

Parshat Shemot

Batya's Story: A Single Woman Pursuing Adoption

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The Torah contains many fertility narratives, and on the surface, they appear to follow the same formula. Whether it is Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, or Chana, they each struggle to conceive, have an encounter with G-d sometimes in the form of prayer, and experience divine intervention that results in the birth of a son. The dynamic these narratives create can be painful for readers whose prayers for children remain unanswered. Parshat Shemot may present an alternative fertility narrative--one that does not involve prayer, pregnancy, or partnership.

וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וַנְּעַרְתִּיהָ הַלְכָתָּהּ עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתְּבָרָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ.

Pharaoh's daughter descended to bathe in the Nile while her maidens walked along the Nile. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent *amatah* to fetch it. (Shemot 2:5)

When we first encounter Pharaoh's daughter, we know only of her father. There is no mention of a husband, no 'wife of' credentials. Moreover the Talmud refers to her as "Batya", literally 'daughter of God', perhaps further highlighting the absence of a husband. As such, Batya's discovery and recovery of the baby basket may be understood as a paradigm for adoption, and several related insights follow.

The first insight into the adoption experience stems from Rashi who notes that Talmud tractate Sota translates *amatah* as 'her arm.' This interpretation begs further explanation, as the text could have used a more obvious term, *yadeha*. Why *amatah*? וַתִּשְׁתַּבְּרָה אֲמָתָהּ אֲמוֹת וְנִשְׁתַּבְּרָה אֲמָתָהּ אֲמוֹת וְנִשְׁתַּבְּרָה אֲמָתָהּ אֲמוֹת -to suggest that Baya's arm extended several cubits.

All responsible parents extend their arms to help their children. How much more so must adopting parents extend their arms, their hearts, and their whole selves to pursue parenthood through means more complex than the biological path. This may be even more the case for single parents pursuing adoption, like Batya.

Following Batya's heartwarming outreach, the Torah explores another complicated aspect of adoption, the relationship with the birth-parents. Batya seems to understand immediately that the baby has needs she cannot meet without the partnership of Yocheved, his biological mother.

וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַת־פַּרְעֹה הַיְלִיכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִנְקֵהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֵּן אֶת־שְׂכָרְךָ וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּנִיקֵהוּ:

And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

In many relationships between birth-parents and adoptive-parents, there is an exchange of money in which the latter pay the former. This often enables birth-parents to afford better healthcare for their developing children, and help defray other costs related to the baby. The comparison to the Batya/Yocheved relationship, while not perfect, contains the same elements of an adoptive mother sending funds to a birth mother in support of the baby's health.

Additionally, this passage calls to mind conflicting emotions birth parents may face. We are not told how Yocheved felt, but can readily imagine her sense of relief at the prospect of her baby being safe, and heartache at having to silently watch him raised in the home of another. How many women throughout Jewish history had to make excruciating choice of placing their children in the care of others to afford them a better life? How many women are faced with this choice today?

Conversely, the text and commentaries subtly convey the lengths to which Batya extends herself on Moshe's behalf.

וַיַּגְדֵּל הַיָּלֵד וַתְּבַאֲהוּ לְבֵת-פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי-לָהּ לְבֵן...

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, **and he became her son...** (Shemot 2:10)

The commentaries discuss *how* Moshe became Batya's son.

The twelfth century Bechor Shor explains:

וּבְעִבּוּר שְׂגֵדּוֹ נִקְרָא בֶּן - כי הצלתו מן המיתה וגדלתו בממונה - *And he became her son*--Because she saved him from death and raised him with her money.

One might add that in saving Moshe's life, Batya risked her own. Who knows what might have happened if Pharaoh found out that his daughter's newfound obsession was a Hebrew baby whom he had condemned to death? Such was Batya's love and, perhaps, longing for a child that in addition to extending herself, she was prepared to take great risks.

Ibn Ezra offers a slightly different variation on the theme.

וּבְעִבּוּר שְׂגֵדּוֹ נִקְרָא בֶּן Because she raised him, he was called her son.

By virtue of Batya's parenting time and efforts did she merit having Moshe become "her son."

It should be noted that this is reflected later in Moshe's own parenting life:

וַאֲלֵה תוֹלְדֹת אֶהְרֹן וּמֹשֶׁה בְּיוֹם דִּבְרַר ה' אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי: וַאֲלֵה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי-אֶהְרֹן הַכֹּהֵן / נִקְרָב וְאֶבְיָהוּא
אַלְעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר:

This is the line of Aaron and Moses at the time that the LORD spoke with Moshe on Mount Sinai. These were the names of Aaron's sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar; (Numbers 3:1-2)

Rashi observes:

ואינו מזכיר אלא בני אהרן?! ונקראו תולדות משה, לפי שלמדן תורה, מלמד שקל המלמד את בן חברו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו ילדו

The text lists only Aaron's sons?!

However, they are considered Moshe's sons because he taught them Torah. This teaches that anyone who teaches Torah to the child of another, it is as if s/he birthed that child.

By means of personal extension, love, longing, investment, education, courage, and more than a little risk, a family is created.

May Batya's path to parenthood offer support to those struggling to build their families, and may the inclusion of her story in the Torah engender greater communal understanding for all those on a fertility journey.



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