

By the Virtue of Righteous Women

By Harav Yaakov Medan

I

The obligation of women to drink the four cups of wine at the Pesach *seder* is explained by R. Yehoshua ben Levi with the argument that “they too were included in that miracle” (*Pesachim*108a). Rashi and the Rashbam (ad loc.) explain that the women participated in the miracle of Pesach in an active manner, and not merely as “people who were redeemed”:

“For they too were included in that miracle” – As we say (*Sota* 11b): As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation, the Israelites were delivered.

The Talmudic passage in *Sota* (to which Rashi and Rashbam refer) teaches that the redemption of Pesach was actualized by virtue of the righteous women living in that generation. The *gemara* there brings the view of R. Avira that although the men were downtrodden by servitude and had given up on the future, the women ensured the continuity of the Jewish people:

R. Avira expounded: As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation, the Israelites were delivered from Egypt. When they went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fishes should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fishes. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field, and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had relations with them among the sheepfolds... After the women had conceived, they returned to their homes; and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple-tree, as it is said, “Under the apple-tree I caused you to come forth...” (*Shir Hashirim* 8:5)... When the Egyptians noticed them, they went to kill them; but a miracle occurred on their behalf so that they were swallowed in the ground, and [the Egyptians] brought oxen and ploughed over them, as it is said, “The plowers plowed upon my back...” (*Tehillim* 129:3). After they had departed, [the Israelite women with their babies] broke through [the earth] and came forth like the herbage of the field, as it is said, “I caused you to multiply as the bud of the field” (*Yechezkel* 16:7). And when [the babies] had grown up, they came in flocks to their homes, as it is said, “And you did increase and wax great and did come with ornaments” (ibid.) — read not “with ornaments” [*ba-adi adayim*] but “in flocks” [*be-edrei adarim*].

According to R. Avira, the women’s righteousness found primary expression in the efforts they made to ensure reproduction. It seems to me that R. Avira’s *derasha* can be anchored in the plain sense of the biblical verses.

In the exodus from Egypt, it was God Himself who delivered Israel with “a waking from above” – “I Myself

and not an agent.” Nevertheless, if there is any human being who deserves even the slightest credit for that redemption, it is certainly Moshe Rabbeinu. As we all know, Moshe Rabbeinu was a man; how then are women connected to the deliverance of Israel?

A rudimentary examination of the biography of Moshe already provides a clear answer to our question. The person who hides Moshe from the death sentence proclaimed by the Egyptians is his mother, and not his father; it is his sister who builds an ark for him and sends him out in it on the Nile, even though the common practice is for men to build such things; it is his sister who stands among the reeds in order to watch over the ark, and it is she who displays cunning and resourcefulness when she calls for a nursemaid “from the Hebrews” at just the right moment. Without a doubt, then, the characters who play the most important role in saving Moshe’s life are his sister and his mother, Miriam and Yocheved.

The third character who plays a role in the saving of Moshe from Pharaoh’s decree is Pharaoh’s daughter, who raises Moshe in Pharaoh’s house. Later, when Moshe returns to Egypt after his extended exile in Midian, it is his wife Tzipora who saves him from the angel when she circumcises her son.

Clearly, then, although it was indeed Moshe who redeemed Israel from Egypt, without the resourcefulness of righteous women, where would Moshe have been? As in the Talmudic accounts about R. Akiva and Rachel and about R. Meir and Beruria, it is precisely women who gave expression to hope and faith in times of crisis.

II

Let us now shift our focus from Moshe the individual to Israel as a whole.

The Torah seems to emphasize the fact that the people of Israel as a whole were saved only by virtue of the deeds of women. I refer, of course, to the two figures who stand out among the gray mass of slaves subjugated to the Egyptians – the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Pu’ah.

Three important lessons may be learned from the conduct of the midwives. First, we witness the simple humanity and natural morality that are expressed in the midwives’ refusal to participate in the killing of the newborns. Second, we learn that murder is one of the prohibitions for which one must give up one’s life rather than commit the transgression, for were it not for the midwives’ cunning answer, Pharaoh would have had them executed. Third, Shifra and Pu’ah established the first underground in history of a slave-nation rising up against its subjugators. I wish to expand upon this third point.

According to the Ibn Ezra, Shifra and Pu’ah’s actions guided many other midwives in their proud struggle

against the enemy's decree. This underground did not engage in espionage or the blowing up of bridges, but rather in incomparable acts of bravery akin to the rescue of comrades trapped under enemy fire. It was here that the real battle for freedom began, with the deliverance of the will of the people of Israel, and it was this that gave birth to the exodus from Egypt. The inner freedom that was expressed in the deeds of the midwives is what made it possible for the physical deliverance of Israel to follow in its wake.

III

Moshe's character reveals itself already in his first two public appearances. In his first appearance, Moshe sees that "there is no man" and strikes the Egyptian oppressor and rescues the Hebrew slave. In his second appearance, Moshe preaches his essential teaching to the Hebrew whom he encounters: "Why do you smite your fellow?" Many generations will pass until Moshe's great successor – R. Akiva – would establish Moshe's actions as his essential teaching: "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" – this is a great principle in the Torah." This is the man whom God chose to deliver the Torah to Israel.

As we have seen, however, Moshe's actions were undoubtedly influenced by those righteous women who surrounded him from the moment of his conception and birth – righteous women by whose virtue the people of Israel were delivered.

Visit our website: <http://vbm-torah.org>