

The Sarajevo Haggadah and the Daughter of Pharaoh

Parashat Shemot, Exodus, Chapters 1-2 | December 23, 2021

As we begin the Bible's second book, we ponder a volume that bears true testament to the Jewish love of the Exodus story, and the trials and tribulations of Jewish history: a Haggadah from medieval Spain. The Haggadah, perhaps the most beloved post-biblical text in the Judaic corpus, contains the liturgy of the Passover Seder, and this particular Haggadah bears exquisite images adorning the text, as well as the more prosaic wine stains of seders past.

The volume was borne out of Spain after the expulsion, ending up in Venice, where chillingly, it took on a signature of a censor from the Inquisition who had inspected it. Then, somehow, the Haggadah made its way to the national museum of Bosnia in Sarajevo, acquiring the name the "Sarajevo Haggadah."

In 1942, the Nazis entered the city and came to the museum to confiscate its treasure. The museum's Muslim librarian, a man named Dervis Korkut, beseeched the director that he, Dervis, act to save the Jewish treasure from the Nazis. Geraldine Brooks, in an incredible article about the Haggadah in the *New Yorker*, describes what occurred:

The director was reluctant. "You will be risking your life," he warned. Korkut replied that the book was his responsibility as *kustos*—custodian of the library's two hundred thousand volumes. So the two men hurried to the basement, where the Haggadah was kept in a safe whose combination only the director knew. He took the book from a protective box and handed it to Korkut. Korkut lifted his coat and tucked the small codex, which measured about six by nine inches, into the waistband of his trousers.

Thus was the Sarajevo Haggadah saved by a non-Jew. In this respect, the book is itself a symbol of the Exodus story: the volume's own history embodies the story of Israel's enslavement and redemption that it seeks to tell. For the roots of the Exodus are bound up in an episode not only of Egyptian evil, but also of Egyptian heroism; moral courage which would end up profoundly impacting the most important Israelite who ever lived.

With all of Joseph's generation dying, the beginning of the book of Exodus informs us of a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph, who viewed the growing Hebraic demographic with dismay:

And he said unto his people: Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us:

Come, let us deal craftily with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass that when there befalleth us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land.

Therefore they did set upon them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh storage-cities, Pithom and Ramses. (Exodus 1:9-11)

Thus did the enslavement of Israel begin; but in further fear of Israelite demographics, Pharaoh turns from tyranny to murder. He orders two women who assist in the childbirth of the Children of Israel to engage in infanticide, killing every Israelite boy. Yet these women heroically ignore the order.

Who were these women? They are described in Scripture as "*meyaldot ha-ivriyot*," which is usually rendered as "Hebrew midwives." But the great Sephardic exegete Isaac Abravanel argues that Pharaoh would surely not

have ordered Hebrew women to murder their own brethren, and instead insists that “*meyaldot ha-ivriyot*” be understood as the “midwives to the Hebrews.” These were, he argues, Egyptians. With Abravanel’s interpretation in mind, let us now study the text:

And the king of Egypt spoke to the midwives to the Hebrews, and the name of one was Shipbrah, and the name of the other Puah:

And he said: When ye act as a midwife to the Hebrew women, look upon the birth stool; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him; but if it be a daughter then she shall live.

But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, and they let the male children live. (Exodus 1:15-17)

It is an astonishing story for the ancient age. The Pharaoh who is worshipped as a god orders the butchering of babies, and yet he is disobeyed. It is the first sign of a central theme at the heart of the Exodus, one that, as we shall see in later lectures, Benjamin Franklin suggested as a motto for the seal of the United States: “rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God.” What the biblical book proclaims is that human dignity derives from the Divine. The inviolability of human life is linked to the Creator in whose image we are made, and no king can undo that. And if, as Abravanel argues, these women are Egyptians, then this truly is a profound moment in the moral and political history of mankind: defying a dictator’s demand because they somehow intuit a moral order to which they owe greater fealty than to Pharaoh. And the fact that Pharaoh then seems to accept the excuses offered by the midwives also indicates they are indeed Egyptian:

And the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said unto them, Why have ye done this thing and have let the male children live?

