

שמות

BUILDERS OF A NATION

Chazal (Sotah 11:) state:

בשכר נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו ישראל ממצרים

As a reward for the righteous women of that generation our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.

In Mitzraim, the men of *Klal Yisrael* were detained in concentration camps as slave laborers. They were dispirited, broken and downtrodden. The women trekked from the safety of their homes through dangerous fields to the outskirts of the camps. There, through a pre-arranged signal, they were able to get the attention of their husbands. In the fields, among the sheepfolds, the wives washed, anointed, fed, gave drink to and encouraged their husbands. The women possessed highly polished copper which they used as mirrors to make themselves more attractive to their husbands. In fact, these were the copper mirrors which Hashem demanded that Moshe accept as material in the construction of the *Mishkan*. Only because these makeup mirrors were used for the holiest of purposes, were they most desired by Hashem (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 9:14). The women (as well as the men) lived natural lives, but their goal was to achieve holiness utilizing their human skills. In the fields outside the concentration camps, these wives urged their husbands to procreate, and thereby the nation was built.

The *Gemara (Sotah 11:)* continues that after the women had conceived they returned to their homes. When the time for childbirth arrived, they went out into the fields and there delivered beneath the apple trees. An angel was sent by Hashem to wash and straighten the limbs of the newborn, in the same manner as would a midwife, and he also provided them with food. The earth protectively swallowed them, and when they had grown up a bit, they returned in flocks to their respective homes.

An additional privilege exclusively reserved for women is evident in the monthly *Rosh Chodesh* observance. Women were rewarded with the custom of refraining from work on *Rosh Chodesh (Tur, Orach Chaim 417)*, a privilege not available to males. Women refused to participate in the building of the *eigel*, and therefore withheld their jewelry from their husbands. Therefore, in special recognition, Hashem awarded to women an additional *Rosh Chodesh* observance over and above that available to men. The *Tur* then quotes his brother, Rabbi Yehudah, who relates the significance of the twelve *Shevatim* to the twelve *Rashei Chodesh*. The *Darkei Moshe (ibid.)* suggests that women who are Halachically renewed monthly are symbolized by the monthly renewal of the new moon. The moon's twelve periods of renewal are related to the renewal of Jewish mothers who established the twelve *Shevatim*. In this respect, the uniqueness of Jewish women must be understood.

At the beginning of *Shemos*, the Torah chronicles the heroics of the women of those generations. Any incident related in the Torah is not intended merely as a space filler or as an incidental anecdote. An episode is recounted by the Torah only to drive home an important message. The Torah commences the story of *Yetzias Mitzraim* at the beginning of Sefer *Shemos*. The opening statement made about *Klal Yisrael* is that they were “fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and waxed exceedingly mighty.” The Torah then discusses the conspiracy of the new king against *Klal Yisrael*. In the midst of this narration, we find a discussion of the Jewish midwives. The Torah testifies that the midwives “feared Hashem” and did not follow the king’s evil instructions, but instead cleverly circumvented his decrees.

Herein lies the secret of *Yetzias Mitzraim*, and herein lies the key to understanding the righteous women of the generations of Mitzraim. Shifra and Puah, the generic names attributed to Yocheved and Miriam, were representative of all the Jewish midwives in Mitzraim. The virtue, nobility and *Yiras Shamayim* demonstrated by these two individuals were also exhibited by the many, many other women of that period. According to one of the commentators who cites a relatively small number, the number of Jews in Mitzraim at the time of the *makos* was about twelve million individuals. It took many, many midwives to service this massive population. Shifra and Puah were merely an example of this righteous, valiant network of women.

Moreover, the rest of the Torah’s narration leading up to the birth of Moshe *Rabbeinu* makes use of generic terms, in a sense indicating its intent to portray all members of *Klal Yisrael*.

וילך איש מבית לוי, ויקח את בת לוי

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi
(*Shemos* 2:1).

At that time, the *Gedolai Yisrael* — Jewish leaders — decreed that men separate from their wives in order to avoid the ultimate murder of their sons. They determined that it was a *sakanos nefashos* to bring a male child into this world. At least until Pharaoh’s evil decrees would subside, husbands and wives were to separate. The women of *Klal Yisrael* could not abide by this decision and mounted a campaign to convince the *Gedolim* to rethink the situation. The women felt that (although it was not their *mitzvah*) they were charged by Hashem to

פרו ורבו ומלאו את הארץ

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth . . . (*Bereishis* 1:28).

