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Parshat Shemot 2018/5778: The Heroes' Heroes: Those Who Create Space and Those who Take It Rabba Daniella Pressner

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

The story of Moshe and the association of women who protect him is filled with an exhilarating sense of adventure, profound humility, and compassion. On the most basic level, this story demonstrates the ultimate power of human compassion to save lives, but there seems to be a deeper message. Moshe's birth narrative is our first exposure in the Torah to the future leader of the Israelite nation. Our analysis of how this story unfolds can help us better understand our identity and our responsibility as members of Am Yisrael.

Shemot 2:1-3 reads:

A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket...She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.

א וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בֵּת-לֵוִי. ב
וַתְהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתְּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב
הוּא וַתְּצַפְּנֵהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים. ג וְלֹא-יָכְלָה
עוֹד הַצְּפִינוֹ וַתִּקַּח-לוֹ תֵבַת גֹּמָא...וַתִּשֶׂם בָּהּ
אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל-שַׁפֹּת הַיָּאֵר.

The incredible stress and angst within these *pesukim* is overwhelming. Moshe's mother has just given birth to him and immediately must think of a new plan for her child. Will this nameless child live? Her only choice is to present him with an alternative life, perhaps never the life *she* envisioned but a life, nonetheless. At the moment when his life could again be in jeopardy, Moshe's sister suggests providing a wet-nurse so that her mother can nurse and ultimately wean Moshe.

Fear of loss and loss itself often leads to disbelief and paralysis; yet both of the women in Moshe's life provide space and a new path for Moshe. The character who *takes the space* and ultimately *births* "new" life is Bat Pharaoh. Despite her privileged status in Egyptian society, Bat Pharaoh is compelled to challenge authority. She is acutely aware that this boy is from an Israelite family and takes the space her father never intends for her to occupy: namely raising this Israelite child. Moshe's mother and sister provide the space Pharaoh (and perhaps even other Israelites) never imagined them providing. Our Nation is born out of humility and a willingness to be flexible with individual vision for the sake of a greater vision, that of Am Yisrael. Our Nation is born of the generosity of spirit and an interest in taking a risk. Interestingly, few commentaries understand Bat Pharaoh's act to be of a selfless character.

Seforno and Or HaHaim are examples of the few parshanim who highlight Bat Pharaoh's selfless nature. Seforno takes on Bat Pharaoh's voice and asks, "[How can it be] a child so pleasant and ready for perfection as this [child] could be cast into a river?" This is not about Bat Pharaoh's greatness or her *individual* spiritual pursuit but rather about the space that she can now provide to

help Moshe save others: the future of Klal Yisrael. Or HaChaim's analysis asks us to consider the *specific order* of the story. He explains that Bat Pharaoh's pity for Moshe *precedes* her recognition that he is an Israelite child. Bat Pharaoh's decision to save Moshe even *after* she recognizes that he is an Israelite is the moment which best defines her character. She reaches out to a Nation other than her own and, according to the Torah text, she is met with kindness and acceptance.

It becomes very clear that in defining who we are as individuals and as a Nation, there are moments where lucid boundaries have to be formed. There are also moments where human courage accepts the space provided by others to propel our Nation forward because that is the unique identity of Am Yisrael.

The pain felt in loss is pain that can never be judged. As a Nation, we will continue to experience moments of deep loss. While none of us have the responsibility to deal with these defining moments of loss alone, each of us must contemplate how we will interact with this holy space. Some of us will be charged with creating space for others and others of us will be brave enough to occupy that space. In one of her most painful moments, Moshe's mother knew that *she* was uniquely positioned to create space for another individual to help build our Nation. And *she* provided this space even when it meant that she would not raise her own child alone.

Yocheved helps us understand our identity by teaching us to make space for others in building our Nation. Bat Pharaoh lent out her hand at a time in history when few others did and in doing so, *she* took part in creating the future of our Nation. From this most crucial moment in history, we must consider the value of allowing others to enter into our vision of Nationhood and to not limit ourselves to building our Nation alone. This week and every week, we must question how and when we live (on) by allowing others to live for us? When will we step back to provide space for others and when will we be courageous enough to take a space? How will each of us take our part in building Am Yisrael?



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