

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Shemot
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פרשת שמות
כ"ג בטבת תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 1:1-6:1

This Shabbat, we begin reading the second of the five books of Moses – that of *Shemot* (Exodus). This book concentrates on the Jews' enslavement in and freeing from Egypt and the beginnings of their wanderings in the wilderness, including the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

In this *parasha*, Bnei Yisrael become slaves to Paro; Paro's daughter saves Moshe from the Nile and, after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, Moshe flees to Midian where he marries and has children. Hashem instructs Moshe to liberate the people; Moshe returns to Egypt, and Moshe and Aharon approach Paro, who refuses their request for liberation.

Women are critical to the storyline in *Parashat Shmot*.

1. When Paro commands the midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill all of the baby boys born to Jewish women, they refuse. And when they are confronted by Paro, they stand up to him and are duly rewarded by God. (Chapter 1)
2. Following Paro's inability to get the midwives to murder the male newborns, Paro orders that all newborn boys are to be thrown into the Nile River. But Yocheved (Moshe's mother) hides her son in a papyrus box among the reeds in an attempt to save his life. His sister, Miriam, stands watch over him. When Paro's daughter comes to bathe in the Nile, she finds the baby, whom she names Moshe, and spares his life. His sister makes an offer to the princess to find a wet nurse for the baby and Moshe's own mother nurses him until he is weaned. (Chapter 2)

3. When Moshe is grown, he flees from Egypt to Midian after killing an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave. He meets and marries Tziporah, the daughter of Yitro, a Midianite priest. Tziporah bears him two sons, and on the way back to Egypt, circumcises their son when Moshe neglects to do so, and accuses him of being a “bloody bridegroom.” (Chapter 4)

So in the course of four chapters we have met six remarkable, strong women: the midwives, Shifra and Puah; Yocheved; Miriam; the daughter of Paro; and Tziporah. Not only are they all strong and remarkable women, but each of them, in her own way, stands up to “the man” in what was quite a patriarchal society. The midwives refuse a direct order from Paro, the “Supreme Ruler.” Yocheved subversively keeps her son alive, aided by Miriam who closely guards him. The daughter of Paro directly violates the command of her father and saves the infant boy. And Tziporah chastises Moshe for neglecting to circumcise his baby and proceeds to do so herself.

The convergence of these women within four chapters of the Torah seems to be more than a coincidence. It seems to indicate that, like much of Jewish history, *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (the exodus from Egypt) – the formative episode of the Jewish people – could not have proceeded except for the intercession of women. Many, many *midrashim* support this notion by describing various contributions of women to the exodus. These include the *midrash* that Miriam convinced her father to direct the Jews to continue having children despite Paro’s orders to murder the baby boys at birth; that the Jewish women enticed and seduced their husbands after the men’s long days of hard work to continue producing children; and that the women stifled their cries during labor so that the Egyptians would not find their newborns.

Although the Torah contains significantly more references to men’s accomplishments than women’s, the book of *Shemot* opens with heavily female stories. Perhaps this is to remind us that even if “below the radar screen,” women were critical to all that happened and continues to happen to the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Which of the women in *Parashat Shmot* do you think was the bravest? Why?
- Name one or more women that you know who make or have made a difference in your life. What have they done or what do they do that is important to you?
- Over Shabbat or the next week, make it a point to thank these women.