

Women Launch the Exodus and Confront Book Banning in Jerusalem

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By Ayala Emmett

The first day of 2016 featured women in politics. It happened in synagogues last Shabbat on January 1, as we read the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus in which six women make history and emerge as political catalysts. All are remarkably brave; all are women who make bold moves in the political/ethnic/religious arena of their time. Framed in contemporary political lexicon, the women speak truth to power, brand civil disobedience, and defy book banning and closing of the mind in Jerusalem. My reading of Torah within the current politics of book banning and fear-mongering in Jerusalem is informed by the idea that in a Jewish universe, word and world are in frequent dialogue.

Most of us are unaware of the significance of the six Exodus women because much of Torah is about men's sphere of action, and when the text occasionally includes women it is difficult to pay attention because they are often hushed by much of rabbinic commentary. Nowhere, however, does Torah in a single Parsha give voice to six agentive women who are consequential and united across ethnicity, religion and class differences. It would be helpful to situate the women and explore how they launch the history of the Exodus and how they insert critical thinking in contemporary political debates.

The Torah narrative embeds the six women in the Exodus story at its early stage of oppression, slavery and attempted genocide. The women are sociologically paired, two are midwives of ambiguous ethnicity, two are Levite mother and daughter, and two are non-Israelite women of high social rank. The women's involvement in the politics of their time is provoked by Pharaoh, who according to the text orders the two midwives, Shifrah and Puah to violate their professional obligation, "when you deliver the Hebrew women look at the birthstool: if it is boy kill him." Pharaoh invades the gendered domestic/private sphere of childbirth and the midwives without hesitation step into the dangerous political terrain. They are defiant, they "did not do as the king of Egypt told them," and they offer us the first biblical lesson in civil disobedience.

The text is (deliberately?) ambiguous about the identity of Shifrah and Puah. Their ethnicity has been powerfully debated in rabbinic commentary, but has typically remained unresolved. The majority of the rabbis, including Rashi the 12th century commentator, identify the midwives as Hebrew women, while other sages view them as Egyptian. Their actions, however, are unequivocal, they defy Pharaoh's edict to kill all Hebrew newborn boys.

The story turns to the actions of the mother and daughter whose identities are unambiguous, they belong to the ethnic Israelite minority, they are Hebrew women of the tribe of Levi. The mother "conceived and bore a son" and

her son is not killed because the midwives have refused to comply with Pharaoh's edict. The Levite mother enters the political danger-zone when she decides to save the life of her baby boy.

Yet, the political threat hangs over the domestic/maternal concealment and after three months the mother realizes that she can no longer hide her son. She makes the most heartbreaking decision that a mother can make, to send away her baby in the hope that he would be rescued. The Levite mother, still nameless, constructs a waterproof basket and places her son among the reeds on the Nile, hoping for a non-Israelite's compassion. The baby's sister is watching from a distance, as her brother becomes the first biblical child refugee.

Entering the narrative is the fifth woman who immediately knows that this is a child of the oppressed minority, "This must be a Hebrew child," says Pharaoh's daughter who without hesitation decides to save and shelter the baby. A women's conspiracy of civil disobedience ensues, the baby's sister offers to find a Hebrew woman to nurse him, the princess agrees, and the boy, still nameless is returned to her weaned, becomes her son and she names him Moses. Mother, sister and his adoptive Egyptian mother are joined in giving life to Moses in defiance of Pharaoh's death decree. Moses, as the text tells us, grows up in Pharaoh's house, kills an oppressive Egyptian taskmaster, escapes to Midian and marries Zipporah, a Midianite of high rank the sixth woman in the Parsha text.

Zipporah, Moses' non-Israelite wife emerges as resolutely agentive in a harrowing journey. When God tells Moses to go back to Egypt to "free my people," a very reluctant Moses returns with Zipporah and his two sons and on the way God wants to kill him. The "him" in the narrative that God seeks to kill is not named. The text is far from clear whether God wants to kill Moses or one of his sons, but whomever it is, Zipporah in that critical moment of facing God, acts quickly and decisively, she circumcises her son and for an unexplained reason it works "and He lets him go." Zipporah closes the circle of the six women as she, like the others is impelled to exit the domestic sphere to save a life; she enters the Israelite religious sphere that could have been dangerous if entered inappropriately.

In a Jewish universe that values connecting past and present, the six Exodus women who cross ethnic and class differences offer a view that undermines recent Jerusalem politics of nationalist text-banning. The political turmoil in Israel swirls over Ronit Rabinan's book "Borderlife" that Bennett, the Minister of Education views as such a threat to the "purity of Jewish identity" that he ordered it banned from schools. The objection to the book is rooted in the nationalist dread of shifting/crossing ethnic boundaries since it describes a love relationship between a Jewish woman and a Palestinian man in their full humanity. Blurring ethnic boundaries and illuminating people's common humanity run through "Borderlife" as well as in the six women narrative. In Bennett's Jerusalem, the text of Parshat Sh'mot that would most certainly be forbidden. The women's actions (like Borderlife's protagonists) legitimate porous/shifting ethnic religious and class boundaries that defy current nationalist zealots' particularistic vernacular. The Exodus women's inter-ethnic relations, alliances, parenting

and marriage produce an intervention in the addictive political ideology of identity purity. The Exodus narrative sanctions life in an Egyptian household and ultimately legitimates mixed identities. Moses who was chosen to be the liberating, law giving leader of the Exodus brought to his role multiple identities, a rescued child asylum seeker, an Egyptian by upbringing an Israelite first by birth and later by choice, and a stranger, a ger, in the land of Midian.

The six Exodus women foreshadow a long list of women peace activists uniting across national/religious identities, Jewish and Palestinian to speak truth to power. The contemporary list stretches from women who have organized after 1967 calling on the government to end the occupation, to recent groups like Women Wage Peace who defy the current moves by the Netanyahu/Bennett government to cast concrete walls and pile barbed wire between Jew and non-Jew. In this political nationalist context the Exodus women arise as six Matriarchs, Imahot, to generations of women of courage who in various ways have been speaking truth to power. They all defy the hegemonic divisive/oppressive story of their time and rewrite across differences a political life-story that embraces compassion and common humanity.



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