

THE DIGNITY OF CHOICE

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Women's wombs lie at the heart of the Exodus.

They are a source of fear and repugnance, terrifying the Egyptians with their reproductive capacity and the demographic implications they carry within them. They are a source of birth, and mourning, and loss, as the baby boys they nurture for months are tossed, like yesterday's trash, into the Nile. They are, in Moshe's birth, the beginning of the redemption.

The story of the Jewish people in Egypt begins with sheer numbers:

שמות א:ז

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ
בְּמֵאדָּ מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם:

Shemot 1:7

But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

Wombs become, in this telling of the story, the key to both the enslavement and the salvation of the Jewish people. It is the miraculous reproductive capacity of these organs that allow the Jewish people to survive despite the Egyptians best attempts to quell their growth:

שמות איב

וּבְהֶאֱשֹׁר יַעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ בֶּן יִרְבֵּה וְכֹן יִפְרֹץ
וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Shemot 1:12

But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that [the Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

But wombs are not women. The first chapter of Shemot treats women simply as faceless carriers of babies, almost animal-like in their reduction to agents of reproduction. Indeed, Midrash Tanhuma (Shemot 5) picks

up on the animal-like imagery of וישרצו (literally: "they swarmed") and proposes that the Israelite women gave birth to babies in litters of six, or even twelve!¹ While God acts through them, allowing the Jewish people to thrive despite their oppression, it is the bodies and organs of these women that foster the miracle, not their hearts and minds.

Chapter two, however, begins to hint at a different story:

שמות ב:א-ב

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בֵּת־
לֵוִי: וַתֵּהָרֶה הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקָּח אֹתוֹ
כִּי־טוֹב הוּא וַתְּצַפְּנֵהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים:

Shemot 2:1-2

A certain man of the house of Levi went and took a woman of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw how good he was, she hid him for three months.

Whereas in chapter one the story of the Jewish people is told in terms of the nation as a whole, chapter two is the story of a particular family, and, more specifically, a particular man and woman. In this story, pregnancy is not a general process that leads to the birth of masses of children in a single instant. Instead, it is the story of a single woman who conceives, and is pregnant, and then gives birth to a single child, and her response to those events. In this telling of the story, it is not only the production of a child that matters, but the way this woman relates to that production: her response to her child and her attempts to save him.

A midrash, taking its cue from the shift to the specific and personal in chapter two, offers an account of this nameless woman's conception, pregnancy, and birth:

מדרש אגדה שמות ב:א

וילך איש מבית לוי וגו'. ולאנה הלך, מלמד שהלך בעצת בתו, לפי שעמרם גדול הדור היה, כיון שראה גזירת פרעה הרשע אמר לשון אנו עמלים, עמד וגירש את אשתו, ועמדו כולם וגרשו את נשותיהם, אמרה לו בתו אבא גזירתך קשה מגזרת פרעה הרשע, פרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים, ואתה גזרת על הזכרים ועל הנקבות, פרעה לא גזר אלא בעולם הזה, ואתה [גזרית] בעולם הזה ובבא... מיד עמד והחזיר את אשתו, עמדו כולם והחזירו את נשותיהם.

ולמה אמר ויקח ויחזיר מיבעי ליה, אלא מלמד שעשה לה מעשה ליקווחין, הושיבה באפריון, ואהרן ומרים מרקדין לפניו, ומלאכי השרת אומרים "אם הבנים שמחה" (תהלים קיג:ט).

Midrash Aggadah Shemot 2:1²

"A certain man of the House of Levi went..." And where did he go? This teaches that he went on the advice of his daughter. Since Amram was the leader of the generation, when he heard of Pharaoh's evil decree, he said: We toil for nothing. Immediately he divorced his wife, and all the rest of the Jews divorced as well. His daughter said to him: Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's. Pharaoh only decreed against the boys, while you decreed against the girls as well. Pharaoh's decree only applies to this world, but your [decree] applies to the next world as well... Immediately, he went and remarried his wife, and all the others remarried as well.

Why then does it say, "he took"? It should say, "he brought back [i.e., remarried]"! This teaches that he behaved in the manner of a first marriage. He placed her on a palanquin, and Aharon and Miriam danced before her, and

1 רבי ינאי אומר: כל אחת ואחת יולדת נשמה ברכס אחת. ויש אומרים: שנים עשר / R. Yannai says: Each and every one gave birth to six at one time [lit: in one belly]. And some say twelve....

2 Midrash Aggadah is a medieval French collection of midrash on the Torah, published by Solomon Buber in the 19th century.

the angels said: "The mother of children rejoices!" (Psalm 113:9).

This *midrash* notices the juxtaposition between Pharaoh's decree that all baby boys must be drowned in the Nile in the final verse of chapter one, and the marriage of Moshe's soon-to-be parents in the first verse of chapter two. Assuming a link between the two events, the *midrash* asserts that this is not simply a marriage, but a remarriage, one that follows the decision to divorce to avoid bringing children into the world only to see them die.

While it is tempting to jump to the happy ending of the *midrash* with its celebration of the remarriage of Moshe's parents, it is important to notice that the *midrash* begins with a choice. In a world determined to make them powerless, Moshe's parents make a choice to separate. Their only power in this moment is to decide whether or not to bring children into the world. In what seems to be a decision accompanied by great sadness, they decide to protect their future children in the best way they know how: by avoiding their existence altogether. The *midrash* asserts that Amram's calculus is skewed, but it also goes beyond that, and in recognizing that there is a choice to be made, it changes Moshe's parents from objects, acted upon by forces beyond their control, to subjects, exercising the small range of control they still have in the best way they know how.

This *midrash* is often read as an uncomplicated celebration of natalism, demanding the willingness to conceive and give birth under all circumstances, arguing that birth, regardless of how long or under what circumstances a child may live, is always better than its absence. But, in drawing our attention to the choices still available to Moshe's parents, this *midrash* offers another reading, one that is not simply about the importance of childbirth, but the importance of choice and dignity in that process.

Moshe's parents are not simply acted upon. Moshe's mother is not a pawn in the demographic war between Pharaoh and God. She is not primarily the owner of a womb and carrier of a child. Instead, she is a human being whose ability to choose

to have a child or not in this moment of persecution is vital to her personhood. In its illustration of the circumstances of Moshe's conception, the *midrash* insists that it is not simply his birth that matters, but the choice that his parents make to conceive him. It is not simply the physical act of birth that ushers in the redemption, but birth accompanied by the life-affirming act of choice and feelings of hope.

The journey to freedom, in the second chapter of Shemot and in this *midrash*, is made possible through choice. In the face of a world that sees her in terms of its need to foster or suppress her ability to reproduce, a woman chooses to embrace the possibility of hope. In the face of a world that demands her allegiance to her father's cruel regime, a princess makes the decision to care. In the face of a world that demands that he look away from the persecution of his brothers, the baby that those two women conspired to save turns to look, and in doing so, becomes the man who will save a people. ◇