

Exodus: Shemot : God, Women and (Dr.) King? (Delivered Jan. 2020)

Who wields power in this world, and what is the source of that power? Those questions are at the center of the Torah story we began reading today, the seminal story of our people asks: who wields power, and what is the source of that power?

You know the most recent Hollywood version of the Exodus story, made a few years ago, was a movie called Exodus: Gods and Kings.” That title – Gods and Kings - resonates with the majesty and drama of the Torah story, as it tells of the grand showdown between God, capital G, and gods, lower case g, the gods of the Egyptians, and the mighty King Pharaoh, who was seen by his people as a god. In this Torah story we certainly see how Gods and Kings make history. We will read for the next several weeks, and again on Passover, of the dramatic confrontations which culminate in the defeat of the oppressor King Pharaoh and his gods, and the liberation of the Israelites, God’s people. But that movie title has always bothered me. (I never saw the actual movie, so I cannot comment on that)

And...as we enter into the thick of this spectacular drama, we should note that the Torah wants to frame the story a little differently. As it lays the ground work for the story in today’s parsha, Shemot, the Torah opens the Exodus narrative by reminding us specifically that history is made not only by Gods and Kings. History is also made by regular people, by folks like you and me. The Torah shows us that through the stories of women, women about whom our rabbinic sages made the stunning statement, “Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation.”

The Torah introduces this foundational story with a series of women heroes without whom the Exodus could not have happened. The midwives Shifra and Puah who defy Pharaoh’s orders to murder all Hebrew male babies. The mother and daughter pair, Yocheved and Miriam, who save a baby; and a princess and her handmaidens who protect and raise that baby, Moses, the future leader of the Israelites. The actions of these women stand not only in direct contrast to the cruel, oppressive regime of Pharaoh; they stand in direct contrast to his values. All of these women protect life rather than take life. They refuse to surrender to cruelty and injustice. In contemporary parlance, we might say they *resist* the evil of Pharaoh. But the Torah is explicit about letting us know that they are not only resisting the negative; the Torah tells us that these women are guided by their positive values. The midwives are driven by their reverence for God. Yocheved and Miriam, Moshe’s mother and sister, act out of family love; the midrash even imagines that it was Miriam and the other Israelite women who encouraged the beaten down men to continue producing babies, despite their oppressive condition of enslavement.

Pharaoh’s daughter acts out of basic humanity. She sees a baby crying, and feels compassion. Even knowing that he must be a Hebrew baby, she reaches out to draw him from the water. A primal human response – sympathy for a crying baby – drives her actions. She is the antithesis of her father, the ruler of Egypt, who operates with absolute inhumanity.

The Torah sets the stage for the Exodus story with a different kind of confrontation. Here we do not have God battling the king with plagues and spectacular miracles that demonstrate God’s power. Rather, here we have human beings, the women of the Exodus, who “battle” with King Pharaoh armed with reverence for God, and God-inspired human qualities like basic compassion and family love. And their strength, and their power, are great.

The mighty Pharaoh, from the start, sets out on a path to his own defeat precisely because his understanding of power is so narrow. He assumes that power is only about military strength, physical dominance and authoritarian bluster. His fear of the growing Israelite population is that the men might join an enemy army – hence his decree against male babies. Other kinds of strength are not even on his radar, most strikingly the potential power of women. When he decrees that all of the Hebrew male babies be killed, Pharaoh explicitly orders – “kill the sons, and let the daughters live.” He cannot imagine “daughters” as a threat. In a delicious irony of the text, of course, it is a daughter from the house of Levi, Bat Levi, and *her* daughter, Miriam, together with Pharaoh’s very own daughter, who save Moshe, future redeemer of the people. It is precisely a group of daughters who set the stage for the downfall of Pharaoh, the king who can only see one kind of power.

The Torah introduces the Gods and Kings spectacle with these much quieter demonstrations of strength by female heroes. Moses, God’s chosen leader, emerges from their actions. What is the Torah trying to say here as it introduces this most essential of all Torah stories?

Biblical scholar Dr Tikva Frimmer Kensky z”l theorized that these women characters are not here to make a statement about gender. Rather, they come to teach us a lesson about power. The women, she asserts, represent the weak and marginalized members of society. Some are slaves, some are Hebrews, but all of them, even the daughter of Pharaoh, lack political power. Yet these women prevail. Their ability to save and sustain life, Moshe’s life in particular, may be the Torah’s way of stating that power can manifest in different ways. The seemingly powerless – be they slaves, or any oppressed minority - can in fact be strong, can in fact change history.

In our world, as in the world of the Torah, as it has been throughout time, political leaders, military leaders and kings certainly wield power and often determine the course of history. Yet as the Torah reminds us here through the women of the Exodus, power can be defined more broadly.

In our own time, as it has also been throughout time, there are challenges we face and battles to fight. We see tropes of hatred and cruelty – antisemitism and racism, rearing their ugly heads, along with threats to our most cherished Jewish, American and personal values and ideals. In the Exodus story, the Torah reminds us that there can be great power in those who affirm life and love, who pursue justice, and in those who act with compassion and in solidarity with others. Spirit has a strength and a power all its own.

We are also reminded of that power this week as we honor the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr . He and others of the civil rights movement, leaders, and also regular people, demonstrated the strength that can emerge when we nurture life, work for good and work together. He often drew upon the Exodus story as a model for liberation and for the journey towards a Promised Land. His life and work are an example of the lesson of our Torah story – that every one of us can make a difference in our corner of the world as we follow our values and ideals, our commitments to the positive teachings of Torah. As Dr. King famously taught, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Shabbat Shalom