‘’*Shemot*: Who was the chief facilitator of the redemption from Egypt?’’

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

As we read the early sidrot of the book of Shemot, and the story of the exodus from Egypt, we may ponder on the people to whom credit is due for facilitating that miraculous act of redemption. Obviously, that entire episode was part of God’s overall plan for Israel’s destiny, but the fact that He works through human beings – called by scholars, ‘the dual-causality principle’ – should in no way detract from the gratitude owed to them for their effort and dedication to a higher cause.

It is the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Pu’ah, to whom the Torah initially gives credit for hiding away the newly-born Hebrew boys from the king’s inspectors (Ex.1:15), and thereby saving countless Jewish lives and securing the future deliverance of the nation. [The name Puah might be familiar as the name of the Israeli Fertility Institute.]

In the same time-frame, and with the same objective, another woman acts to frustrate the king’s edict. Ironically, she is none other than his own daughter, though the passage (Ex. 2:5-10) does not reveal her name and she referred to exclusively as ‘the daughter of Pharaoh,’ probably to underscore her courage in defying her own father’s edict. Only in the last book of the *TaNaKh* is her name revealed:

And these are the sons of Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh (I Chron. 4:18)…

Her contribution was to save just one Hebrew boy, but, as he was destined to become the leader and deliverer of the Hebrew nation, her act of saving little Moses’ life contributed directly to the realisation of the destiny of our nation. Hence her endowment with the Hebrew name, ‘Bityah,’ ‘daughter of God.’

The Midrashic sages, with their penchant for expounding the significance of biblical names, state:

> God said to Bityah: ''You made Moses your own son, although he wasn't so;
> I shall therefore make you my daughter, though you are not.''
>
> (Mid. *Vayyik Rabb*. 1:3)

To fully appreciate the enormity of her heroism we must realise that to defy a king in a totalitarian state, especially in antiquity, and more so in a country where the king was regarded, worshipped as, and ruled as, a god, was an act of desperation and danger. To do so not just under the king's nose but within the cocoon of his own family life, by presenting him with a Hebrew grandchild, was as audacious and brazen an act as could ever be imagined. Given that the king was new, and not yet secure, on his throne, and had identified the Hebrews as a mortal threat to the security of Egypt (see Ex. 1:8-10), his daughter's act was not just disobedience but treason.

Bityah was thus history's first 'righteous gentile,' though the greatest mystery is how Pharaoh came to accept that situation, however much he may have loved his daughter!

So, perhaps controversially, I might suggest that it was Bityah – ably supported by Yocheved, Moses' mother, who hid him for his first three months of life, before he was taken by Bityah under her care and responsibility, and who was later employed by Bityah to suckle him, as well as by sister, Miriam, who kept a watchful eye on him throughout – who may be credited with having been the prime facilitator of Israel's ultimate liberation.

The part played by those three women - as well as by the wives of the Israelite slaves who kept the spirits of their husbands high by providing them with a happy, loving and vibrant

family life while they were not working – was recognised by our sages who observed - בשכר נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו ישראל ממצרים – 'On account of the worthy Israelite women, our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt' (Tal. *Sota* 11b).

But as far as the act of redemption and the Exodus was concerned, Bityah must take prime credit for having saved the life of the future liberator.

It might be argued, however, that God could easily have chosen another leader had Moses not survived! I discount this, however, since it was apparent from God's responses to Moses' initial refusal to accept the leadership role (Ex. 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13) that in His estimation, Moses was unique in his suitability to undertake that mission. And we don't have to search far for the reasons for this.

Notwithstanding his speech impediment, Moses was at home with the royal palace conventions and mores. He was unique in his ability and confidence to walk its corridors without fear of let or hinder. After all, he was brought up there, and would therefore not be intimidated by its grandeur and formality, its pomp and ceremony. He would never be taken to task for any lapse of court protocol. He would have known which officials were influential. They would have known him from childhood as a royal prince, the king's adopted grandson. Some might have even dandled him on their knees, would have retained residual reservations about publicly criticising him. Some might have even admired his chutzpah!

Moses spoke the language fluently. It is clear that, when he offered the excuse for refusing the mission – *I have never been a man of words…for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue'* (4:10) – he was referring to his impediment, not his mastery of the language. Hence God's curt response - *'Who gives man his mouth? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind?*'

– which refers to physical skill and facility, not to knowledge of a language. Moses would have known the court jargon, and would never be mocked for his 'broken Egyptian.'

No. Moses was the only possible choice, and, given his, undoubtedly private, education, and concomitant ability to see the wider picture, to negotiate and understand statesmanship, and to assess the comparative worth of would-be candidates for high office – as he was called upon to do regularly in the administration of the Israelites (see Ex. 18:21, 25; Nu. 13:1-15; 11:16, 24-29).

And to whom, after God, must the credit go, as the enabler of that blessed situation, and, arguably, the initiator of Israel's salvation? Clearly to the Egyptian princess who saved his life, protected, nurtured and educated him, giving him the confidence to look kings in the eye, and argue, cajole, and even threaten them, to secure his people's destiny.

Not for the first time in our history, we owe a super debt of gratitude to our women for their contribution to our safety and survival – and our sages had a tradition that Bityah joined their august ranks.

Shabbat shalom,
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