

Yitro 5777

We Are All Righteous Women

I have been thinking a lot about women recently.

The early Rabbinic tradition, as it turns out, does so also; particularly about the role of women in the Exodus narrative we are reading. In the Babylonian Talmud we find the assertion, *bizkhut nashim tzadkaniot shehayu be-oto ha-dor nigalu yisrael mimitzrayim*.

It was by the merit of the righteous women of that generation that our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt. [BT Sotah 11b]

If we think for a moment about the meritorious women who populate the story of our people's journey from slavery to freedom, we can probably each identify more than one of them. They drive the Exodus narrative. (For proof, as we consider them, just imagine it without them.)

They fall into two basic categories. There are the women with names. The midwives Shifrah and Puah, whose refusal to obey Pharaoh's command saved countless Israelite boy babies. Yocheved, Moses' mother, who puts her baby in a casket in the river to save his life, only to end up being his wet-nurse and saving it in a way she had never anticipated. And Miriam, of course - Moses' sister, the one who ensured her mother's continuing care of her son, but who herself grew into a leader of the women of Israel on the shore of the Red Sea and who would one day challenge the fairness of her brother Moses' leadership. The challenge fails, but she remains in the story and her eventual death is deeply mourned by the emerging nation.

Less well known, but just as instrumental to the story through Midrash, is Serah the daughter of Asher. The Torah mentions her both at the descent of Jacob's family into Egypt and at the end of the Exodus narrative. The Rabbis infer that she lived through it all. It was she who reunited Moses with the bones of Joseph, buried in Egypt, to fulfil the oath with which Joseph had bound the people to return his bones to Canaan, and without which the people would not have been able to leave.

And then there are the anonymous women. Pharaoh's daughter, Moses' compassionate adoptive mother, is nameless in the Torah (though called Bitya by later tradition). And the women of Israel populate the background of the story, never quite silent, even though the various censuses only count the men.

But the most compelling appearance of anonymous women is not in the Torah at all, but in a skilful and richly symbolic Midrash first brought in the Talmud by one of its lesser known teachers, Rabbi Avira, to explain the very claim with which I opened this morning - *bizchut nashim tzadkaniot*. Let me summarize it:

When Pharaoh gave his decree that all the boy babies should be killed, the Israelite men stopped sleeping with their wives because they were frightened of what the results might be. When their wives went to draw water, the Holy Blessing One arranged for little fishes to enter their pitchers, so that they drew them up half full of water and half full of fish. They set two pots on the fire, one for the water and one for the fish, and carried the pots to their husbands. They washed them, and anointed them, and fed them, and gave them drink, and then gave themselves to them there among the sheepfolds. And when they knew they had conceived they went home, and when the time came for them to give birth they went and delivered their babies in the open field under the apple trees, and the Holy Blessing One sent them a midwife from the highest heavens to wash and straighten the limbs of the babies, and provided them a cake of oil and a cake of honey to sustain them. When the Egyptians saw them they tried to kill them; but by way of a miracle they were swallowed in the ground and the Egyptians brought oxen and ploughed over them. But after the Egyptians had left, they broke through the field and came forth like grass; and when the babies grew up, they came back to their homes in flocks. And when the Holy Blessing One revealed Godself at the sea, it was they who recognized God first...[BT Sotah 11b].

We should pay special attention to the qualities these women show. First, they intuit the disastrous nature of Pharaoh's decree. Second, they understand the climate of fear that it creates. And third - in collusion with God, it would appear - they compassionately work around both those things. In the gentlest of ways, they persuade their husbands back into their arms, and thus the 'hosts' of Israel which we read about last week, prefigured symbolically by the little fish in the pitchers, are created.

And the results are miraculous. The babies, cared for by an angel, resist all efforts to kill them, sprouting back into life like grass that can never be ploughed under. They return home, from where in due course they are delivered a second time, from slavery into freedom. And when God appears at the Red Sea, they are the ones who first understand the enormity of what is happening, as if they have inherited their mothers' intuition.

And thus, teaches Rabbi Avira, the righteous women of Israel saved the nation.

This year, as I read once more of the women of our tradition, I do so through the lens of the latest manifestation of women as a group in our contemporary narrative.

I am thinking, of course, of the Women's March a few weeks ago. I think we know that the march on Washington was not the only one. It grew into a phenomenon. All over the USA and all over the world - in Bolivia, in the Congo, all over Europe, in Indonesia, in Madagascar, Peru, Vietnam and Zimbabwe - groups of people gathered to support each other and make their voices heard. A number of you marched here, in New Orleans. One of you observed to me, *to have 10 or 15 thousand people marching here and it's not a parade...I don't think you realize how unique that is.*

And I gathered other impressions from those of you who went to Washington. You told me how necessary you felt it was to be there. You told me how you hardly marched in any physical sense, because it was so packed, but that it was peaceful, supportive, non-violent and never scary. It was multigenerational and multi-ethnic, and respectful. One of you told me that people you knew from multiple points of your life were there, that you felt as though everyone marching everywhere else in the world was with you, that you were one individual but part of a huge population, all of whose individual presence was essential.

I say 'individual' and not 'women.' Because all of you I spoke to noticed how many men were marching with you. Just about every photo I have seen has a man in it - sometimes with a sign, sometimes with a child, sometimes just being there.

Rabbi Ethan Tucker from Mechon Hadar recently wrote about the OU's latest statement on female clergy. He argues that when the Talmud refers to 'women' it's not talking about a biological or chromosomal category, but a sociological one. And I see the same phenomenon at work in the Women's March. As a matter of simple fact, it wasn't only a march for women. If so, then today we can all of us choose to emulate our ancestors.

What was it about those women that really got them the credit?

It's not that they were extra-specially heroic - though they were.

It's not that they 'stepped up' - though they did.

It was that they prioritized the needs of others over themselves. The midwives, Miriam, Yocheved, Serah, Pharaoh's daughter, the anonymous women in the fields - all of them saw past their own personal situations because they realized they needed to save others, to help others, to support others. Lack of self-interest is an indispensable moral quality in the ultimate creation of freedom.

If we needed proof - this morning we read the Ten Utterances of God at Mount Sinai. Every one of them that does not have to do with God or with the sanctification of time - and they are a minority - is about the way we should relate to others. It is our investment in our relationships, not our own theological convictions or the steadfastness with which we observe ritual, that decides our eventual moral trajectory.

It is unclear yet whether the Women's March has generated lasting outcomes. Will its participants found and lead new organizations of their own? Will they join and support existing organizations? Will they not join anything but quietly work within their existing relationships to create the change they wish to see? Will they be Miriam, will they Pharaoh's daughter? Or will they remain anonymous, just like the women who went out into the fields?

But while those questions are being lived into their answers, we can question ourselves: what about us? All of us can choose to be righteous women. All of us. So this morning we must ask: what will we do in the spirit of the Ten Utterances, in acting for the other, today, and tomorrow, and going forward? Because now it is we who must together create the generation of children who will recognize God at the sea.

Shabbat shalom.