

"Bringing Down the Empire" prepared by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

Yocheved places Moshe in a *teva* which is rectangular so can't be steered by humans – placing him in the Nile means she has to have faith that God will steer the tiny boat.

"At the same time, faith is not the same as abandonment of human responsibility, so Miriam remains nearby. That intricate balance between being there and letting go, staying connected and allowing movement that doesn't include us, is played out in this scene by the Nile." Marsha Mirkin (*The Women Who Danced at the Sea*)

Placing Moshe in the Nile as an act of radical trust:

This part of our story is an "ancient observation about the vulnerabilities of absolute power structures in human societies. Even if they are seemingly invincible, these power structures have cracks in them, even at the highest levels. Poor Yokheved, baby Moses' biological mother, acted on the hope that this "crack" was part of reality. It was a desperate act. She dared to have faith that there was something more to the world than raw power and callousness. She cast her condemned son upon the waters of the Nile—the symbol of the life of all of Egypt—in the hope that someone, somewhere in this empire of cruelty might feel a stirring of sympathy and choose to rescue the child. "

In every way Moses' origins and upbringing make him the consummate "other"

..."the selfless women in Moses' young life give birth to the independence of mind that will allow him to assume his role as leader. From them, Moses learns to examine the norms and values of his environment and to reject the corruption he sees among Egyptian and Israelite alike . . . [T]he daughters in this narrative lead Moses to an awareness of his otherness, and ultimately to a discovery of the heroism needed to conceive of and carry out the move to redemption."

Judy Klitsner (cited by Maurice Harris, *Moses, A Stranger Among Us* p.118)

His otherness was a key factor in challenging the norms of his society and adoptive status. Those of us who have felt like "the other" bring this very quality to the Jewish community – or any community we become a part of.

This singular stature allowed a growth of mission in him that wouldn't have necessarily happened otherwise.

He needed to be born of the house of Levi AND to be raised in Pharaoh's court as his kin.

We need both the identities we're born with and the ones we acquire through experience

Harris - "Tyrants like Pharaoh have the power to name things, and they count on the names of things remaining stable, like the other objects of their control. What they can't control, however, is something the Torah shows us in this story: the unexpected events of our lives can change us utterly, even changing our names, renaming us into members of a counter-force to the system of oppression. "

She (Pharaoh's daughter) had compassion on him...

Harris - "In the brief moment described in this verse the daughter of the most powerful emperor in the world stood face to face with an abandoned Hebrew baby boy condemned to die by her father's order, the seed of the overthrow of four centuries of slavery was planted. In the time it took for one young woman's heart to feel a pulse of compassion strong enough to evoke action, the gods of Egypt fell and the God of Israel entered the drama of history on the world's stage as the Champion of the Oppressed....the revolution was born in the most unlikely of places - inside his unnamed daughter's heart."

On naming Moshe from the Egyptian term for 'drawing out'

"It is significant that the name given to Moses by Batya, is a word based on the act of saving his life, and not on the feelings of mercy that Batya experienced. This detail conveys one of the Torah's central lessons quite beautifully: we can claim to feel a variety of things, but it is our actions in this world that have lasting impact."

18 And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said to them: 'Why have you done this thing, and have saved the boy-children alive? 19 And the midwives said unto Pharaoh: 'Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous, and give birth before the midwife arrives.

Discuss this answer

They exploited his prejudice

'Marsha Mirkin – Pharaoh believed this ludicrous story, thus teaching us a great deal about prejudice. When we are prejudiced against another, we reduce the other to something non-human. If we truly saw each other as human beings all created in God's image, it would be hard to be so destructive towards each other. Pharaoh had to dehumanize the Hebrews in order to abuse them. Because they were already reduced to animals in his mind, it wasn't strange to think they could give birth quickly and not follow the same rules as human mothers do in the birth process."

Robin Cohn - Rather than cower before the most powerful man on earth they "defend themselves with straight faces against Pharaoh's charge of insubordination. Their lives are at stake, and yet their sly comparison between the vigorous Hebrew women and the pampered Egyptians comes through as totally credible to the 'wise' king: 'Oh yes, of course, that would be a problem, wouldn't it?' There is a great relish in this uneven conflict between the effete elite and the crude, but shrewd, vital, and resourceful, oppressed. The king fails to realize that not only is he being deceived, but he is also being mocked - In essence, Shiphrah and Puah insinuated that the Hebrew women were strong in comparison to weak Egyptian women.

Not only will they not kill but they refer to the women as CHAYOT – life producers!

The significance of this story is that it is the first recorded instance of one of Judaism's greatest contributions to civilization: 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, lay 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

Shifra and Puah, by refusing to obey an immoral order, redefined the moral imagination of the world.

As their daughters, what are we called into doing to address the dehumanizing of people, especially women and children (sex slaves currently fastest growing criminal activity – bigger than illegal drug trade)?