Women's Midrash on Exodus 2

From ***Yocheved's Own Story*** *(Vanessa Ochs)*

At the edge of the Nile, Yocheved gathered reeds, and exactly as her mother had taught her, she began to weave the basket to hold her baby son. She called him "my son, may God protect you," for she knew she could not give him the name that he would take with him. He would have to wait for the name to be given to him by his own life, by his own loves, and by his own pains....

Yocheved positioned the sleeping baby under the blanket so that his ear rested on her beating heart. She continued to weave as she spoke to her mother in heaven.

"You taught me to weave baskets for my babies so I could place them beside me when they were too large to carry. You never taught me how to make a basket strong enough to hold my child so he might float away from death."

From **Miriam** *(Marsha Praver Mirkin)*

I hid by the river, a young lioness, crouching, ready to jump, keeping myself still. And then she came - the princess dressed in her golden clothing. ... That day changed my life and the life of the princess. I was no longer simply Moses' sister, and she was no longer simply Pharaoh's daughter. We were God's daughters, an army of resisters, with our weapons of love and faith.

Miriam Argues for Her Place as Prophetess

(Chava Romm)

That morning when we left you in the bulrushes,
scrubbed clean and freshly swaddled in your simple basket,
I knew you were too precious to abandon.

And when the princess was taken by your innocence,
and claimed you for her own,
it was no mere fate that restored you to the full breasts of your rightful mother,
but your sister's cunning.

You lived a stranger
in the house of the oppressor.
I grew among midwives, stubborn tribeswomen,
who spared the newborn sons
in rank defiance of the pharoah's orders.

You learned to speak for us
before kings and officials.
I coaxed children
from the narrows into light with singing,
tempered by our kin
laboring long in huts and brickyards.

My brother,
we have both been chosen.
What you witness on the mountain cannot live without the miracles below.
Women draw water for the journey;
I have packed bells and timbrels.

Let us go.

Epitaph *(Eleanor Wilner)*

Though only a girl,
The first born of Pharaoh,
I was the first to die.

Young then,
we were bored already,
rouged pink as oleanders
on the palace grounds, petted
by the eunuchs, overfed
from gem-encrusted bowls, barren
with wealth, until the hours of the
afternoon
seemed to outlast even
my grandmother's mummy, a perfect
little dried apricot
in a golden skin. We would paint
to pass the time, with delicate
brushes dipped in char
on clay, or on our own blank lids.
So it was that day we found him
wailing in the reeds, he seemed
a miracle to us, plucked
from the lotus by the ibis's beak,
The squalling seed for the sacred
Nile. He was permitted
As a toy; while I pretended play
I honed him like a sword.
For him, I was as polished and as
perfect
as a pebble in a stutterer's mouth.

While the slaves' fans beat
incessantly as insects' wings,
I taught him how to hate
this painted Pharaoh's tomb
this palace built of brick
and dung, and gilded like a poet's
tongue; these painted eyes.

Another Betrothal by a Well

(Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*)

THE SAGES IN OUR OWN TIME TEACH: Like the tale of any hero, Moses' story contains certain classic motifs: unusual origins, an early brush with death, and, here, a fantastical romance. Like Rebecca and Rachel before her, Zipporah is first encountered by her beloved at a well.

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But before Moses could marry me, he first had to pass my father's test — to uproot the ancient tree planted in our garden. How I feared for this brave young man, whom I had already come to like for his courage and silent strength. Although my father had warned me never to reveal the secret of the tree, I disobeyed him this time because I wanted to spare Moses' life. So I told him that this tree had sprouted from a magical staff created at the dawn of the world and had thus far devoured all my previous suitors. Although Moses effortlessly plucked up the tree, my father reneged on his promise and cast Moses into a barren pit to die. But I secretly fed him for seven years, so when at last my father went to retrieve his bones, he found to his surprise a living man and was finally forced to give me to Moses in marriage. Indeed, what a trial to be a hero — and the wife of one!

