surely the punishment for sin is exile as the Torah itself repeatedly points out, so how can we relate to Abraham's skepticism as a lack of faith?

Before we attempt to answer this question, let us explain how a national lack of faith can be effectively remedied through exile in Egypt specifically.

### **THE REMEDY**

When Moses describes the land of Israel to the Jewish people, he contrasts it with Egypt in terms of the attribute of faith.

*For the land to which you come, to possess it – it is not like the land of Egypt that you left, where you would plant your seed and water it on foot like a vegetable garden. But the land to which you cross over to possess it is a land of hills and valleys; from the rain of heaven will it drink water; a land that the Lord your God seeks out; the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end.* (Deut. 11:11-12)

Living in Egypt, whose chief water source is the system of irrigation ditches that catch the overflow from the annual flooding of the Nile, does not require the maintenance of a close relationship with God. But living in Israel, which depends entirely on rainfall, is only possible for a people that have such a close relationship with



God that "the eyes of God are always focused on them from the beginning of the year to its end."

Egyptians can survive without faith in God, but the Jewish people were deliberately presented with a homeland where faith in God is a necessity of life.

In fact, Egypt was a land that worshipped the powers of nature, rather than an abstract spiritual Divinity. The Egyptian gods were the Sun, the engine that powers nature, and the lamb, the Zodiacal sign associated with the month of Nissan, the first month of spring, symbolizing the power of natural renewal.

Egyptologists inform us that according to Egyptian belief, even the world of the spirits was a natural place that was really part of the physical world. After death, departing souls migrated to this part of the natural world, and it was possible to equip them with the provisions they would require to be able to continue a life of luxury.

Hence the science of mummification, the preservation of the physical integrity of the departed, and hence the pyramids, those elaborate tombs that are one of the wonders of the world, where the Egyptian royalty could keep on living eternally in splendid luxury.

Our historical understanding of the Egyptian view of life thus entirely corresponds to the Torah's description of Egypt as a place where the prevailing culture did not subscribe to faith in a purely spiritual God.

## THE LURE OF ASSIMILATION

The exiled Jew in Egypt faced an enormous temptation to assimilate.

At the beginning of Exodus Pharaoh expressly states that his motive for oppressing the Jews is entirely defensive.

*Behold the people, the Children of Israel, are more numerous and stronger than we. Come, let us outsmart it lest it become numerous and it may be that if a war will occur, it, too, may join our enemies, and wage war against us and go up from the land.* (Exodus 1:9-10)

Pharaoh was afraid of the Jews because they simply refused to blend into the Egyptian melting pot. They refused to change their names, or their language or their mode of dress. (See Shir HaShirim Rabba 4:1 among many references.)

A Jew in Egypt was constantly subjected to the message that he was living in oppression and misery through his own choice, only because he refused to conform to the host culture. If he would agree to internalize it and adopt its outer trappings, he could not only improve his lot, but could aspire to reach the highest levels of Egyptian society. After all, didn't Joseph attain the position of number two in the Egyptian empire?

So why continue to cling in misery to the faith in God handed down by the patriarchs when you could enjoy the benefits of a great life without the necessity of believing in any form of Divine intercession at all?

In the face of this temptation, the Jews stubbornly refused to assimilate. They clung to their language, their name and their own mode of dress, insistently presenting the face of a threatening foreign body. They chose to suffer for the preservation of their faith.

Why? Wasn't the incontrovertible evidence that none of this was necessary displayed in plain view every day?

### **VOLUNTARY ENDURANCE**

When we search the world for examples of voluntary endurance of suffering by large numbers of people, the word love immediately springs to the mind. People will endure much suffering not to be separated from someone they love.

To surrender one's faith in God is to surrender one's connection to God as well. For a person who feels close to God, abandoning his faith is akin to abandoning his child.

In fact, this principle applies to human relationships as well. It is a well-known fact that love and trust are very closely associated. Trust is really faith. To lose trust in a loved one is to lose the love and the entire relationship.

If the Jewish nation was willing to pay the price of suffering 210 years of Egyptian oppression to cling to its faith in God, their stubborn perseverance is a measure of the greatness of their love.

### **THE MEANING OF FAITH**

What does faith in God mean? People have often remarked that the obligation to have faith in God

is a paradox. Either one already believes in God, in which case the obligation to do so is entirely superfluous, or one does not, in which case it is absurd. If I don't believe in God in the first place, there is no God in my perception who can obligate me to believe in Him. But this is a very shallow view of faith.