And the midwives said unto Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and deliver before the midwives come to them. (Exodus 1:18-19)

Were these women Hebrews, one would think Pharaoh would be somewhat suspicious. That he is not is perhaps explained by the fact that it was inconceivable to him that these two particular people would dare to defy him. If Abravanel is correct, then the first heroes of the Exodus story, the first heroes of this foundational Jewish story, are two Gentiles. In the midst of anti-Israelite oppression, moral courage among certain non-Israelites suddenly makes itself manifest.

Thus it is fitting that one of the most cherished *Haggadah* in history—the Sarajevo Haggadah—should have been preserved by a non-Jew who himself defied the anti-Semitic tyranny that descended upon him. And this was not the only dictate of a dictator that Korkut defied. As the article in the *New Yorker* reveals, Korkut and his wife Servet also hid and thereby saved the life of a young girl from the Sephardic community of Sarajevo: Mira Papo, a Jew who, like the Israelites in Egypt, was targeted for destruction only to be saved by Gentile heroism. Geraldine Brooks writes:

[T]he Korkuts called her Amira, passing her off as a Muslim servant sent from a rural Albanian village by Servet’s family to help with the Korkuts’ infant son, Munib. “I told her if anyone came to the door she should go to the pantry.” Servet said that the two of them, both just nineteen years old, became great friends. In spite of the immense risks, she told me, “I loved having someone my own age around. She called me Auntie Servet.”

Thus the Haggadah was saved, preserved by a non-Jew who had also risked his life to save a Jew. Rightly understood, the pages of this Haggadah uniquely proclaim a Jewish story of exile and persecution, but also of celebration. On the one hand, the wine-soaked pages are “adorned” with the inquisitor’s inscription in the Venice Ghetto, a reminder of the centuries of affliction and hate Jews received from non-Jews. On the other hand, the only reason we have these pages, the only reason that we have this book today, is because of the extraordinary courage, morality, and heroism of a non-Jew. This Haggadah parallels the original Exodus

story it tells. A story of persecution at the hands of non-Jews, but also rare and extraordinary Gentile heroism.

The midwives' heroism is only the beginning; it is the mercy of another Egyptian that truly sets the stage for the redemption.

With the midwives' refusal to obey his order, Pharaoh instead insists that the newborn boys be thrown into the Nile. An Israelite baby is born, hidden for three months, and then his desperate mother takes desperate action:

And when she found she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch; and she put the child therein, and laid it in the reeds at the edge of the river.

And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him.

And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river; and her maidens walked along by the riverside, and she saw the ark among the reeds and sent her handmaiden to fetch it.

And she saw it, the child, and behold it was a boy that wept. And she had compassion on him and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children.
(Exodus 2:3-6)

Pharaoh's daughter finds Moses in the Nile, and she defies her father's decree. Through the intervention of the ever-alert Miriam, Moses' sister, the baby is brought back to his birth mother to be nursed, so his earliest moments will be spent in a Hebrew home, and then Pharaoh's daughter adopts the child, and raises him as her own:

And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him from the water.
(Exodus 2:10)

The Hebrew here is a bit ambiguous, and translation is tricky. The simple understanding is that Moses' appellation is a pun. In the verse, the phrase "I drew him" is "*meshitihu*," and so it would seem that Pharaoh's daughter names her adopted son *Moshe*, Moses, as a pun on this word.

Yet countless commentators find this profoundly puzzling. Why would an Egyptian princess give her son a name bearing a Hebrew pun? Why would she pun in a language not her own?

I therefore prefer the explanation of my favorite biblical commentator, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin.

Rabbi Berlin argues that the baby's name is not a pun. "Moses" in Egyptian is essentially the word for "son." For Rabbi Berlin, Pharaoh's daughter is exclaiming, "I have drawn this baby from the water, I have saved his life." Therefore, even though he was born to another woman, even though he will be nursed by her, my son he remains.

This reveals another striking detail: presumably Moses' Israelite parents, whose names are Yocheved and Amram, named their child at his birth, and Jewish tradition contains all sorts of suggestions as to that particular appellation; but never are those names used. Moses is known in the Bible only by the name which he received from an Egyptian. In so doing, the Torah itself is recognizing, in a remarkable manner, how critical one act of heroism from a non-Jew was to the story of the Exodus itself. And so we must ponder the dialectic contained in the Exodus story at the outset.

