

Elisheva Runs
a midrashic story

By Howard Zilber

Nearest to her were the Israelites, her people. They were jubilant. Four hundred years of slavery, and now they were free. There was much laughter and shouting. Not so far from her: the Egyptians. In every home someone was dead, as a result of the tenth plague. There was screaming, and wailing, and cursing of many gods. So Elisheva laughed. Elisheva cried.

“Hurry up, Elisheva.”

It was Aaron who wanted to marry her, Aaron, Moses’s brother.

“I need to say goodbye to my friends.”

“Why do you bother with this silly girl?” Miriam asked her brother.

Elisheva ignored her. She wanted to comfort her Egyptian friends but was hesitant to let her full feelings show to Aaron whose back told the story of slavery’s cruelty in hieroglyphs inscribed by whip.

“Well hurry. When the bread is baked, we’re leaving.”

“The dough is being formed,” Elisheva called over her shoulder. “By the time it rises and is baked I’ll be back.”

Just as she was about to leave the camp she ran into her brother Nashon.

“All Israel is facing east and you are heading west,” Nashon teased. “Why must you always be different?”

“The same reason you always have to be reckless.”

It was true. When they were kids Nashon was the first to climb a pyramid and wildly run down.

“Just hurry, sister.”

She did hurry toward her friend’s house. When she entered Hent was sobbing. Her brother Bek had been first born. Elisheva had always liked Bek. When they were young he had made toys for the younger children, little figures and carts that he gave to his sister, and to Elisheva, and to baby brother Yuni. Elisheva feared that Hent would now hate her. But Hent thought all gods were capricious. And she loved her friend.

“Eli, do you remember the time Bek...”

“Sheva do you remember the time Bek...”

And while a servant prepared Bek’s body with fragrant spices, the lazy Egyptian sun nudged the sundial a few degrees.

Elisheva knew she should leave, but she listened to Hent’s stories, and added a few of her own. But what she could not say, though she tried, is that her first girlish love had been for Bek.

Meanwhile, Moses had insisted on haste, baking the bread before the dough rose. Aaron pleaded with him to wait. So did Nashon. But Pharaoh had changed his mind so many times. Moses feared the Egyptians would attack.

So while Elisheva consoled her friend, the Israelites departed with their wafers some wit had already dubbed: the Bread of Affliction. Elisheva was about to excuse herself when Hent’s father, General Merkha, returned home with his son Yuni, from a meeting with Pharaoh.

When she was younger there had been a race for girls. Israelites were not permitted to enter. But Elisheva loved to run. Most Israelites didn’t look too different from the Egyptians, but Elisheva was one of those rare Israelites with light hair and skin. With henna and kohl she did her best to disguise herself.

Elisheva was a gazelle: graceful, swift, and confident. She won the race. Hent finished second. General Merkha was to award the prize. When he looked at Elisheva, he noticed the henna and kohl in her sweat. He would have disqualified her had he not detected the pleading stare from his daughter. Instead of unmasking her, Merkha placed the golden pomegranate necklace over Elisheva’s head.

So when General Merkha entered his house he was not surprised to see Elisheva. He was even pleased. He knew she was helping his daughter deal with her loss. But he did insist on detaining her. Soldiers were scouring the streets for Israelite stragglers.

“I can disguise myself.”

“Those tricks are well known,” Merkha replied. “Better to stay here with us until the mood is less vengeful.”

Yuni wanted to add that Elisheva should stay with them permanently, but as often happened the beautiful Elisheva intimidated him.

For several days Elisheva stayed with the family. Almost every day General Merkha had another meeting with Pharaoh. One day he came home agitated.

“Pharaoh will not accept the loss of his chattel. He plans to pursue them and kill them or bring them back.”

“My people have a several day head start,” Elisheva stammered.

“Yes,” began the General, “but Pharaoh has horses. When the Israelites reach the sea, we will attack before they can build bridges.”

“I must warn them,” Elisheva said.

“Anyone who sees you will kill you,” Hent implored.

“I will run at night.”

Merkha knew that Elisheva loved Egyptian music, and art, and people. He trusted her to help her people without hurting his. He said his farewell to her.

Hent packed a large bag for her friend filled with dried fish and fruit. She was about to bake her some bread as the sun was beginning to set.

“I need to run all night. Don’t let the dough rise.”

Hent was perplexed. “If I bake this all you’ll get are brittle crackers.”

Elisheva laughed. “It will be lighter. It will also remind me of how much your people have suffered.”

The moon rose, Elisheva kissed her friend, and began to run. Yuni cried as he watched his first golden love receding in the moonlight.

Elisheva’s thoughts were scattered. They raced back to her friend. They raced forward to her people. But then as always happened, she became one with her running. The leap, the stride, the landing and then the leap again. The leap, the stride, the landing, and then the leap again. The rhythm repeated over and over, hypnotically reproducing itself under the stars she could never count. It became a kind of music and she started to sing.

With the unselfconsciousness of a bird she sang Hebrew songs and Egyptian songs. She sang of love, hot as the sun, cool as the moon. And she never tired. Her voice was proof there was breath enough in her. Her legs were proof there was strength enough in her. She was swift, but with a swiftness that could be sustained for a night, for several nights.

