

## Comments on Parshat Shemot by Cheryl Vogel

The book of Shemot is a sharp contrast to the book of Beraishit. Where Beraishit was about the birth of the nation of Bnei Yisrael, Shemot is about its survival. I'd like to focus this dvar torah on the role of the women of Beraishit and Shemot in the birth and survival of the nation.

The matriarchs Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah, are merited with giving birth to those who would eventually go to Egypt and as this parsha says "they were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong—very, very much so; and the land became filled with them." But this population increase did not come easily to the matriarchs. Each of them had their struggles with fertility. As we know, Sarah did not give birth to Yitzchak until she was 90. In Parshat Toldot, Rivka is infertile, Yitzchak prays and God grants his prayers and Rivka conceives. It's not an easy pregnancy, as the Torah says "The children agitated inside her." With Rachel and Leah, Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, yet she was infertile. Leah, however, got pregnant easily, as it says "God saw that Leah was unloved, so he opened her womb." And indeed she has four sons in succession. Eventually Rachel does conceive, gives birth to Yosef, but dies in childbirth with Binyamin. Eventually, Leah experiences infertility as well.

With each matriarch, prayer and divine intervention led to their ability to bear children and build the nation. It was not easy for them and nothing was taken for granted. There was no medical protocol for infertility then. The budding nation was built on prayer and faith in God.

The women of Sefer Shemot are no less heroic than the Matriarchs. Where the Matriarchs were concerned with procreation and fulfilling the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that they become a great nation, The women of Shemot were concerned with the survival of the nation.

The women of shemot were born into a culture of slavery. Bnei Yisrael had previously lived well in Egypt, having settled there during the reign of Yosef. Now, a new Pharaoh was in charge, one who was not aware of what Yosef had done for Egypt. Bnei Yisrael is now a populous group and Pharaoh fears them. Pharaoh puts them to work thinking it will stem their population growth. When that doesn't work, he tells the Jewish midwives to kill the male babies.

The midwives names were Shifra and Puah, and according to our Sages, this is Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moshe. Their faith, belief, and fear of God forced them to ignore Pharaoh's decree. Pharaoh called them back and admonished them, but they replied that the babies come so fast, that they are born before the midwives can get there. God rewards the midwives' devotion by continuing the Jewish population explosion, and making Yocheved the matriarch of the Kohanim and Levi'im and Miriam an ancestor of David.

Then we read about the birth of Moses. Yocheved is able to hide him for three months, but when she is no longer able to hide him, she sets him afloat on the river. With Miriam watching from the river bank, Pharaoh's daughter discovers the basket and realizes he must be a Jewish baby. Miriam comes forward, offering to find a wet nurse for the baby. Indeed, the wet nurse is Yocheved, his mother. This was

another reward for Yocheved saving the Jewish babies. The Torah says that Yocheved “took the boy, and nursed him. The boy grew up and [Yocheved] brought him to Bat Pharaoh” who raised him as a son.

It is unclear how long Moshe stayed with his family, but clearly he stayed with Yocheved and Amram until he was weaned, and for the early years of his life. Some say he was even as old as twenty. However old he was, he lived with his birth family long enough to learn the culture of the Jewish people and to teach him the sensitivity and compassion necessary to become the leader of his people.

The Midrash tells us that had it not been for Miriam, Moshe might not have been born. Yocheved and Amram had separated, not taking a chance on producing a son that would be subject to Pharaoh's decree. But Miriam implored them to reunite, saying that their separation was preventing ANY child from being born. Yocheved and Amram remarried, and after that, Moshe was born. Later in Sefer Bamidbar, when Miriam dies, the Torah tells us that the waters dried up. Our sages learned from this that a well followed Miriam through Bnei Yisrael's journeys, and there was always water. Surely water is necessary for survival, even more so in the desert.

We don't know much about Miriam's family life; the Torah does not mention it. She is never mentioned as a wife or a mother, though some sources say that she married Hur, and some sources say she married Calev and Hur was her son. In any case, my feeling is that the fact that she is not described as a wife or mother (as our matriarchs were) shows that her main role was in the survival of Bnei Yisrael.

As Moshe lives in Pharaoh's house he remains a Jew, even when surrounded by the Anti-Israelite decrees and attitudes of Pharaoh. After Moshe flees to Midian, he meets Zipporah at the well, after saving her and her sisters from shepherds. He marries Zipporah and they have two sons. After his conversation with God at the burning bush, Moshe prepares his family for the journey back to Egypt. Moshe's newborn son is uncircumcised, and Moshe seems more concerned with the journey than with circumcising his son. So Zipporah takes it upon herself to perform the brit milah. Zipporah knows the importance of bringing the baby into the covenant at the appointed time.

When Moshe was called upon by God to lead the Jewish people to freedom, a conversation ensued about his own worthiness for the job. Why me? I can't speak well. But when the women of Shemot saw a job to be done, they didn't wait or hesitate; they jumped in and did the dirty work without deliberation.

Indeed, Moshe and Aharon did the heavy lifting when it came to dealing with Pharaoh and the ultimate redemption from slavery, but the women of Shemot, Yocheved, Miriam, and Zipporah, were the ones who were responsible for the survival of Jewish babies and the perpetuation of Jewish culture and mitzvot, and ultimately the entire Jewish nation.

Shabbat Shalom.