The obligation to have faith in God is an obligation never to break the connection with Him. Thus, the commandment to believe in God – the first commandment in the Torah – is really a commandment to preserve one's connection with God at any price on the grounds that the relationship with God is the most important of all human relationships.

This also explains why the outer trappings of faith are so important. Why didn't the Jews of Egypt say to themselves, "There is no need to antagonize the Egyptians with the outward display of our Judaism. After all our faith is in our hearts. Why shouldn't we adopt Egyptian names, speak the language and wear the clothes? What do these outward displays have to do with our inner beliefs?"

Connections require expression. Philosophy is in the mind, but relationships must be manifest in the real world.

To be an Egyptian in everything but mind, is to be an Egyptian all the way. The essence of an Egyptian is that he has no faith. But a man of faith must look like a man of faith. If his faith is not demonstrated in the way he lives his life, it is not the faith that fuels love and relationship, but merely the empty faith of dogma and ideology.

### THE CONTEXT FOR LIFE

*Joseph harnessed his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He appeared before him, fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck excessively. (Genesis 46:29)*

Rashi is bothered by the singular verb in this verse. Surely the verse should read that they wept on each other's necks. But Rashi explains that the verb is in the singular because only Joseph wept.

When Jacob embraced Joseph, Jacob recited the *Shema*. At this supreme emotional moment Jacob connected his love for Joseph with his love for God.

His relationship with Joseph falls into place only in context of his understanding that the God of Israel is the One and Only.

All of life and its relationships take on significance in the context of this supreme relationship. Every aspect of life is tinged by one's faith in God.

Abraham asked for a guarantee because he knew that he could not attach his children to God with such a powerful bond that it could never be broken no matter what they would have to endure to preserve it. To create such a powerful bond between God and the future generations of Israel was beyond his capacity. Such a bond could only be forged by the self-sacrifice voluntarily endured by the Jewish nation in Egypt to hang on to its faith.

Abraham could teach his children about the existence of God. But such mental knowledge is not sufficient to preserve the bond between God

and human beings that the land of Israel represents. To preserve such a bond one has to learn to live with faith and be willing to suffer to preserve it.



### True Greatness

And the king of Egypt said to the midwives, one of whom was named Shifrah and the other Puah. (1:15)

When Pharaoh decreed that all newborn Jewish boys should be drowned, two heroic midwives saved the day. One was named Shifrah and the other Puah. Rashi explains that these two women were none other than Yocheved, Moshe's mother, and Miriam, his sister. Why then were they called Shifrah and Puah? Yocheved was called Shifrah because she was *meshaferes es havlad*, she beautified the infants and smoothed their limbs. Miriam was called Puah because she was *poah umedaberes livlad*, she cooed and whispered to the infants.

It seems strange that the special names the Torah gives Yocheved and Miriam memorialize the care they showed to the infants. These women actually saved their lives. If it weren't for them, those

infants would have been drowned. Shouldn't they then have been given names that memorialize their heroic rescue of the Jewish children? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to name them *Hatzalah* and *Teshuah*, for example?

My *Rosh Yeshivah*, Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, always used to say that true greatness is manifested in the little things, the low-profile actions that reveal the depth of character and commitment. It is not enough to perform heroic acts that grab the headlines, so to speak. People of lesser worth can also find it within themselves to rise to the occasion for that one moment of heroism and perform acts of greatness. But it is a superficial greatness, because after the deed is done, they revert to ordinariness. They pat themselves on the back and say, "All right, I've done my duty. I've risked my life and saved the world, and now it's time to go home and get on with my life." A meteoric rise and a descent to earth. True greatness, however, is expressed in small but extraordinary deeds. These two heroic women, Shifrah and Puah, were pulling Jewish children to safety in a time of mortal danger, yet they had the sensitivity and the presence of mind to take the time to beautify their little bodies and to soothe their little souls with coos and whispers. This was true greatness.

The Talmud reports (*Avodah Zarah* 18a) that Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma taught Torah in public despite a Roman decree forbidding anyone to do so under the penalty of death. One day, Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion visited him.

"Don't you know," asked Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion, "that Heaven granted [the Romans] their power? How can you flaunt their decrees?"

"I rely on the mercy of Heaven," Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma replied. "Tell me, will I have a share in the next world?"

