

**Parshat Shemot:
The Israelite Women and their God: Partners in Dangerous Love**
Rabbanit Yael Smoocha
Class of 2021

From the first time I learned it, I was fascinated by the following midrash on the Israelite women living as slaves in Egypt:

Rav Avira expounded: Our fathers were redeemed from Egypt through the merit of righteous women who were in that generation. At the time that they would go to draw water, the Holy One Blessed be He would arrange for them little fish in their pitchers. Half of what they would draw was water, and half was fish, and they would cook two pots, one of water, and one of fish, and carry them to their husbands in the field. They would wash them, anoint them, feed them, and give them to drink. Then they would find a secluded area among the fields and make themselves available to their husbands... (Sotah 11b)

דרש רב עוירא בשכר נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו ישראל ממצרים בשעה שהולכות לשאוב מים הקב"ה מזמן להם דגים קטנים בכדיהן ושואבות מחצה מים ומחצה דגים ובאות ושופות שתי קדירות אחת של חמין ואחת של דגים ומוליכות אצל בעליהן לשדה ומרחיצות אותן וסכות אותן ומאכילות אותן ומשקות אותן ונזקקות להן בין שפתיים (סוטה יא:)

What impresses me most about the Israelite women in this midrash is the context in which it takes place. In a time of persecution, humiliation, and misery, the Israelite women find within themselves the ability not only to nurture their husbands, but to temporarily create a space in which all the torture disappears, and for a brief moment, there is nothing but love. In the midst of a cycle of pain, these women temporarily reverse the downward spiral by stepping outside their own selves, caring for their husbands, and finding creative ways to be intimate even when their partners cannot be home. Their act of love is just as much an act of faith in the future as well, for it is only through their faith they could ever have dare to bear children at such a dark point of their lives.

This is extraordinary to me. It's one thing to give of myself when I am feeling taken care of, but it usually feels impossible to give of myself when I'm feeling hungry, tired, stressed, you name it! I have a lot to learn from the example of women who schlepped pots of water and fish out to the fields after a full day of their own slavery.

Yet perhaps because these women acted in extraordinary ways, God responded in kind. The midrash continues with God's contribution:

And when the time of their childbirth arrived, they would go and give birth in the field under the apple tree and the Holy One Blessed be He would send from the heavens on high one who would clean and beautify them like a wild animal who cleans her newborn...and would gather for them [the newborns] two round loaves, one of oil, and one of honey...

וכיון שמגיע זמן מולדיהן הולכות ויולדות בשדה תחת התפוח שנאמר (שיר השירים ח, ה) תחת התפוח עוררתיך וגו' והקב"ה שולח משמי מרום מי שמנקיר ומשפיר אותן כחיה זו שמשפרת את הולד שנאמר (יחזקאל טז, ד) ומולדותיך ביום הולדת אותך לא כרת שרך ובמים לא רחצת למשעי וגו' ומלקט להן שני עגולין אחד של שמן ואחד של דבש

The women are not alone in their quest for continuity. It is God who miraculously made fish appear in their water jugs, and it is God again who nursed the birthing mothers and their babies, washing and feeding them

out in the open field, as organically as a wild beast, yet with the celestial details such as loaves of honey and oil from the “heavens above”.

The midrash goes on to describe the lengths to which God miraculously protects these newborns from the hands of the oppressing Egyptians, time and again from certain death. Clearly, God and the Israelite women are depicted here as partners, each doing what is extraordinary in order to keep the nation alive. In the eyes of the Rabbis, God is an integral piece in the narrative of righteous Israelite women. The ultimate Mother/Nurturer Herself, tending and protecting the women who took great risks to love and bear children at a time when they easily could have allowed themselves to get sucked into the aura of hopelessness surrounding them.

We see God playing the role of cheerleader as well in this next midrash, found in Tanchuma 9, in which the women don't just nurture, but play! Note the overlap between the two midrashim, as well as their differences.

Rabbi Shimon son of Halafta said: What would the daughters of Israel do?

אמר רבי שמעון בר חלפתא: מה היו בנות ישראל עושות?

[They would] descend to draw water from the Nile, and the Holy One Blessed be He would arrange for them small fish inside their water pitchers, and they would sell them and cook from them, and take from them wine and walk to the field, and feed their husbands, as it is written “in all the work of the field” (Shmot 1:14)

יורדות לשאוב מים מן היאור, והקדוש ברוך הוא היה מזמין להם דגים קטנים בתוך כדיהן, והן מוכרות ומבשלות מהן ולוקחות מהן יין והולכות לשדה ומאכילות את בעליהן שם, שנאמר: בכל עבודה בשדה (שמו' א יד)

After they ate and drank, they [the women] would take their mirrors and gaze into them along with their husbands. She would say, “I am more beautiful than you”, and he would say, “I am more beautiful than you”. Through this they would habituate themselves in the ways of desire, and multiply. And the Holy One Blessed be He would remember them immediately.

משהיו אוכלין ושותין, נוטלות המראות ומביטות בהן עם בעליהן, זאת אומרת: אני נאה ממך, וזה אומר: אני נאה ממך, ומתוך כך היו מרגילין עצמן לידי תאוה ופרין ורבין, והקדוש ברוך הוא פוקדן לאלתר.

Here we have a narrative that goes even further. Not only are the women caring physically for their husbands, but in addition they are enticing them through flirtation and play. They are armed with not only fish, but with wine and even mirrors as they make their way up to the fields. They have a clear plan, and that plan involves playtime. Playtime in a time of physical enslavement, bitterness, and suffering! It takes an indomitable, unstoppable spirit to carry out such plans, and lift a partner's spirit along the way.

The midrash continues to explain that these same mirrors were later donated towards the basin in the mishkan, which the cohanim would use to prepare for their ritual service. According to the midrash, Moshe is hesitant, indeed indignant, at the idea of accepting erotic tools to build a holy place.

God, on the other hand, has no reservations. In the words of Rashi's commentary on the Torah (Shmot 38:8), God states the following:

Accept [the mirrors], for these are more dear to me above

א"ל הקב"ה, קבל, כי אלו חביבין עלי מן הכל, שעל

all else, for through them the women established many legions in Egypt.

ידיהם העמידו הנשים צבאות רבות במצרים.

Once again, God puts His stamp of approval on the questionable nature of the women of Egypt in their quest for national continuity, survival, and the survival of their family life. It is God, not Moshe, who through the lens of the midrash, sets the record straight: A vibrant intimate relationship is holy work, no less holy than the service of the Temple itself.

Hence God partners once again with the Israelite women, celebrating the valor of their creative, spiritual work. The ultimate Mother, Nurturer, Cheerleader. I can almost visualize God's hands resting reassuredly on the shoulders of the Israelite women, whispering, "I got this. We're in this together."

May God give us all, men and women alike, the strength to look beyond ourselves in times of personal מצרים (literally "straits"), just as the Israelite women did, open our hearts to others, and let God do Her magic as our Partner in loving even in the those moments when it's hardest. And may God help us find the courage to laugh a little in those moments as well.



Rabbanit Yael Smooha came to Maharat after nearly two decades of teaching in both Jewish Day Schools and NYC public schools, and receiving an MA in Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Yael's passion for deepening Jewish spirituality drives her to facilitate meaningful connections among her students through personal reflection, discussion, and artistic expression, as Director of the Jspace Family Hebrew School program at the Bayit, as intern at the Mt. Freedom Jewish Center in Randolph, NJ, and currently as a middle school educator at Kinneret Day School in Riverdale, NY.