

Elysa Graber Lipperman on Shemot
Sisterhood Shabbat, January 9, 2010

The text of this week's parasha, Shemot, begins with a specific list of the names of Jacob's descendents who came to Egypt and describes how, over time, Jacob's descendents were fruitful, increased abundantly, multiplied, and became mighty. As time passed, a monarch of a new dynasty who knew not of Joseph, came to power. The king was intimidated by the numbers and strength of Jacob's descendents living in Egypt and feared the group might join an outside enemy of the state, so the king appointed taskmasters to enslave the Jewish people to weaken them.

The perception that a group of people who trace their origins to another or different place may be a potential enemy of the state which is described in the Torah has repeated itself in history. Consider, for example, the experience of people of Japanese descent in America during World War II. Later this morning, we are fortunate to have Aida Mansoor speak about her Muslim faith to foster understanding of Islam and to build bridges with others in the face of events of recent history.

But for now, it being Sisterhood Shabbat, I would like to focus on the women mentioned in the text of this week's parasha and the important role these women play. When Pharaoh's strategy of enslaving the Hebrews to lessen their power and strength proved unsuccessful – the text indicates the Hebrews multiplied more -- the king told Shifrah and Puah, two Egyptian midwives serving the Hebrew people to kill all of the male sons born to the Hebrew women. It's interesting that Pharaoh did not concern himself with the fact that women trained and dedicated to help bring life into this world could probably not be relied on to kill the boys.

The midwives defied the Pharaoh and caused the boys to live. The text states the midwives were driven to do this because they feared god. Commentary concerning this chapter of the text suggests that the expression of fearing god contained in the text is used in connection with individuals who did not worship the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but, rather, individuals who did not wish to be parties to a monstrous crime. Even though national interests were at stake, the midwives preferred to obey the voice of human kindness and the voice of their conscience. (Hertz Chumash, p 208)

I think we would all agree that this direct defiance of Pharaoh's orders carried much risk and necessitated a great deal of bravery. When asked why the boys were still living, Shifrah and Puah told the pharaoh that the Hebrew women were unlike the Egyptian women – they were experts and gave birth before the midwives came to them. Pharaoh accepted this story about the Hebrews being different and did not suspect the midwives.

When the Pharaoh realizes the midwives are unable to carry out his orders, he commands the people in his kingdom to throw the sons born to the Hebrews into the river.

The text mentions a Levite woman who bears a son, Moses, who she is able to hide for three months after she realizes that he is a good child, a child that would not betray his presence by crying. Here we have an example of a woman acting in a brave manner, risking her own life. When Moses' mother could no longer hide him, to save his life, she constructs a basket that would float and placed him in the river. Moses' sister, Miriam, watches the basket in the river from a distance.

The text goes on to describe how Pharaoh's daughter who was bathing in the river saw the basket, had it fetched for her, heard a baby cry, and had compassion for the boy, even though she knew he was a Hebrew baby. Miriam, with some chutzpah, asked Pharaoh's daughter if she should fetch a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for her. Pharaoh's daughter agrees, and Moses is brought to his own mother to be nursed and cared for as he grows up. When he is a little older, Moses becomes the son of the king's daughter and grows up in the very court of the king bent on killing the Hebrews.

Consider the importance women play in the beginning chapters of Shemot. Pharaoh's plans for the annihilation of the [Hebrew] children are defeated by women – the human feelings of the midwives, [the actions of a mother protecting her child], the tender sympathy of Pharaoh's daughter, and Miriam's watchfulness and resourcefulness. (Hertz Chumash, p. 210). All of these women take actions which preserve Moses' life, actions which ultimately lead to the path of the redemption of the Israelites in Egypt. Actions which often are demonstrated by successful leaders – bravery, the ability to set a positive example, the willingness to follow your heart and mind, the willingness to do what is right, and a little bit of chutzpah.

I am so proud to be part of Sisterhood and this service, surrounded by leaders in our community. Women leading challenging parts of the service. Women demonstrating all they can do for their daughters and sons. Women and their daughters leading parts together. Young women being encouraged to lead and being supported when they do. Women helping our synagogue thrive.

Additionally, like the women in the parahsha, Sisterhood's efforts nurture future leaders. The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and the students attending these institutions are all supported by the Torah Fund Campaign of Women's League. Later on in the service, Melissa Zachariah will share with us more about what Sisterhood does.

I want to close by thanking everyone who participated and supported today's service.

Shabbat Shalom!