

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Shemot)

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.

- Aesop

Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel z"tzl, the famed Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir, once met with a small group of businessmen and asked them what they thought the most important lesson of the Holocaust was.

"Never forget?" Suggested one; "Always fight?" posited another.

With a sigh, the rabbi explained: 'I learned the essence of the human spirit; of what really matters.'

During the Holocaust human beings were treated like animals; transported in cattle cars, with no food, no water, no bathrooms, and not even a few feet in which to lie down. Thinking they were headed for work camps, when they finally arrived, and the doors slid open amidst suddenly blinding light, rifle butts, Nazi guards and dogs, men were separated from women, families were broken apart, and children were dragged away screaming. Finally, after the endless roll calls, they were allowed to enter the barracks for what was meant to approximate sleep.

As they entered the barracks, every sixth man was given a blanket, as they were assigned one bunk for six men. And as they went to sleep, that man had a moment to decide whether he would make sure he was well covered to stay warm, or would spread the blanket to all six men.

"And that was when we learned who we really were", said Rav Nosson Tzvi, when every one of us with a blanket made sure, without thinking, to spread it to all six in the bunk.

This week we begin the second book of the Torah: *Sefer Shemot* (Exodus), which describes the birth of the Jewish nation. And in the midst of the tale of Egyptian servitude and the enslavement of the Jewish people, there is a fascinating story that we almost miss.

The focus of this week's portion is clearly on the birth, coming of age and eventual leadership of the Jewish Messiah, Moshe, born amidst the enslavement of the Jewish people to what appears to be the most evil empire on the face of the earth.

But Moshe might never have survived but for an incredible act, from a most unexpected source. Seemingly terrified that the Egyptians would discover her baby and put him to death, Yocheved, Moshe's mother, places him in a basket on the Nile River hoping that perhaps somehow he will be saved. At the very least she will not have to see his death....

And as the basket floated by on the Nile River, no less than the daughter of Pharaoh sees it, and seemingly without any hesitation, reaches out to grab it (or sends her handmaiden to fetch it, depending on which interpretation one chooses to accept ...)

Think about it: this is the daughter of Pharaoh himself! Think daughter of Hitler or Eichmann, seeing a Jewish baby in Berlin in 1942, or ISIS Commander Baghdadi's daughter seeing a

Jewish baby in ISIS controlled Syria or Iraq. The verse (2:6) makes it quite clear that she knows this is a Jewish baby. After all, who else would it be? It would be safe to assume, given the Egyptian decree to murder every Jewish baby boy, that this was probably not such a unique phenomenon. Yet the daughter of Pharaoh seems to have no hesitation whatsoever. Nor is she alone; her handmaidens are clearly with her, so the risk she is taking is quite significant. There were no trials for people who violated Royal decrees in those days....

Amazingly, she does not send the baby to be saved elsewhere, perhaps hidden with a sympathetic Jewish family or the like. She will eventually bring the child up in the palace itself, as her own son! In fact, Moshe's sister Miriam, watching from afar, approaches and suggests her mother as a nursemaid, to which the daughter of Pharaoh readily agrees! This itself is quite extraordinary: how comes a Jewish girl simply approach the daughter of Pharaoh without so much as a 'by your mind'?! And the princess simply agrees? With no hesitation and no remorse?!

And most incredible of all, is that she actually *names* Moshe:

“Ki min hamayim meshitihu”

“Because he was pulled forth from the water”. (2:10).

The most mentioned name in the entire Torah; the name of the person who would bring the Torah into the world, named by an Egyptian princess! Moshe must have had a name given him by his parents Amram and Yocheved, yet it is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah. And even though Jewish tradition shares other names Moshe was known by, it is the name Moshe that the Torah chooses to use! (*Meses* is indeed an Egyptian name meaning 'child', as in *Ramses*: Child of the God 'Ram'....)

Jewish tradition associates this daughter of Pharaoh with the Egyptian princess mentioned in *Divrei Hayamim* (Chronicles 4:18) as *Batya*: meaning 'daughter of G-d', ascribing to her great righteousness.

Think about it: One of the most powerful figures in the mightiest empire on earth, an Egyptian princess, has a brief encounter with a slave girl who was six years old, yet it seems as though Bat Pharaoh does not even notice; she is too caught up in the moment to be held back by protocol.

What a powerful message: One simple, beautiful act of kindness, will ultimately change the world. And as the Jewish Nation is about to be catapulted onto the world stage, we are reminded never to forget the power of one individual, and one simple act of kindness.

Just a short distance from us, across the border in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and even in the Sinai and the Gaza strip, our ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah and Iranian enemies are trampling on the rights of individuals with unsurpassed cruelty, in pursuit of what they believe are the interests of their nations. Meanwhile, Judaism and Israel continue to value every act of kindness, and the importance of every individual.

Spread your blanket....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman