



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Miketz 5774

By Jacob Siegel

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Parashat Miketz continues the narrative of Joseph and his brothers. It describes Joseph's ascent to power, the trust he earns from Pharaoh and his power as a minister over all of Egypt. It also mentions, in passing, a woman whose life becomes entwined with Joseph's: Osnat, daughter of the Priest of Ohn. Osnat receives a bare four sentences, and is never again mentioned in the Tanach. Who is she, and what can we learn from her presence in the text?

At first glance, she seems heavily disempowered. She is mentioned in the Torah only because Pharaoh gives her as a wife to Joseph. The text reads: "[Pharaoh] had him [Joseph] dressed in fine clothing and placed a gold chain around his neck...and he gave him Osnat, daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of Ohn, as a wife."¹ It seems like Osnat is not much more than a possession Pharaoh uses to demonstrate Joseph's changed status, comparable to jewelry and fine clothing.

When the rabbis explore her background, they paint a picture of a history of further disempowerment. They write that she is not just any Egyptian woman, but related in a tragic way to Jacob himself.² According to the rabbis, Osnat is the daughter of Dina, daughter of Jacob. Remember Dina? Her rape at the hands of Shchem, and her brothers' subsequent violent destruction of the city, represents the essence of total disempowerment.

At second glance, however, there is more to the story. Unlike many female characters in the Bible, Osnat has a name. Being identified by name humanizes her in the text. Osnat's character becomes yet more rich and complex when we consider another *midrash* about her in which the rabbis suggest she is more righteous than Joseph. When it comes time for Jacob, the grandfather, to bless Joseph's sons, according to rabbinic interpretation, he is only convinced to do so by Osnat's presence.³ How could Osnat, who began our story in such a disempowered state, become so powerfully righteous?

Maybe the rabbis are suggesting that Osnat, having grown up the child of Dina and knowing of Dina's rape, gained extra resilience in her own life that enabled her to reclaim her humanity. Maybe they mean to imply that Osnat, learning from the past and from her mother's story, was strong enough to fight against her own disempowerment, strong enough to claim a name for herself. And maybe this strength is what the rabbis notice when they credit her as being even more righteous than Joseph.

Tragically, many girls in countries across the world today face circumstances similar to that of Osnat. Every year, about 10 million girls become child brides, and one in seven girls in the developing world is married before the age of 15.⁴ Child marriage makes girls vulnerable to high levels of illiteracy, poverty and gender based violence. Additionally,

¹ Breishit 41:42.

² Midrash Aggadah Breishit, *Parashat Miketz*, Chapter 41.

³ Pesikta Rabati Piska 3 – On the 8th Day.

⁴ Mark Tran, "Child marriage campaigners in south Asia receive \$23m cash injection," *The Guardian*, 23 August 2013. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/aug/23/child-marriage-india-bangladesh-nepal>.

they are more likely to die in childbirth or experience the death of their babies and children. Specifically, girls younger than 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than those in their 20s. And girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence than their peers who marry later.⁵

We, as a global society, need to support girls and young women as they face these challenges and empower them to overcome them. Organizations like Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AEN), in Mumbai, India, are working to promote the rights of girls and reduce the incidence of forced teenage marriage. To help girls escape the cycle of poverty and violence, AEN provides girls with a haven where they can meet peers and learn to understand and defend their rights. Those who refuse arranged marriages or want to leave violent situations can get legal support and assistance from AEN, which helps them negotiate with their families and file reports with the police. AEN also provides girls with college scholarships, vocational training and assistance in finding jobs. This support helps them gain financial independence and enables them to have greater choice in whom they marry.⁶

In this week's *parashah*, Osnat embodies transformation. She moves past the disempowerment of her mother's violent rape and her own forced marriage to make a name for herself and ensure the blessing of her sons. We can all follow Osnat's example by transforming the global treatment of girls and women. AJWS will soon be launching a campaign to end violence against women and girls, stop hate crimes against LGBT people and hasten the end of child marriage around the globe. Please stay tuned for more information about joining that campaign in the coming weeks.

May we all merit to draw lessons from the righteous in our society, those who are often disempowered and traded as objects, and may we support them as they find for themselves the resilience to survive and fight for their empowerment.



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⁵ "Child Marriage Facts and Figures," *International Center for Research on Women*, 2012. Available at <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>.

⁶ Leah Kaplan Robins and Sasha Feldstein, "A Call Against Violence Heard Around the World," *AJWS Reports*, 2013, p. 8. Available at http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/ajws_reports/2013.pdf.

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