(Source: Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*

Moses' Firstborn Son, Gershom

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OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: Why doesn't Zipporah name her firstborn son? After all, many biblical women name their own children, often choosing names that reflect the mothers' circumstances or their hopes for their children. But here Moses, not Zipporah, names their firstborn son, calling him Gershom, which he interprets to mean: "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."
(2:22). And why this name?

HAGAR THE STRANGER ANSWERS: How well I understand this name! Gershom and I share it. Both our names are related not only to ger, "stranger," but also to geresh, "to banish," since we were driven from our homes by the stern rod of history. In this story, it's difficult to tell who's the foreigner, which the foreign land. Moses is born a slave in Egypt, which the Bible always refers to as a foreign land. But he's also a stranger in Zipporah's homeland of Midian, just as she becomes a stranger among her husband's people in Egypt. And together with the entire people of Israel, they wander as strangers in the alien desert for forty years until they come home to their promised land, only to be exiled from there centuries later. Because Moses is already in exile from his birthplace, he knows better than Zipporah how to name the next generation.

Bitya, The Daughter of God

Bili Sivan in *Dirshuni*

“And Pharaoh’s daughter went down to bathe in the Nile, and her maidens were walking along the Nile. And she saw the ark in the reeds and sent her slave girl and took it — and she opened it, and she saw the child, and it was a young lad, crying, and she took pity on him and said, “this is a child of the Hebrews” (Exod 2:5–6).

And these are the children of Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh (1 Chron 4:18).

Lo, this is the fast I desire. Open the manacles of evil, untie the ropes of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, and the wretched poor, take them in to your home. If you see someone naked, clothe them and do not ignore your own flesh (Isa 58:6–7).

Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh (1 Chron 4:18) — Pharaoh’s daughter or God’s daughter? [Bit-Yah = Bat-Yah = daughter of God].

Well, she took herself out from under her father’s authority, for she pitied the boy, even though she knew her father had commanded *every newborn boy, you will cast into the Nile* (Exod 1:23)

The Holy Blessed One said: She who took pity on my child, will be my daughter, and that is what it says: “Bityah.”

And how does pity happen? Go and see what the prophet Isaiah learned from the deeds of Bityah, Pharaoh’s daughter:

And she saw — she saw and did not look away, as is written, I*f you see . . . someone naked, clothe them, and do not ignore your own flesh* (Isa 58:7).
And she sent — she sent her slave girl and did not shutter the blinds of her heart, as is written, *Send the oppressed free* (Isa 58:6).
And she took — she took the ark and did not fear for her own life and say, “what has he to do with me?” As is written, *and the wretched poor, take them in to your home* (Isa 58:6)

And she opened — she opened her heart to a foreign child and did not say, “he isn’t one of ours,” as is written, *Open up the manacles of evil* (Isa 58:6).
And she saw him, the child — and she saw again, that she returned and looked in his eyes, as is written, *If you see someone naked, clothe them* (Isa 58:7).”

The Holy Blessed One said to Pharaoh’s daughter, you, with the Torah of kindness on your lips, and your mouth opened with wisdom, you taught my sons and daughters the secret of opening the heart, as is written *and she opened;* who taught the gaze that sees in the child the lad that he will become, as is written *and she saw him, the child, and it was a young lad;* and you taught the secret of listening to the weeping of foreign children, as is written *this is a child of the Hebrews* — you will be taken in under my wings and you will be a daughter to me, and your name in Israel will be Bit-Yah.

And not only that, but the Holy Blessed One commanded her, and said, go and teach that secret of compassion to all who come to this world, you who rebelled against the idols of your father’s house, the idols of racism.

Commentary

This midrash deals with the story of Bityah, the daughter of Pharaoh, who violated her father’s decree and saved the life of a Hebrew baby. She adopted him and raised him as her son, even though he was a son of the Hebrews, who were slaves in Egypt. And she gave him the name Moses. The midrash relates that the Holy Blessed One said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Moses was not your son, but you called him your son. So too, you are not my daughter, but I am calling you my daughter” (Leviticus Rabbah 1:3).

