The Role of Women in the Exodus Story

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

The Sages wondered: how was it possible for the Jews to escape from Egypt? Being a slave in Egypt was like being in a high security prison or a concentration camp, from which you cannot escape alive. The answer to this question seems to be very simple: we left Egypt thanks to the miraculous intervention of HaShem, our God. And, of course, Moshe and Aharon his brother. But to our surprise the Sages of the Midrash formulated a different answer: □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ *"It was for the merit of virtuous women that the Jewish people were liberated from Egypt."* To understand the logic and beauty of this statement we must open the Tora and read carefully Exodus 1:15 to 2:10 (see here). In this text, we read Pharaoh's order to the midwives to kill Jewish babies, but they refused. These two women, Shifra and Puah, represent the first recorded example in the Bible, and I believe in human history, of civil disobedience. The Tora clearly states that it was thanks to the courage of these women that the Jews did not disappear and were able to survive and multiply.

THE MOTHER, THE DAUGHTER AND THE STEPMOTHER

The Tora also tells us about three other women of great courage and valor, who played a fundamental role in our departure from Egypt. Moshe's mother, Yochebed, who decided to have a child despite Pharaoh's decree to murder all newborn Jewish boys. When it was no longer possible to hide her child from her, Yochebed placed her little baby in a basket. And that basket was found by Pharaoh's own daughter, who in a second and very brave act of civil disobedience against her own father, rescued the Jewish baby and adopted him as her own son. The Torah also mentions another woman, Miryam, Moshe's sister, who watched the basket that carried her little brother across the Nile and when Pharaoh's daughter rescued him, she suggested getting a Hebrew woman – Moshe's own mother – to nurse her adopted son. Moshe was breastfed and raised by his own mother during the first years of his life, and this is how

he learned about his Jewish identity. Each of these three brave women played a critical and fundamental role, directly or indirectly, in the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt.

THE GREATEST QUESTION

There is also a beautiful Midrash that asks: How did the children of Israel realized that they had to aspire and pray for their deliverance? In other words: how did they realize that they were slaves, in a society where everyone was a slave? The question seems absurd today. Unless we remember Plato's cave. If a person is born, grows up and lives his whole life in the depth of a dark cave, he will never know what "light" is. But he won't know what darkness is either. Since the identification of darkness is only possible when one sees the light. Without knowing the light, darkness becomes the natural condition of existence. Jewish slaves were born, raised and lived for several generations in slavery (140 years, according to Maimonides). How was it possible, then, that it occurred to them to aspire to freedom?

HEROES AMONG US

Also in this case, the Midrash grants the main credit to the Jewish wives. The sages explained that every day, Jewish women went to the Nile and collected small fish that accumulated on the river bank. With these fish they prepared a tasty meal and also a special balm. In the evenings, Jewish wives would visit their husbands at the construction sites. The Egyptians deliberately did not let the men to return to their homes to prevent population growth. The wives prepared and embellishing themselves as best they could in front of copper mirrors and when they met their husbands, they rubbed their backs, battered by the sun and the whip with the balm they had prepared; they served their husbands the tasty food they had prepared and spent the night with them, unseen by the Egyptians, in the apple orchards.

IDENTIFYING DARKNESS

While Egyptian masters went to great lengths to humiliate and dehumanize Jews, breaking their spirits and making them feel doomed to be slaves for life, Jewish women doubled down on

their efforts to inspire in their husbands a sense of dignity. They rose to this tremendous challenge and did their best to make them feel that they were NOT destined to be slaves but “family men”, and that they could be happy and have a life of dignity. In other words: Jewish wives inspired their husbands to see the light in the dark cave, so that they would understand that they were living in darkness: and that slavery was not the “new normal.” It was this noble and valiant effort by the women of Israel that prevented Jewish men from accept their status as slaves, as did all other enslaved peoples, and aspire for freedom. It was thanks to the virtuous women of Israel, their courage and their wisdom to strengthen their husband’s spirits in the most difficult moments of our history, that our freedom from Egypt was possible.

Dedicated to my daughter Orit and her husband, Dr. Adam Harari, on the occasion of the Berit Mila of our new grandson

Yosef Yaakob Harari