

Today's parsha is the first in the book of Exodus. Shemot is the Hebrew word for "names". The parsha's first reading begins with the translated sentence, "And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt, then goes on to name each man and his household, Jacob and the families of 11 of his sons (as Joseph is already in Egypt). In all, Jacob's descendants total 70 souls.

To summarize the parsha: Joseph and his brothers die and a new pharaoh takes over who does not know Joseph. The new Egyptian king is threatened by the great multitude of Hebrews, and takes measures to stop them from thriving. He first enslaves the Hebrews, forcing them to perform harsh labor, and later orders the Hebrew midwives Shifra and Puah (who are thought to be Moses' mother Jocheved and sister Miriam) to kill all the Hebrew male babies at birth. But the midwives fear G-d and they enable the boys to live. Continuing to fear the Hebrews, Pharaoh now orders that all baby boys be drowned in the Nile. As an aside, our sages tell us that Pharaoh chooses this form of death because his astrologers foretell that the Israelite leader who will rise up to destroy Pharaoh will meet his end by water. On the day Moses's basket is placed in the Nile, Pharaoh's astrologers inform him that the one destined to redeem the people of Israel has already been cast into the water and the decree is revoked. So even as a three-month-old infant, seemingly a passive participant in the events surrounding him, Moses was already fulfilling his role as a savior of his people. Ironically, in a way the astrologers' prediction does come true years later, when Moses dies before entering the Promised Land as punishment for striking the rock to get water for the people when G-d has commanded him to talk to it. He does indirectly "meet his end" by contact with water.

To continue summarizing the parsha, in the story we all know so well, Jocheved, midwife and daughter of Jacob's son Levi, gives birth to a son and hides him at

home for three months. Fearing he will be found, she makes a basket, places him in it and floats it into the river. Pharaoh's daughter finds him, takes compassion on him and names him Moses which means "I drew him out of the water". Moses will grow up as her son in Pharaoh's palace. But first, due to the cleverness of his sister Miriam, Moses is nursed for several years by his very own mother. As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardships of his brethren. He kills an Egyptian whom he witnesses beating a Hebrew slave, and as a result, must flee from Egypt to escape Pharaoh's wrath. In Midian, he marries Zipporah who bears him a son named Gershon. Moses becomes a shepherd tending his father-in-law Jethro's flocks until one day God reveals himself to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mt Sinai, and calls upon him to go back to Egypt and redeem his people. G-d instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh "Let My people go so that they might serve Me", demanding they be permitted to go into the desert for three days to sacrifice to their G-d. Moses is a humble and reluctant leader and he asks G-d some important questions, such as "Who shall I say You are?" To this G-d replies "Yehiyeh asher yehiyeh, I will be who I will be". He also asks "Why me? I am and have never been a man of words. I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (evidence that Moses is afflicted with a significant speech impediment). To this G-d answers "I will be with you". I will instruct you". Ultimately G-d also agrees that Moses should "put the words into the mouth of your brother Aaron" who will often be the spokesperson for his brother. They do as they are bid, but Pharaoh's heart is hardened and his response is to greatly intensify the workload of the Hebrew slaves. The people complain that Moses has now made their lives even worse and Moses asks G-d, "Why have you done evil to this people?" G-d promises Moses that redemption is close at hand. The parsha ends here but we know what will come next. The pop singer Bruno Mars captures the essence of

G-d's next acts in his lyrics "*If you don't believe Me just watch!*"

In commenting about this parsha, I'm going to talk about Moses's mother, Jocheved, whom we don't hear too much about. She has lessons to teach us about raising Jewish children, and about what being a parent means. Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yanki Tauber asserts that Moses's leadership ability begins with his mother.

Jocheved was the daughter of Jacob's son Levi. The Torah tells us that when Jacob and his family came to Egypt, they numbered "seventy souls". But the detailed list given in the Torah includes only 69 names. Our sages explain that when Jacob's family departed the Holy Land, there were only 69 Jews; but upon their arrival in Egypt, they numbered 70. The mysterious 70th soul is Jocheved, the mother of Moses, born "*between the boundary walls*" as the first Jewish family entered exile in Egypt, an exile which was the precursor of all future exiles of the Jewish people. She was born at the very moment when Jacob and his entire household, Levi and his wife among them, had just entered the gates of Egypt, the youngest member of the seventy souls who made up Jacob's household. So the woman who gave birth to Moses was not of the generation for whom *the exile* was the sole reality. Nor was she born in the Holy Land, among the generation for whom the Egyptian enslavement did not exist. Rather, she was both. She knew freedom *and* slavery and was therefore well suited to birth and rear a child who would deliver an enslaved people to freedom.

Jocheved was brought up by her father Levi and her grandfather Jacob whom she lived with for seventeen years until his death in Egypt. She married her nephew Amram. Her father Levi passed away when she was 93 or 94 years old, the last of Jacob's twelve sons to die. It was then that the troubled times began

for her people, culminating some thirty years later when the cruel Pharaoh ordered all new-born baby boys of the children of Israel be put to death. Jocheved was the chief Jewish nurse in Egypt. She was a great lover of Jewish children, and devoted herself to *helping* young Jewish mothers and their newly born babies. Her daughter Miriam, then only five years old, helped her. When Pharaoh sent for the Hebrew midwives and ordered them to annihilate the Hebrew male babies, Jocheved defied him. She found one excuse after another for Pharaoh and somehow her let her live.