Pharaoh’s daughter’s name is not mentioned in the biblical story in Exodus, but the rabbis called her Bityah, identifying her with a figure who lived several hundred years later and is mentioned in the book of Chronicles: *And these are the children of Bityah the daughter of Pharaoh* (1 Chron 4:18). Since the Bible does not contain vocalizations, the name Bityah may also be read as Batyah, meaning daughter of God. It is against this backdrop that Gili Zivan asks whether Bityah was the daughter of Pharaoh or the daughter of God.

Zivan's response is that although she was Pharaoh's daughter, she removed herself from her father's domain" with her act of compassion for the Hebrew baby she found in the river. Zivan invokes quasi-halakhic language, implying that her act had real-world implications. The Holy Blessed One bore witness to her compassion and had compassion for her. Just as she adopted Moses, God adopted her and accepted her into His domain. Just as Bityah named Moses, The Holy Blessed One gave her the Hebrew name Bityah.

Zivan's midrash, which like many classical midrashim has a chiastic structure of repetiton in reverse order, then shifts to an exegesis of biblical verses before returning to an imagined dialogue between The Holy Blessed One and Pharaoh's daughter. The middle part of the midrash is closely patterned on verses from Exodus 2 that describe Pharaoh's daughter's actions: *And she saw . . . and she sent . . . and she took . . . and she opened . . . and she saw.* By focusing on these verbs, Zivan emphasizes Pharaoh's daughter's active role in rescuing Moses.

In order to shed light on the nature of Pharaoh's daughter's acts of kindness, Zivan uses the midrashic technique of juxtaposing verses from different contexts by means of a word that recurs in both. She compares the verbs used in Exodus 2 with the prophecy of Isaiah 58:1–2. The choice of Isaiah is not incidental. In this chapter, Isaiah rebukes the people for their moral depravity in stringently observing the rites of fasting without changing the way they treat their slaves and other disempowered members of society. As Zivan demonstrates, Isaiah chooses to describe the compassionate behavior that God desires by means of the same verbs used in Exodus 2 to describe Bityah's compassion in rescuing Moses:"

"And she saw"—"If you see"
"And she sent"—"Send the oppressed free"
"And she took"—"Take them in to your home"
"And she opened"—"Open up the manacles of evil"
"And she saw him, the child"—"If you see"

This section of the midrash conveys the notion that Isaiah regards Bityah's behavior as an act of kindness that has significance far beyond her own personal context. For Isaiah, her actions become a model of the behavior expected of all the people of Israel.

The final section of the midrash returns to the imagined dialogue between God and Bityah. Isaiah's words are understood not as the prophet's personal insight but rather as a prophetic expression of God's will.

God's words are expressed by invoking terminology that appears in "A Woman of Valor," the description of an ideal woman that appears in Proverbs 31. God enumerates Bityah's virtues and explains that she who has "the Torah of kindness" on her lips and her "mouth opened with wisdom" is the one who taught all of Israel the values of empathy and responsibility toward "foreign children," and thus God adopts her as a daughter. The term "foreign children" serves to connect the biblical story with the political reality in contemporary Israeli society. One of the great moral problems confronting Israel today is how to deal with the children of foreign workers residing illegally in Israel, who face the constant threat of expulsion. By means of this midrash, Zivan demands that Israeli society treat these children with compassion and embrace them.

God sanctions Bityah's moral rebellion against her father. The midrash reaches beyond the understanding in the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 12b: *And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe [liraḥotz] in the river* (Exod 2:5). Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: "She came down to cleanse from her father's idols." Zivan's phrasing, "You who rebelled against the idols of your father's home, the idols of racism," identifies idolatry with racism and the religious dimension with the moral.

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