



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Shmot 5770

By Rachel Farbiarz

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As if in mockery of Pharaoh's decree—"every son that is born you shall cast into the river, but every daughter you shall save alive"<sup>1</sup>—*Parshat Shmot* opens with a cast of extraordinary women. Among these alternately cunning and curious, steadfast and stubborn women, a cabal of three—Yocheved, Miriam and Batya—stands out for its impromptu conspiracy of kindness.

The story is well known: No longer able to hide her infant boy from Egypt's genocidal regime, a Hebrew slave-woman swaddles her son in a tiny ark and—trusting enough in God or man—sets him upon the Nile. Bathing by the banks, Pharaoh's daughter spies the vessel and swiftly she is drawn in: "She saw him, the child; and behold a boy who wept. And she had compassion on him and she said: 'Of the children of the Hebrews [is] this one.'"<sup>2</sup>

Another child soon materializes from the reeds, precociously offering to fetch a Hebrew nursemaid. The nymph so audaciously exploiting the princess's compassion is, of course, Miriam, who had lingered "to know what would be done" to her infant brother. The girl returns with Yocheved, who, with the princess Batya's imprimatur, becomes wet nurse to the son she had just surrendered. Upon his weaning, the boy is returned to Pharaoh's daughter, who names him Moses and raises him as her son.

What is going on between these women who so seamlessly close ranks behind an infant Hebrew boy? There is a graceful call-and-response to the women's actions—one kindness unfolding, improvised in the wake of the other. They seem to display a resilient responsiveness to one another, a silent ability to act in concert. Indeed, when Batya hands over the foundling to the "wet nurse," she instructs: *Haylikhi*—"Take away this child, and nurse it for me, and I will give thy wages." Rashi informs that with this word—*Haylikhi*—Batya acknowledges that she understands the whole sad story: *Haylikhi, Hay Sh'likhi*—"Here is yours," the princess proffers.<sup>3</sup>

Batya knows then, to whom this boy belongs—to the girl in the reeds, to the mother paid to nurse her own son. She knows that the three of them—mother, daughter, abductor-savior—are wordlessly conspiring to allow this one boy to slip beyond the reach of her father Pharaoh's murderous decree. The tale's economy masks the astounding decisiveness and generosity of Batya's actions. Without hesitation she accepts the impertinence of a young slave-girl; the burden of a son-who-is-yet-to-be-hers; the intervention of his mother, her natural rival for the boy's affections. Batya collaborates with the enemy; reaches across the master-slave divide to chip away—using compassion—at her society's cruelty. If Yocheved is this conspiracy's mastermind and Miriam its lookout, Batya is its lynchpin.

*Shmot's* is certainly not the last tale of women's efforts to resist society's violence through acts of nurturance. From Sri Lanka to Sudan, our modern conflicts are rife with women's creative collaboration to marginalize violence, restore justice and rebuild community. "When women are actively involved," observes the NGO Initiative for Inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 1:21.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 2:5-7.

<sup>3</sup> Rashi, Exodus 2:9.

Security, “peace agreements are more credible and cover a broader range of issues. [Women’s] participation widens negotiations beyond topics of military action, power, and wealth sharing, while...building bridges among negotiating parties.”<sup>4</sup>

This assessment was vividly enacted in Liberia in 2003. After decades of brutal civil war, thousands of Christian and Muslim Liberian women came together to *pray* for peace. As the women’s movement gained momentum, government men and men of war secretly began to offer their support. The exhausted warriors were out of options: They needed violence to be met—finally—with the collaborative improvisations of peace, and the praying women had come to be seen as the way out for a generation who knew only war’s language.

The women’s movement ultimately compelled Liberia’s warring factions to negotiate. When talks stalled, the women surrounded the delegates and refused to let them leave. Those trying to remove the protesters were shamed into withdrawing when the women began to undress—a potent West African symbol of rebuke.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Liberia’s extraordinary example, the role of women in forging peace is too often overlooked. As International Crisis Group’s Donald Steinberg observes: “Men leading peace conferences still exclude women or shunt them off to ante-rooms while ‘real’ negotiations take place.”<sup>6</sup> As of 2006, only four out of 61 senior UN peacemaking officials, and one out of 38 UN mission leaders, were women.<sup>7</sup>

Whether through cabals of three, movements of thousands or teams of negotiators, women’s work in the hard labor of peace is desperately needed in today’s riven world. Let us hope that we will soon see the weighty value in our Sages’ ancient words: “In the merit of the righteous women of that generation, our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt.”<sup>8</sup>



**Rachel Farbiarz** is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, as well as of an Orthodox yeshivah high school. After clerking for a federal appellate judge in San Francisco, Rachel practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. In this role, she helped to improve the basic living conditions on California’s death row at San Quentin. Rachel currently lives with her husband in Washington, D.C., where she works on her own writing and art. This is the second year that Rachel has penned *Divrei Tzedek* for AJWS. Rachel can be reached at [rachel.ajws@gmail.com](mailto:rachel.ajws@gmail.com).

<sup>4</sup> T. Whitman, *et al.* “Strategies for Policymakers.” *Institute for Inclusive Security*, Oct. 2009.

[www.huntalternatives.org/pages/8105\\_strategies\\_for\\_policymakers\\_bringing\\_women\\_into\\_peace\\_negotiations.cfm](http://www.huntalternatives.org/pages/8105_strategies_for_policymakers_bringing_women_into_peace_negotiations.cfm).

<sup>5</sup> K. Conley. “The Rabble Rousers.” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, Dec. 2008. [http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200812\\_omag\\_liberia](http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200812_omag_liberia).

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of D. K. Steinberg, U.S. House Rep. “UN Security Resolution 1325,” 15 May 2008, p 21.

[http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing\\_notice.asp?id=988](http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=988).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* at p. 19; Test. of B. Bigombe, U.S. House of Rep., p. 24, see fn. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Talmud, *Sotah* 11b.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)