When there was pink in the eastern sky she would find a place to sleep through the blazing day. When orange tinged the western sky she would run again. And this rhythm of orange and pink, day and night, was like the rhythm of her breathing, only slower.

On the first night a raven approached her.

“Turn back,” it said, “before you is darkness so thick you will drown in it.”

But Elisheva continued to run. On the second night a dove approached her.

“Turn back,” it said. “Behind you is goodness and light.”

But Elisheva continued to run. On the third night there was a second, silent, hovering dove.

“Well, what do you want,” Elisheva demanded.

“The black birds and the white, we all come from God,” came the mysterious reply.

Elisheva detected a slight warming of the light. For a moment she thought it was dawn but realized it was behind her. The Egyptians had caught up to her and were making camp. Elisheva sneaked back, hid behind a rock, and listened as General Merkha spoke to his men.

“Our nation has suffered much struggling with this strange Hebrew God. We have seen locusts eat our crops. We have scratched at bleeding boils. We have stumbled in the darkness. We have watched our loved ones die. Perhaps you fear that we are defenseless against this invisible God. But don’t forget that Pharaoh too is a God. You have seen the pyramids. They testify to our strength and permanence. Tomorrow we will reach the Hebrew camp. We will capture them if we can. We will kill them if we must. If the gods have other plans we will die honorably as heroes. So go to sleep, dream of your wives, and awake prepared to fight.”

The men dispersed. Stealthily, Elisheva followed General Merkha into his tent.

“General, please spare my people.”

“Pharaoh commands. I only obey.”

“I must warn my people you are coming.”

“They have no weapons. I will not stop you.”

Elisheva left the tent. Yuni followed her.

“Sheva, please turn back,” he stammered, “In a year I’ll be old enough to marry you.”

Elisheva took off the golden pomegranate necklace she won in her first race.

“Yuni,” she began, “Please go home and give this to Hent. It’s hers now.”

“My father will think I’m a coward.”

“My little bird, if you do this, I will never forget you.”

She handed him the necklace and ran.

She ran, and she ran, and she ran. The sound of her feet on the desert floor was like a drum urging her on. She ran past stones. She raced past the moon. It was sliding under the horizon when the first rose of dawn revealed the sea.

Moses stood at the front. Behind him were his siblings Miriam and Aaron. Elisheva also saw her brother Nashon.

Then she heard the pounding of horse hooves on the desert floor. She looked behind her and saw Pharaoh's army.

"Aaron, press forward," she shouted, "The army is on the way."

But Aaron didn't move. Neither did any of the others. They were transfixed by the sea, with its deep, swirling currents.

"Aaron, step forward," she shouted again.

Aaron had been brave enough to face Pharaoh. But the sea looked mightier than Pharaoh.

As the Egyptians sped closer, Elisheva could hear the people murmuring while Moses prayed. There was very little time left.

"Nashon, you are foolish enough. Step into the sea."

Nashon haltingly placed a foot in the water.

What happened next was hard to believe, even for those who saw it. Like blades of grass in the wind, the sea parted. To the left of the Israelites: a wall of water. To the right of the Israelites: a wall of water. And between those two walls a corridor.

Nashon, Aaron, Moses and Miriam began to walk toward the other side. Feeling as if they were in a dream the others followed. They were just beginning to approach the other side when General Merkha and his men reached the water.

"General, go home. This is a miracle from God," Elisheva shouted. "You will not bring them back."

"I would rather die as a soldier than live as a coward."

General Merkha entered the corridor followed by his men. They were standing between the walls when those walls collapsed. The sea was again the sea, only a fiercer, raging sea. Horses thrashed but to no avail. Men tried to swim but each stroke led to deeper confusion. There was screaming and anguish. Then there was less screaming. Then there was only silent drowning and a sea littered with corpses, equine and human.

Elisheva did not know how to swim. She ran into the water. She ran until the water was up to her neck, and then without knowing how, she found herself swimming among the dead.

She remembered a story her mother told her about Noah's brother, one of the last to die, swimming from body to body scavenging for food and fresh water.

She was almost to the other side when she saw General Merkha. Never before did he so seem to resemble his son Bek, Elisheva's first love. Her tiny personal tears fell into the murderous sea generating ripples so small they looked ridiculous. Elisheva

laughed. Elisheva cried. Then she uttered a prayer for Merkha and Bek, and stepped on to the shore.

She was shocked to hear Moses leading the people in song.

“God is my strength and my might

Egypt in darkness has drowned

We seek light

So to Israel in triumph we’ll climb

Our guide is our God

And our God is sublime”

Then Miriam and the women picked up the tune adding tambourines and dance.

Elisheva blurted out, “How can you dance when so many will be mourning?”

Miriam shot back at her, “When the people feel joy, *you* must feel joy.”

“I do feel joy but it is a heavy, sorrowful joy.”

Then Miriam turned to Aaron and asked, “How can you marry this foolish child?”

Elisheva stared hard at Miriam, while Aaron only managed to mumble in reply.

Elisheva was disappointed, but then thought a little weakness might not be such a bad thing in a husband. She found that funny. But she didn’t laugh.