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**Parshat Sh'mot**  
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Shabbat shalom. I hope I need no introduction, but I'm Noam Andelman.

Today's parsha is Sh'mot. You all already know the story of the Hebrews' descent into slavery and Moshe's life, so I won't recap it now. Suffice it to say that some very dramatic events happen. But I'm not going to talk about those.

While Eema and I were studying the parsha, I noticed that, even though the story focuses on Moshe, there are many women who play key roles. These include: the midwives Shifra and Puah; Moshe's mother Yocheved; his sister Miriam; his foster mother, Pharaoh's daughter; and his wife Tzipporah. In a male-dominated text like the Torah, this is an extraordinary number of women. Even more noticeable, all of these women except for Pharaoh's daughter are given names. (The rabbis later name Pharaoh's daughter Batya.) I found this intriguing and wanted to examine these women further.

Upon further reflection, I realized that they have something in common. They all save lives, most of them at risk of their own lives.

Let's look more closely:

*The midwives* disobey Pharaoh's command to kill the male babies even though they might be punished. The text says that they act out of "fear of God." Some sources say that the midwives are really Yocheved and Miriam. I prefer the opinion of several other sources who argue that they are Egyptian women. Despite being surrounded by people who blindly obey Pharaoh, Shifra and Pu'ah insist on doing what's right, risking their lives for people who are unlike themselves, who are at the very bottom of society.

According to a midrash, *Yocheved* and Amram, Miriam and Aaron's parents, get divorced to avoid having more children who may be killed. Encouraged by Miriam, though, Yocheved and Amram take the courageous step to remarry and have more children. As we read in the Torah, once Moshe is born, Yocheved hides him, at great risk to her own life. When this is no longer possible, she makes the painful decision to put Baby Moshe in the Nile, and she also endures the pain of giving him up a second time after she has been his nurse, knowing that a royal life will be safest for him.

*Miriam's* first big move is to convince her parents to remarry, arguing that they can at least have daughters, and, in her first act as a prophet, foretelling that their new child will save the Hebrews. In addition to ensuring that Moshe is born, Miriam also plays a key role in saving his life. She follows the floating basket, not knowing where it will take her. When Pharaoh's daughter Batya has Moshe in her arms, Miriam, thinking quickly, arranges for Yocheved to nurse her own son.

*Batya* has compassion on Moshe even though he is a Hebrew, the child of a slave. I would like to believe that she feels that way for all of the slaves, that she disagrees with her father's policies. (Some commentators believe that she later leaves Egypt with the Hebrews, trading her luxurious palace life for a hard life of travel.) We can imagine that she would have been punished if Pharaoh had learned Moshe's true origin.

*Tzipporah* is the key player in a very confusing story that happens when she, Moshe, and their two young sons are traveling to Egypt, per God's command. God, or an angel, appears and tries to kill someone, either Moshe or their baby Eliezer. Tzipporah saves the day by quickly circumcising Eliezer. The sources don't discuss how Tzipporah knew that this act would solve the problem. What we do know is that Tzipporah's creativity and decisive action saves the life of her loved one.

All of these brave women find themselves in situations where people's lives are in danger. They boldly step in, thinking quickly and taking action, often at risk of their own lives. Someone else in this parsha also has to sacrifice and take risks in order to save others. This person, of course, is Moshe. The difference between Moshe's situation and those of the women mentioned above, however, is that Moshe doesn't have to decide what to do but rather whether or not to obey God's commands.

Consider, for example, the scene at the burning bush. Moshe does not wake up one day and think, "All those Hebrews are being oppressed by the Egyptians. Maybe I should go help them." Instead, God tells him to go. God also teaches Moshe miracles and even promises to tell him exactly what to say.

I don't know about you, but if God visited me and asked me to do something, I would say, "Yes, God. Whatever you say, God." Instead, Moshe protests repeatedly. The midrash says that God tries to convince Moshe for a whole week and also suggests that Moshe chooses to bring his young family on the trip in order to stall for time.

Looking at the parsha, I see two models of decision-making. We can call one the Burning Bush model, in which God tells you exactly what to do, and you just have to decide whether to comply. We can call the other one the Best Guess model, in which God is in the background, and you have to recognize problems on your own and decide what actions to take.

The nice thing about the Burning Bush model is that you don't have to think about pros and cons, consequences, or even whether what you're doing is right. Just look at Moshe. From the burning bush on, for 40 years, God tells him almost everything that he should say or do, down to tiny details - pick up the stick, put down the stick, say these words, take this path through the desert, attack these enemies. Occasionally Moshe does need to decide how to act, such as when God threatens to destroy all the Hebrews in the desert, but most of the time he just has to do what God says.

Unfortunately, burning bushes are hard to find these days. We would all be very lucky if God told us what to do even once in our whole lives. Instead, we have to use the Best Guess model, like all the women in this parsha.

Luckily, not every decision we make is a Best Guess kind of decision. Even without God's directions, we have tools that can guide us. There are role models like this parsha's women and other personalities throughout our traditional sources. There are rules like halacha, government laws, and social contracts. And there are many modern role models as well, including Martin Luther King, Junior, who risked his life to change what was wrong in our society.

In my life as a Jewish adult, I will usually be able to use these aids for guidance. For example, I will wear t'fillin and a tallit, continue to celebrate shabbat and Jewish holidays, and take on more roles in shabbat services, like I did today. I will donate 10% of my bar mitzvah gifts to Cradles to Crayons (which helps poor children) and to Mazon (a hunger-relief organization). The canned food that you will see at lunch will be donated to a local food pantry.

Now that I'm bar mitzvah, I'm also taking on a bar mitzvah project. I will learn how to cook more and then volunteer with the Chesed Committee to provide meals to people who need them.

Those choices are not that complicated. However, I know that I will sometimes have to face a hard decision with no clear answers. In today's parsha, we learn that you can't always rely on divine direction. But we also learn that that's OK. The women of Sh'mot are good, smart, quick-thinking, and brave. They care about others and use their intuition and their values to challenge authority and do what they think is right.

Under the Burning Bush model, Moshe sometimes finds it difficult to follow God's commands. The Best Guess model is that much harder because we have to face uncertainty and weigh the consequences of our actions, without the guidance of an all-knowing and all-powerful deity. () When making my Best Guesses, I will try to remember the examples of Shifra, Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, Batya, and Tzipporah and, like them, do God's work even without direct instructions.

And if God happens to decide to help out by speaking to me personally, I plan to be ready for my Burning Bush moment!

Shabbat shalom.