"Have you ever done anything outstanding?" asked Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion.

"Yes, I have," said Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma responded. "I once had charity as well as my own money in the same pocket. They got mixed up, and I didn't know which was which. So I gave everything to charity."

"If so," said Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion, "may my own portion be as great as your portion, and may my destiny be as great as yours."

What can we make of this conversation? Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma is risking his life to teach Torah in public. He will probably die a horrible death at the hands of the Romans if he is apprehended. Yet this great act of heroism doesn't seem to guarantee him a share in the next world. What worthy act convinces Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion that Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma has earned a share in the next world? That he gave his own money to charity when it got mixed up with charity money! Amazing!

We see clearly from this Gemara how true greatness is measured. Headline-grabbing acts of heroism are not absolute proof of true greatness. On the other hand, giving away one's own money when it gets mixed up with charity money will never get a headline. In fact, no one will ever know about it. Such an act shows what a person is

really made of. Such an act is a sure sign of true greatness.

## KINDNESS AND TRUTH

And she opened [the box] and saw the boy, and behold, he was crying, and she took pity on him and said, "This is a Hebrew boy." (Shemos 2:6)

Pharaoh's daughter Basya went down to the river to bathe, and she caught sight of a box floating among the bulrushes. She sent her attendants to fetch the box, opened it and saw a baby boy crying, and she said, "This is a Hebrew boy."

How did she know this? What made her conclude that the infant Moshe was a Hebrew child? It was not his appearance. It was not the sound of his crying. It was simply the conditions of his discovery. Why was a child adrift in a box on the river? It must be that his parents were trying to save him from Pharaoh's decree of death to all male Jewish infants.

Basya's logic was excellent, and she guessed right. But it seems to have taken her a while to figure it out. As soon as she saw that the box contained a boy, she should have realized that he was Jewish. But apparently, this is not what happened. According to the Torah, she noticed that "he was crying, and she took pity on him" and only afterward did she say, "This is a Hebrew boy." What took her so long?

Rav Nissan Alpert offered a beautiful solution to this question in the context of his eulogy for his *rebbe*, Rav Moshe Feinstein. Rav Moshe was universally recognized as by far the greatest Torah scholar of his time. His knowledge was vaster

than vast, his insight razor sharp and his humility, sensitivity and kindness legendary. One might have thought it would be very difficult for a young scholar to receive a *haskamah*, a letter of approbation, for a new *sefer* from such a towering sage, but just the opposite was true. Rav Moshe gave *haskamos* readily and easily to just about anyone who asked for them. He also gave letters of recommendation and letters of endorsement for all sorts of projects with the same ease. It came to the point that people were no longer impressed by a letter from Rav Moshe, so easy were they to come by. Why did he do this? Why wasn't he more discriminating when it came to writing letters on behalf of people?

Rav Alpert explained that *chessed*, kindness, and *emes*, truth, are not really compatible concepts. Kindness flows from the heart. It is an instinctive emotional response. Truth is established by the brain. It is the product of scrutiny, investigation and logic. In a certain sense, truth is the antagonist of kindness. If we would do a thorough investigation of poor people that ask for charity we would probably reject most of them.

Indeed, when *chessed* and *emes* are mentioned together in the Torah (*Bereishis* 24:49; *Shemos* 34:6; *Yehoshua* 2:14), the word *chessed* always precedes the word *emes*. *Chessed* is quick and instinctive. *Emes* is deliberate and thorough. If *chessed* would wait for *emes*, it would never get off the ground.

A person's first reaction must be kindness. Only afterward should he set off in search for the truth. When a beggar asks for a handout, don't wait until you check out his credentials. Give him





## Shmot (Exodus 1:1-6:1) *advanced compendium*

something right away. When an institution needs financial assistance, don't call for an audit to determine exactly what the problem is. When a young author comes for an approbation, give it to him! This was Rav Moshe's philosophy in life.

When Basya opened the box and saw the boy, concludes Rav Alpert, her first reaction wasn't to assess the situation, to consider who the child's parents were and why he was adrift on the river, to determine if it would be appropriate to rescue him. Her first reaction was kindness. "He was crying, and she took pity on him." Before she gave any thought to the situation, her kind heart went out to the crying child. Only afterward did she stop to consider the situation, and she came to the correct conclusion that "this is a Hebrew boy."

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