

A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Va'eira

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing  
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi  
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth  
and **the thoughts of my heart**  
find favor before You, G-d,  
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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**Parashat Va'eira 5768  
Do You See What I See?**

One of the powerful things about studying the Bible is our ability to read between the lines as a source of inspiration and insight. There are many pivotal moments in the Exodus story that reaches out to us in a myriad of ways, leading us to understand our relationships to others, to ourselves, and to God in new and exciting ways. One such moment occurs when Miriam meets up with the Pharaoh's daughter while watching her brother float downstream on the Nile River in a "teiva," a basket, the same Hebrew word that describes what Noah built to save himself, his family, and the animals of the earth that he gathered together prior to the flood. Some would say that this meeting was a significant interfaith interaction that takes place on the banks of the Nile.

Rabbi Sandy Sasso, author of "God's Echo," a book of *midrashim* on the stories of the Bible, offers us a series of questions to help focus our attention on some of the details that were left out of the Biblical story, things that take place in the minds of the sages who try to answer for us some of the questions that we may have that take place behind the scenes, so to speak. She asks her readers:

"Sometimes we are like Moses and Miriam in the story, in need of an extended hand. Will we take the hand of the stranger, our presumed enemy?"

Sometimes we are like Pharaoh's daughter, in a position to offer help. When, where, and to whom will we extend our hand?"

But these are not the only questions that plague us. Prior to this scene we are told that the Pharaoh of Egypt made a decree that all of the Hebrew male children should be drowned in the

river upon birth. How could the Pharaoh's daughter defy such a decree when she saved what could only be a Hebrew baby, even if she considered it a gift from the gods? What possessed her to go to the river where the common folk bathed when she had slaves to bring water to the palace?

There is something unusual about the women of the Exodus story. First we encounter Shifra and Puah, Egyptian midwives, who defy the Pharaoh's decree. And now the Pharaoh's daughter does the same thing. The Bible rewards her by giving her the privilege of naming this special child whom she rescues. She calls him Moses, the "one who is drawn up." In Egyptian, the name Moses is attached to other names, designating that person as a "son." In our story, Moses is adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter as if she were her own son. However, she herself remains nameless. And so the sages try to rectify that by rewarding her bravery and her courage to defy her father by giving her the name "Batya," which means "daughter of God."

How did Batya survive her father's wrath of being the wayward child? Some say that she deceived her father by pretending to be pregnant for several months before presenting Moses into the court. Others claim that the Pharaoh believed her when she said that the male child was gift of the river god. Needless to say, these same sages were equally concerned about her fate when the angel of death passed through Egypt, since she was the first born to her mother. One midrash claims that she left Egypt with the Israelites. She later became the wife of Caleb from the tribe of Judah, one of two tribal leaders who scouted out the land of Canaan, promised to them by God, and who gave a positive report of what he saw, along with Joshua.

Names are powerful. They tell a story in and of themselves. And so aren't the silent parts of the Bible, the spaces between the words that are recorded and the ones that are left out. Rabbi Sasso asks, "What if the characters on the margins got to tell their own story?" Would Batya see her act of saving a child as an act of courage or was it merely her being defiant, caught between an overbearing father whose decrees she hated and the turmoil that was brewing inside of her as she struggled with her own sense of compassion and justice?

After being a mother to this child during those informative years when a child's psyche develops, was it God alone who gave Moses what was needed to stand up to the Pharaoh, or was it also the encouragement of a mother who knew better than her own father what it meant to be just and act kindly in this world? Each time that the Pharaoh hardened his heart to his grandson's pleas, he broke his own daughter's heart. As Rabbi Sasso concludes, it must have been Batya who taught her son the ultimate lesson of the Bible, "to love the stranger as yourself," hearkening back to his days as a child playing with the other royal Egyptian children in the Pharaoh's court.

Going back to the place where Batya drew Moses out of the water, let us imagine what happened as the handmaidens protested and Miriam looked on from a distance. Where do you place yourself in the story? Are you a handmaid who does what she is told – out of fear of retribution? Do you see yourself as Batya, a rebel who is interested in pursuing a cause? Do you identify with Moses who is the innocent one of the story? Or are you merely a bystander, sitting off to the side, content in being a witness for the time being?

Wherever you see yourself on this Shabbat and at this moment in time, may the story that you develop be a continuing source of strength as we each choose our paths in this world, struggling with our innermost beings, trying to determine what is good and what is right for us in our spiritual journeys through life.