In the tale of the Egyptian enslavement, we see, on the one hand, the start of a pattern of persecution that exists throughout our history. "*Shelo echad bilvad*," we sing at the seder, "*amad aleinu lechaloteinu*." "Not only one," not only Egypt, "rose up against us to annihilate us." Rather, in every generation, there are those that rise up against us to destroy us, "*vabakadosh barukh hu matzileinu miyadam*," "and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hands." There are patterns in Jewish history, and from the Exodus tale we learn of the constant threats to the People of Israel.

Yet in the midst of all this, we also mark the moral heroism of particular Egyptians, heroism which stands as a testament to the moral capacity of mankind. This complexity reflects how we tell the Exodus tale in the Haggadah. Much of the seder is particularistic, but after the meal is consumed, suddenly psalms are sung that are not only about Israel, or are largely not about Israel at all, but rather look forward to a time when all of humanity in a world redeemed will join in praise of God. "Praise the Lord, all the nations, adore him, all the peoples," we read in the Haggadah, followed by another stanza universalistic in nature: "*Nishmat kol chai teva'ech et shimcha*," "The soul of every living being will bless Your Name." The genius of Judaism lies in its balance of the particular and the universal. We focus first on the tale of the chosen nation, but we end Passover evening by thinking of all humanity.

As the years went on, the Exodus themes of persecution and moral heroism were further reflected in the story of the Sarajevo Haggadah and its savior. When Tito's communists took over Yugoslavia, Dervis Korkut was absurdly placed on trial, falsely accused of aiding fascists. Korkut's family asked for Mira Papo to testify on his behalf, to describe how he had worked against the Germans. But she, afraid of what would occur if she turned up to the trial, failed to do so. Mira Papo married, became Mira Papo Bakovic, her husband died, and she emigrated to Israel. Overcome by guilt, she testified to Yad Vashem about what Korkut had done for her, and Korkut's family was sent a certificate by the institution bestowing its greatest honor, proclaiming Korkut a "righteous gentile among the nations."

Fast forward to the 1990s and the war in Yugoslavia. Korkut's daughter Lamija, like many members of her community, was in deep crisis and needed to escape the country. Geraldine Brooks writes that

Lamija and her husband tracked down the head of the local Jewish community and produced the crumpled photocopy that Mira Papo Bakovic's testimony had provided for them. The certificate bears a Biblical epigraph in English and Hebrew: "Whoever saves one life is as

though he had saved the entire world." The Macedonian Jews, delighted by the opportunity to repay a debt from the Second World War, went into a frenzy of lobbying and organizing. Four days later, Lamija and her husband flew to Tel Aviv; their children, they were promised, would join them there two days later.

They arrived in the terminal at Ben-Gurion Airport, blinking in the strong Mediterranean sunlight and the flash of reporters' cameras. The story of how Dervis, a Muslim, had saved Mira and Mira, a Jew, had saved Dervis's child proved irresistible to the Israeli media, and to its politicians.

Brooks concludes her tale of Korkut's daughter by telling us that

in the midst of all the chaos, someone addressed her in Serbo-Croatian. "It was a good feeling, to have someone speaking your language," she said. But she had no idea who it could be, greeting her so warmly. Pushing through the crowd was a slender, wiry man she had never seen before, with a shock of dark hair and a mustache. Opening his arms, he introduced himself, and Lamija fell into the embrace of Davor Bakovic, the son of Mira Papo.

The Bible's second book gives us the first story of the persecution of Israel, and we know that it will not be the last. Enemies arise in every generation. But in midst of evil there is also, at times, heroism. Thus does the story of the Exodus embody the sadness and the joy, the exile and the redemption, contained in the pages and the history of the Sarajevo Haggadah.

Discussion Questions:

1. The Egyptian midwives to the Hebrews are described by the text as God-fearing. This description for moral courage appears elsewhere in Scripture. What does this tell us about the biblical approach to ethical wisdom?
2. The woman who saves Moses' life is not only an Egyptian, but is also the daughter of Pharaoh. The child of Egypt's murderous ruler is a heroine of our story. What does this teach us about the nature of individual virtue and moral agency?