

Network Drash

1/21/17

A woman bathes down at the river. She has grown up with all of the luxuries available at her time and place. She has servants waiting upon her and barely has to lift a finger to have any desire she has met. Suddenly, she hears a baby's cries. It is coming from the rushes by the river. She follows his cries and sees a basket. She peers in and sees a baby boy - clearly a Hebrew. She knows of her father's decree - that all baby Hebrew boys must be killed. She has grown up with propaganda of the evils of the Hebrews living Egypt and has, up to this point, believed in her father's decree. They must be stopped before they take over Egypt. The Hebrews are lowly people, uneducated, uncouth and don't fully accept the ways and mores of Egypt. Yet, this is just a baby, a sweet innocent child. What has he done to deserve that fate?

At that moment, she must decide, should she throw him into the river and follow her father's wishes or follow her heart and hold the dear child to her chest. She lifts the baby up and feels the universal affection that she has felt for any other baby she has ever seen or touched. All boundaries between herself and the Hebrews dissolve in that moment as she defies her father and takes on the role of his mother.

Pharoah's daughter, named Bityah according to the Midrash, took a courageous act. Her ability to transcend her situation, betray her father and most importantly recognize the other as human and as deserving of life as anyone else is exemplary and one I think we can all find inspirational especially this weekend.

Yesterday, we inaugurated one of the most contentious presidents in American history and one known for denigrating women. Women and men from all over the world are marching to protest his presidency. The synchronicity of the fact that Network Shabbat is occurring on a day when women are out there showing their support for Women's Rights is fortuitous. These women are standing up for respect for women, something that they feel is lacking in this new administration. Not only are people concerned for how women's rights will be treated, but how immigrants, gays and lesbians, and Jews will fare under a Trump presidency.

Wherever you stand on the political spectrum, we can all agree that there has been a rise in hate crimes and disrespect for Jews and other races and ethnicities following Trump's elections. There have been numerous bomb threats at JCC's across the nation including at our own Albany JCC. The new administration, possibly unintentionally, has unleashed a nascent anti-semitism and racism that has been allowed to have a stronger voice under his leadership. Any of these isms or intolerance in general come from an inability to relate to the other. Something that Bityah and others were able to do.

In addition to Bat Pharoah's courageous act, Shifra and Puah, Egyptian Midwives act in an exemplary fashion. They are told by Pharoah that they must kill all baby boys when they attend Hebrew births. Yet, they do not do so. When asked by Pharoah why they disobeyed him, they respond by saying that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly,

so they are unable to grab the babies and throw them in the Nile. Not only do they go against his decree, but they don't back down when confronted about their disobedience.

These women are able to transcend the voices of their time saying that the Hebrews don't belong in Egypt except as a service to the Pharaoh. They are not considered full humans. One can imagine a Nazi Germany like propaganda occurring there, yet these women didn't give in to those messages. Instead, they were able to transcend them and see the legitimacy of all of humanity.

One could argue that it is easier to do this when confronted with the innocence of baby's faces and the neediness of a baby's cries. Yet, if you ever saw the Ice Age movie, you may remember that when Sid and Manfred (the 2 animal main characters) are confronted with a crying a baby, they have to think seriously about whether to save him or not because they know what he will grow to be, and they are very afraid of humans. So, even though these babies seem to be far-removed from their adult counterparts, we can imagine that these women aren't blind to who they will become.

Similarly when Ishmael is crying in the desert after he and Hagar are exiled from their home, God saves him. In a Midrash, the angels inquire as to why God spared his life when God knew that his ancestors would become enemies of the Jews. God responds that God judged Ishmael for who he was at that very moment, not who he would become. God, too, understands the necessity of judging someone for who they are at the moment, not for what that person will become. God, too, sees the other and can't ignore his entitlement to live.

So, how do we treat the other with dignity and respect in this day and age. First off, it may be difficult for those of us with different political opinions to respect each other's views. I was talking to a friend the other day who is not a Trump supporter about how her entire family supports Trump. She questions how they share the same genes. Yet, even though we disagree with one another, we are all deserving in respect. Trump supporters have a view that is deserving of respect and need to be heard just as those that oppose him need to be listened to. I think the first step is to listen, as best as you can, without judging, without getting wrapped up in any emotion you may be feeling. Just that interaction alone can be healing.

Beyond that, we must recognize the other in people of all races and creeds. Everyone deserves a voice and all people must be shown some level of respect and dignity.

That being said, if we witness disrespect is being shown to someone, we all have the responsibility to be like Bityah and Shifra and Puah, and stand up for what we believe in. If we feel that women's rights are being infringed upon, we must write to our legislators, march and educate the next generation of the sanctity of these rights. If we see innocent children being denied healthcare, education or sanctuary from persecution in their home countries, we must find a way to advocate for them. We are living in a time where many people feel their rights are being threatened. We must recognize the plight

of the other, the stranger and the disenfranchised in our society and in the world at large and fight for their right to exist.

May we all find a way to respect people whose beliefs do not echo our own. May we all have the strength of our mothers to see the other's legitimacy and stand up for their rights if and when they are threatened.