

Parshat Shemot: Lights Amidst the Nations— Righteous Gentiles in Parshat Shemot

By Yael Turitz Kaplan, Class of 2027

The gemara in Sota 11b tells us: “In the merit of righteous women in that generation, the Jews were saved from Egypt.” And yet, when we begin the epic story of the exodus in Parshat Shemot with a list of names, women are absent from the list. What women is the gemara talking about? On what merit did they help bring the Jews out of slavery? In Masechet Sota, the gemara goes on to tell us about the women of Bnei Yisrael who persisted in having children despite Pharaoh’s decree to kill all baby boys, a famous midrash on this week’s parsha. But I’d like to posit that perhaps four of the women in whose merit the Jews were saved from Egypt appear in the parsha itself.

The first are the midwives, Shifra and Puah, who refuse to obey Pharaoh’s orders to kill the newborn sons of Hebrew women. Despite the danger to their own lives, these two women choose to ignore direct orders because “the midwives feared God” (Exodus 1:17). The third woman who boldly defies Pharaoh’s authority is his own daughter, who sees baby Moshe in his basket on the river and knows immediately that this is a Hebrew baby (Exodus 2:6). Despite the danger, she chooses to raise the child as her own in Pharaoh’s household. And finally, the fourth woman in this parsha who acts righteously is Moshe’s new wife, Tzipporah. While Moshe and his family are on their way to Egypt to begin the exodus, they come face-to-face with death for reasons that are unclear in the text of the Torah. Nevertheless, Tzipporah seems to understand what the problem is, and she immediately circumcises her son and saves Moshe’s life (Exodus 4:25).

What’s fascinating about each of these meritorious women is that they are not necessarily members of Bnei Yisrael. The Torah tells us that Shifra and Puah are “m’yaldot ha’ivriyot,” which can be translated either as “the Hebrew midwives” or “the midwives of the Hebrews.” The midrash famously posits that these women are actually Yocheved and Miriam, Moshe’s mother and sister (Shemot Rabbah 1:13), but what if they were Egyptian women who took a bold stance and risked their own lives to save a people they didn’t even belong to? The next woman we encounter in the parsha certainly falls into this category: the princess of Egypt has no stake in the lives of Israelite baby boys, and yet she chooses to put her own life in danger to save Moshe’s. And in the strange scene on the way to Egypt, it is Tzipporah, Moshe’s Midianite wife, who acts to save the day.

Could the gemara in Sota be speaking of these women as well as to the brave Israelite women who refused to stop having children? There’s an interesting discussion in Masechet Chullin (92a) about a verse in Parshat Vayeshev from the butler’s dream as described to Yosef in jail. In the dream, there were three branches on the vine from which the butler plucked grapes (Genesis 40:10). The Rabbis in the gemara try to expound what these three branches may represent, and one explanation is as follows: “Rava says: These three branches are the three ministering angels appointed to oversee the gentiles, who plead in favor of the Jewish people in each and every generation.”

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A classic read of this interpretation might be that the three angels who oversee the gentile nations are the ones pleading on behalf of the Jewish people. But perhaps we can read it as referring to three angels who oversee those among the gentiles who plead in favor of the Jewish people in each and every generation? The implication of this would be that in every generation, there are people outside of the nation in whose merit we prosper; that we can indeed be saved via the merit of non-Jews. And in the Exodus story, those non-Jews take center stage.

So many moments in the Exodus story would not have happened without the help of people outside of Bnei Yisrael. The four women in this week's parsha are prime examples of this; without each of their brave choices to do what was right in the face of injustice, Moshe Rabbenu would not have been born, nor would he have survived long enough to carry out his mission of leading Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. Parshat Shemot marks the beginning of the Exodus story, the pivotal narrative that establishes the Jewish people as a nation devoted to God and to Torah. But none of it would have happened without these women, these outsiders. And so it is in the merit of these women, too, that the Jewish people were saved from Egypt.

No individual can carry the burden of life's challenges alone. We must recognize that we often need help, even in pivotal moments of forging our very identities and charting a path forward. And sometimes, help comes from unexpected places, or even from places or people we've cast off as too different to understand us, or too foreign to be of any help. But as the non-Israelite women in Parshat Shemot show us, everyone has something to offer and wisdom to bring. It is our job to graciously accept help from wherever it may stem as a zechut—and perhaps then, we too can merit redemption.

Yael Turitz Kaplan is originally from Silver Spring, Maryland. She is passionate about Jewish education and wants to help make Torah accessible and inspiring for the next generation. Yael comes to Maharat after 4 years of working as a special education teacher at The Shefa School. While there, Yael earned a masters in special education and Jewish education from Touro College, and she holds a BA in religion from Barnard College.