

When we speak of the Jewish People, we refer to Jews before and after receiving the Torah, מתן תורה. What kind of Jew lived in Egypt? What was Jewish life like before מתן תורה? What did they stand for? What did it mean to be classified or identified as a Jew? Did the Jews in Egypt have similar problems to those we face today, such as assimilation?

Apparently there were many assimilated Jews in Egypt, as Rashi points out (פרשת (בשלח ד"ה וחמושים), either 1/5 or 1/50 left Egypt. The rest were apparently comfortable in Egypt, assimilated and disappeared. Only a small group joined Moshe on the journey to become the עם הנבחר. The Torah simply hints about this majority, but does not dwell on their story. The Midrash tells us that many Jews in Egypt had scrolls, which probably contained ספר בראשית. On their days of rest they would assemble in homes to read and discuss these scrolls. The exodus from Egypt did not begin with Moshe. Moshe completed the miracle. The Jews' faith in Gd's promise of redemption was not just incidental. They waited anxiously for it and sacrificed to preserve their identity as Jews till Hashem fulfilled פקד פקדתי.

ויילך איש מבית לוי ויקח את בת לוי. בית לוי means the tribe of Levi. בית לוי were the vigilant guardians of Jewish life and its continuity in Egypt before the arrival of Moshe. The word בית indicates responsibility, as they were the leaders of the generation. Amram and Yocheved belonged to this group that resisted Pharaoh's attempt to assimilate the Jews. שבט לוי guarded against assimilation to ensure fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham in ברית בין הבתרים.

Hashem rewarded the Jewish midwives with בתים. What does בתים mean? ויעש להם בתים means Hashem entrusted the leadership of the Jewish community to the midwives and gave them authority to lead and teach the masses in Egypt. According to Chazal, the midwives were Yocheved and Miriam.

The importance of their role in the progression towards the exodus can be glimpsed through Miriam's role. When Pharaoh decreed that all male Jewish children must be put to death while all female children would live, In reaction to this decree, Amram divorced his wife. He decided it was futile to bring children into the world only to be killed immediately. Why go through the pain of having a child they would never have an opportunity to raise. He admitted defeat and was committing the equivalent of national suicide. Miriam's leadership came to the fore when she accused her father of being more cruel than Pharaoh because his policy meant there would be no male or female Jewish children. The Midrash says when Amram was forced to surrender Moshe he slapped Miriam and said

"What has become of your prophecy? We had a beautiful child who now we must surrender, just as I said would happen years ago".

Miriam never lost hope. She lingered around the waters of the Nile to observe what would happen to Moshe because she felt personally responsible for him. The Torah tells us, through the subsequent events, that Miriam was correct. Miriam's leadership is evident again after קריעת ים סוף when she led the women in song praising Hashem. She is described as the prophetess, sister of Aaron, If not for her, it is possible that the exodus would not have taken place. Where Moshe was the leader when they left Egypt. Miriam was the leader before he emerged on the scene. This leadership role was the בָּתִּים that Hashem rewarded Yocheved and Miriam with.

In פרשת שמות, Gd charges Moshe with the mission to tell Pharaoh to release the people and tell them their long nightmare of enslavement is ending as Gd remembered them as promised. Based on his prior experience with the people, Moshe was not sure they would be receptive of this message of imminent redemption. They would not accept that he, Moshe, had been sent to lead them from Egypt to the Promised Land. Gd replied that they would believe him, as their attitude changed over time. They were prepared for redemption under the leadership of Miriam and Yocheved. Leadership was stripped from Amram because he could not see the future of the Jewish nation. It was given to Yocheved and Miriam who foresaw that the Jewish People would survive and made every effort, at great personal risk, to save the lives of the newborn male children.

Why did Pharaoh command the midwives to kill the male children in a clandestine way? Why didn't he simply issue an order to exterminate them that would send a strong message to his people? In fact that is exactly what he did later when he decreed that all male children, Jew and Egyptian, be drowned in the Nile. Why use the midwives to do his dirty work?

Enemies of the Jews were not content with merely oppressing the Jew. They sought to discredit him in the eyes of the world, to prove the Jew subhuman and an immoral being, undeserving of sympathy. The Nazis ימ"ש selected and assembled Jews in the finest halls in Poland, They were instructed to dress in fine clothing, and were provided sumptuous food. They provided an orchestra and instructed the Jews to dance. The Nazi photographers would record these events and after the performance, these Jews were dispatched to the death camps. After the war the Nazi motives were revealed. Their intention was to discredit the Jew

as sub-human and unworthy of pity by crafting a narrative that they were indifferent to the suffering of their brethren. Only a callous sub-human could partake of banquets while their brethren were suffering in Treblinka. Pharaoh attempted to use the same tactic and discredit Yocheved and Miriam. A midwife's role is to protect the mother and newborn child. Pharaoh sought to portray the Jewish midwives as the murderers of the Jewish children they were supposed to protect. He expected Yocheved and Miriam to obey his orders out of fear of incurring his wrath. Pharaoh would then claim the midwives killed the children because they realized that the children were as sub-human, like the midwives themselves. The midwives recognized Pharaoh's plan and, under the penalty of death, demonstrated their leadership when they refused to implement his nefarious intention.

When Pharaoh's daughter opened the box and saw Moshe, the Torah says ותראהו את הילד, she saw somebody besides the child (see Rashi). Why didn't it use the simpler form of the verb, ותרא? How did she know this was a Jewish child? After all, Pharaoh decreed that all boys, Jewish and Egyptian, should be cast into the Nile. Apparently Pharaoh's daughter had a conscience and she did not agree with her father's decrees. Presumably Pharaoh decreed that aiding the Jewish children was a capital offense, yet his daughter had the moral character to rebel against her father's signature policy and let the child live.

Pharaoh's daughter like other great leaders had the ability to recognize genius and greatness and know how to nourish it. Pharaoh who appointed Joseph as prime minister had this talent. He recognized Joseph's interpretation was appropriate while that of his advisors was not. He realized Joseph was the wisest man in the land and immediately appointed him as prime minister, the second most powerful man in the country. Pharaoh's daughter had this ability. When she opened the box she saw it, ותראהו, the Divine Countenance with Moshe, she immediately felt the great potential of this child radiating from that box. She questioned her father's motives: how could he consider this child sub-human and condemn him to death? She immediately dispatched Miriam to bring her a Jewish nursemaid.

Pharaoh's daughter instructed Yocheved to nurse the child and offered to pay her for her services. Likely she was not paid as the Torah does not record any payment when Yocheved brought him to the palace years later. Pharaoh's daughter realized this child was special and even if she raised him, she would never be his mother. She could never help him reach his true potential. Only his real Jewish mother, Yocheved, could accomplish that.

During the Holocaust, Jewish parents desperately entrusted their children to gentiles to save their lives. After the war, the adopting families refused to return the children to their natural parents. They claimed that they raised the children during the war and did not report them to the authorities. They convinced themselves they were entitled to keep them as their own. Unfortunately, many Jewish children were lost because their adoptive parents refused to recognize the Jewish children's true potential and destiny. Pharaoh's daughter made two extraordinary sacrifices. The first was rebelling against her father and saving Moshe's life. Her second was allowing Yocheved, his true mother, to raise Moshe to ensure he would reach his true potential and greatness.

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