

Pharaoh's Daughter: Thoughts on Parashat Shemot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter who had saved him as a baby floating in a basket in the Nile river. Moses was nursed by his own mother, but once he was weaned he became the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses lived in the Egyptian court.

The Torah informs us that when Moses grew up "he went out to his brothers," i.e. the Israelites. How did Moses know they were his brothers? How did he identify himself as an Israelite if he had been raised as an Egyptian?

When God told Moses to go to Egypt to lead the Israelites to freedom, He told Moses that his brother Aaron would meet him and help him. How did Moses know he had a brother?

Later, when Moses assumed leadership of the Israelites, he spoke an eloquent Hebrew. When and where did he learn Hebrew?

The answer to these questions leads back to one person: Pharaoh's daughter. (The Torah never tells us her name, only identifying her as Bat Par'oh, Pharaoh's daughter.)

Bat Par'oh saved baby Moses even though she knew that Pharaoh had ordered the death of all Israelite baby boys. While this might have simply been one spontaneous act of mercy, perhaps it reflected something more about Bat Par'oh. Although an Egyptian, she felt a bond with the oppressed Israelites. Although a daughter of Pharaoh, she had humanitarian instincts that transcended her father's palace. She saved Moses not only as an act of compassion, and not only as an act of defiance against her father's cruel policies; she saved the Israelite baby boy because of her own identification with the suffering of the Israelites.

When she raised Moses, she apparently wanted him to know that he was an Israelite. She must have kept him in touch with his family members. She must have made sure he learned Hebrew...and she herself must have learned some Hebrew. When she first named him, she called him Moses; in Egyptian Mose means son. The Torah, though, gives a Hebrew derivation for the name: "*ki min hamayim meshitihu,*" for I drew him out of the water. Scholars ask: Did Bat Par'oh actually know Hebrew?

Surely she gave the baby an Egyptian name, and the Torah “Hebraized” the source of the name. But maybe Bat Par’oh actually did know Hebrew and consciously chose a name that had both Egyptian and Hebrew resonance.

Midrashic sources suggest that Bat Par’oh left Egypt with Moses when he fled to Midian. The Talmud identifies her as Bithiah, mentioned in I Chronicles 4:18; Bithiah married Mered who is identified as Caleb, one of the righteous spies (Sanhedrin 19b). Even though these identifications may be far-fetched from a historical vantage point, they underscore the essential righteousness of Bat Par’oh and her choice to become part of the Israelite people.

The Torah includes just a few lines about Bat Par’oh, not even providing readers with her name. Yet, the entire exodus story could not have happened without her heroic actions. She literally saved Moses’ life as well as imbuing him with an Israelite identity. Without her, Moses would never have developed as he did.

The Torah is teaching that even seemingly minor characters can have tremendous impact on the unfolding of history. Even people whose deeds are hardly noticed, whose names we don’t even know—even such people may be courageous beyond measure.

Rabbinic tradition identifies Bat Par’oh as Bithiah...a name meaning daughter of God. In effect, she wasn’t a “daughter” of Pharaoh, whose policies she rejected and defied. She was indeed a daughter of God, a woman of wisdom, compassion, and remarkable heroism.

There are surely Bat Par’oh personalities in all ages, including our own. They often pass their lives in relative anonymity. Their heroic actions generally go unnoticed and unappreciated. But their quiet deeds impact powerfully on their families, societies, and the world at large.