The depraved edicts of a wicked king are irrelevant to discharging the mandate of Hashem. In addition, they had the *bitachon* — trust — that if they fulfilled their functions, Hashem would fulfill His.

Miriam is portrayed as a spokesman for the other women. Miriam undertook a campaign to convince her father, Amram, to resume life with her mother, Yocheved (*Sotah* 12•). Naturally Miriam was inspired by Hashem, but inspiration does not come to those who do not seek it. Similarly, utilizing the principle of “to deduce what is hidden from that which is taught” (*Yoma* 59•), all across the Jewish communities of Mitzraim, daughters were busy lobbying their fathers to return to their mothers. All over Mitzraim husbands who had left their wives due to fear of Pharaoh’s perversity were now returning to their wives and resuming their family lives.

What inspired heroism in these women? What prompted them to take the initiative for the *ge'ulah* from *Mitzraim*? What unique spirit was present in these women that was not present in the men?

Prior to *Kabalah Hatorah* there were separate traditions for women. Women understood that they possessed certain unique capabilities in serving *Hashem*, and they utilized them to the fullest degree. This is very poignantly expressed by the contemporaries of Rus as she wed Boaz. All those who witnessed the scene expressed what was probably then a common *berachah* to a *chasan* and *kallah*:

יתן ה' את האשה הבאה אל ביתך כרחל וכלאה, אשר בנו שתיהם את בית ישראל

Hashem shall make the woman coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, the two who built the house of Israel (*Rus* 4:11).

All understood that Rachel and Leah fought and plotted so that each would have the privilege of establishing the *Shivtei Kah*, the seeds of *Klal Yisrael*. The rivalry between Rachel and Leah, the scheming each did to win time with Yaakov, the intrigue of introducing Bilhah and Zilpah onto the scene, were all done for one purpose only. Rachel and Leah did not merely seek cuddly infants on whom to lavish their love and affection. They desired children for one purpose, and one purpose only: in order to establish a nation for Hashem.

The Rambam states in *Moreh Nevuchim* (III:51) that the only purpose our *Avos* and *Imahos* expressed for having children was that they “create a people who would know and worship Hashem.” Their declared intent was solely *lesheim Shamayim*. Avraham *Avinu* enjoyed great wealth, recognition as a great military leader, respect as one of the intellectual giants of his time, and acclaim as a foremost orator with brilliant new ideas. Moreover, he was an established prophet of Hashem. What more can a man want? Nevertheless, Avraham complained to Hashem:

מה נתן לי ואנכי הולך ערירי

What [regarding all the gifts] did You give me, seeing I go childless (*Bereishis* 15:2).

Avraham wanted nothing more than to establish generations that would serve Hashem. Whatever applied to Avraham, was at least equally relevant to Sarah. When Rachel saw that she bore no children to Yaakov, she complained:

הבה-לי ואם אין מתה אנכי

Give me children, or else I shall die (*ibid.* 30:1).

Was Rachel merely being melodramatic? The Torah indicated that Yaakov became furious with her words (*ibid.* 30:2), and didn't commiserate with her plight (see Ramban *Bereishis* 30:1). Yaakov simply did not fully appreciate the degree to which Rachel wanted to be a part of the founding of the *Shivtei Kah*. Both the *Avos* and *Imahos* understood that *Klal Yisrael* would issue forth from them, but the *Imahos* perhaps yearned for it more. They enjoyed a natural instinct for children — for nation building. They directed this natural yearning *lechvod Shamayim* — for the Glory of Heaven. The *Imahos* did not seek to compete with the *Avos* for greatness, they sought to achieve greatness in their own ways. They understood that they could accomplish much in ways which men could not. They devoted themselves to establishing a nation to serve Hashem.

As is evidenced from the aforementioned passage in Ruth, all recognized that the credit for building *Klal Yisrael* goes to the *mesiras nefesh* of Rachel and Leah (Rashi, *Bereishis* 31:4). Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah passed this tradition down to their daughters throughout the generations. When Miriam, as well as the other women of her time, lobbied their fathers and husbands to return to a normal home life, they were following the traditions handed down by Rachel and Leah. Hashem recognized their idealism and proclaimed that “as a reward for the righteous women of that generation our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.”

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