The circumstances of Moses' birth itself is a lesson in the selflessness demanded of him as a leader. Jocheved and her husband Amram had separated when Pharaoh decreed all newborn Hebrew males be cast in the Nile because they were unwilling to bear and lose their children. But their daughter Miriam rebuked them saying "Your decree is worse than Pharaoh's: Pharaoh wants to annihilate our male babies, but the separation of husband and wife threatens to end the birth of all Jewish children." Amram and Jocheved realize that as leaders and role models, they had to rise above the personal anguish of the times and so they remarried and Moses was conceived and born.

We all know "my son the doctor" jokes which make fun of but lend some truth to the fact that success of the child is often thought of as a feather in the parent's cap. Here's a good one:

*The first Jewish president calls up his mother and invites her over for Passover. Characteristically, his mother immediately begins complaining.*

*"Oy, I'll need to book a flight and it's going to cost so much - it is just too much of a bother."*

*Her son counters, "Mom! I'm the President! I'll hire a private jet for you!*

*"Oy, I'll need to catch a taxi and carry my luggage. It's just too much!"*

*"Mom! I'm the President! I'll pick you up in my limo! Then my guards will carry your luggage for you!"*

*"Oy, I'll need to book a hotel."*

*"Mom! Don't be ridiculous! I'm the President! You can stay at the White House!"*

*"Okay, fine," she finally acquiesces. Two minutes later her friend Sophie, calls.*

*"So, Miriam, what's new?"*

*"Oy, I'm going to my son for Pesach."*

*"Who, the doctor?"*

*"No, the other one."*

Well, if we are judging a mother's success by the people her children become, Jocheved is surely one of the greatest Jewish women that ever lived. Her son Moses brought the children of Israel out of Egypt and received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Her son, Aaron was the high priest of Israel and the father of all the *kohanim*. And her daughter Miriam was a midwife and a prophetess, in whose merit the children of Israel had water during the forty years wandering in the desert. Really, has there ever been a Jewish mother who had three more famous children?

When Moses grew up, Jocheved told him who he was. She taught him to be brave and risk his life to save his people, just as she and Miriam had done.

Jocheved was known by two other names. In the beginning of the book of Exodus (Shemot) she is called Shifrah, which means “Beautiful.” She is so called because she would make Jewish children beautiful and healthy by the good care she gave them. In the book of Chronicles she is called Yehudiyah, the Jewess, because she risked her life to save the Jewish people.

The great sage Rabbi Judah Hanassi (who gathered and arranged the Oral Law into the six volumes of the Mishnah), when speaking of Jocheved, said: “There was a Jewish woman who was the mother of 600,000 children.” Because that is the number of Israelites her son Moses delivered out of the land of Egypt.

Jocheved lived to see her daughter Miriam lead all of the Jewish women in praise of G-d after the crossing of the Red Sea, and to see her two sons Moses and Aaron receive the crowns of royalty and priesthood. In an article entitled *Jocheved: Planting the Seeds of Leadership*, Stacy Goldman, a mother and teacher, notes that the Rabbis describe Jocheved as having planted a vineyard by giving birth to Moses. Goldman notes that King Solomon in Proverbs offers this description of the ideal woman: “She envisions a field and buys it; from the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard.” The rabbis explain this verse represents Jocheved since Moses represents all of the Jewish people, and they are called a vineyard in the book of Isaiah. Moses’s mother was of strong moral character and she worked to ensure that she herself lived up to her own moral standards. With proper love, care and attention, she saw her seeds come to life in her children and their accomplishments. The impact her children had on others, enabled not just one plant come to life, but an entire vineyard!

Goldman states the Torah is emphasizing that a Jewish leader is not one who is born in a supernatural way. He is a normal person who has a father and mother,

and who has elevated himself spiritually to be worthy of his rank. She asserts that every child has the potential to become a Moses—a leader of his generation.”

Last week I visited family in Philadelphia. I spent time with a beloved high school friend and we talked about our years of raising children. Her path was a bit more difficult than mine. She adopted her children and her son (Gregg) had his share of growing challenges and finding himself for a long time. This young man who was raised but not born Jewish, eventually made aliyah to Israel, served in the Israeli army for 7 years, and then returned to the U.S. as Director of the Community Relations Counsel of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh. He is currently the Director of the Middle East Forum in Philadelphia. Daily I read his insightful and impactful publications as he makes a difference in how Jews live, think, and are viewed in our world. His parents worried and wondered, but they believed in his potential, modeled ethical behavior, and tried to *literally* keep the faith.

When we moms get together, the cell phone photos come out early. We just love scrolling through the newest pictures of our children and grandchildren from whom we receive great nachas, and for whom we have great hopes. At birth, a baby has such profoundly magical potential for the fully formed person he will become and the smallest steps are extraordinary. Jewish mysticism tells us *every Jewish person is born with the spark of Moses* in his or her soul. In a world that is bringing us more difficult challenges each and every day, we need strong, bright, and, if you ask me, Jewish leaders, we will surely need to nurture that spark. I think raising children in our world is an act of courage and a leap of faith, and we never know in whose house the creator of world peace, the curer of cancer, or the next Albert Einstein or Bob Dylan is growing up. Like Moses’s mother, Jocheved, as we tend our small garden, we may actually be planting a vineyard.

We are the people that G-d delivered from Egypt, to be a light unto the nations and to make a better future. I think we are doing a pretty good job.

Shabbat Shalom.