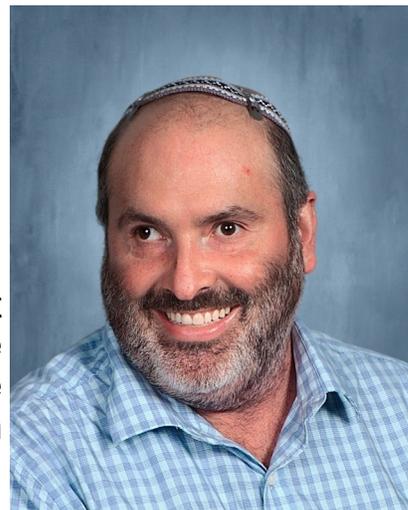


Women and the Exodus

"In reward for the righteous women of that generation, Israel were redeemed from Egypt."

Rabbi Ari Ellis



The name of Moshe is conspicuously absent from the text of the Haggadah. Indeed it's hard to imagine telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt without mentioning Moshe Rabbeinu. But this is an intentional choice by Chazal in order to shift the focus away from Moshe, a human being, and give credit where credit is due, to HaShem.

Nevertheless, Moshe was not the only human being that contributed to our Exodus from Egypt. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his commentary to the Haggadah writes that "the human face of the Exodus is the story of six remarkable women. Without Moses there might have been no exodus. But without the heroism of women there would have been no Moses." So who were they?

The first was Yocheved, Moshe's mother. She gives birth to three children destined for greatness: Miriam, the prophetess, Aharon, our first Kohen Gadol, and Moshe, our greatest leader. In the time when Paroh decreed that all baby boys should be thrown into the Nile, Yocheved devises a bold plan to save Moshe's life. And against all odds it succeeds.

The second figure is Paroh's daughter, who rescued Moshe, knowing full well that he was a Jewish child. If anyone in Egypt would obey the king's decree it should be the members of his own family. But she defies him to do what is right.

She is not mentioned by name in the Torah. However there is a reference in Divrei HaYamim (I 4:18) to a "Bityah, the daughter of Paroh," and our tradition identifies her as the one who rescued Moshe. And according to the Rabbis, Ha-Shem said "'Moshe was not your son yet you called him your son. You, too, are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.'"

The third woman is Miriam who risks her life to follow Moshe's basket. And it is Miriam who suggests to Paroh's daughter to allow Yocheved to nurse Moshe. Without her, Moshe might never have known his identity. He would have grown up not knowing that he was a Jew.

The fourth was Moshe's wife, Tzipporah who saved Moshe's life. The Torah tells us that "during the journey, while they were encamped for the night, God confronted Moshe and wanted to kill him; Tzipporah took a stone knife, cut off her son's foreskin, throwing it down at Moshe's feet. Then she said: 'Blood groom by circumcision.'" (Shemot 4:24-25)

And the final two are the midwives, Shifra and Puah, whom Paroh instructed to kill every male Jewish child. But they risked their lives because they feared God and did not do as Paroh commanded saving the babies. This is perhaps the first recorded instance of civil disobedience in the history of the world. And their courage reverberates even today reminding us of the imperative to fight for justice no matter the cost.

While the primary story that we tell at the Seder focuses on the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea, and the epic confrontation between Moshe and Paroh in Egypt. But we must give thanks to HaShem and remember that these events did not happen in a vacuum. Many others, and in particular these six heroic women, contributed in countless ways to our salvation. "In reward for the righteous women of that generation, our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt."

Chag Sameach!