

Torah Table Talk

Accomplishing the Impossible

Parshat Shemot Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

January 1, 2005 - 20 Tevet 5765



Parshat Shemot sets the stage for the story of the Exodus. Having settled in Egypt, the Israelites become victims of Pharaoh's hatred. The king of Egypt oppresses the Israelites and sets task masters over them. When this does not stop their increase, he commands the midwives to kill the male Israelite children. But even this effort fails because we are told, the midwives "feared God" and refused to obey Pharaoh. In the end Pharaoh decrees that all the male children shall be drowned in the Nile.

It is against this background that Moshe is born. No longer able to hide her new born baby, his mother places him in a basket in the river. Moshe is retrieved by Pharaoh's daughter who takes pity on the Hebrew child and saves him. Miriam, Moshe's older sister comes forward and offers to find a nurse maid for the infant – none other than Moshe's own mother! These courageous women serve become role models for Moshe later in his life.

Moshe grows up in the palace and as an adult does he begin to realize his responsibility to his people. After killing an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite slave, Moshe flees from Egypt when he discovers that his secret is known. It is in Midian that he meets Jethro, marries his daughter Tzipora, and encounters the Burning Bush. Moshe is a reluctant leader as God tells him, "I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."

Exodus 2:5 –

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe by the Nile while her servants walked along the Nile; she saw a basket among the reeds, and she sent forth her "Amah" and she took it.

Rashi's Commentary:

The word Amata can be translated as, 1. her servant or 2. her arm... The sages explain Amah (an Amah is also a measure referred to as an arms length) as her arm; her amah stretched out from a single Amah to many "Amot," arms length in her effort to reach the basket. (In other words, Pharaoh's daughter's arm stretched out beyond its normal length when she retrieved Moshe's Basket.)

Rashi's commentary is already reflected in the wall paintings in Dura Eropus in Syria, an ancient community in which a synagogue was excavated. On the walls of the synagogue a number of Biblical scenes are depicted. In one of them we see the daughter of Pharaoh reaching out with an abnormally long arm to reach baby Moshe.

1. What is it about the word *Amata* that seems to trouble Rashi in this verse?
2. Why do you think the sages wished to depict Pharaoh's daughter as the subject of a miraculous act from God? What does this say about her behavior? To what extent is her decision her own and to what extent is she influenced by God's presence.

3. Can you think of situations in your own life when you were forced to stretch beyond your normal capacities? What doubts did you have? What helped you overcome your own doubts? In what other situations do you think this might be true?

Rabbi Isaac Kalisch of Worka:

Pharaoh's daughter seems to have been unaware that something miraculous would happen when she reached out and her arm became extended. Why would she even try to reach the basket when it was so far away from her? We learn an important lesson from this: when a cry for help reaches a person, he should not stop to contemplate whether or not he can accomplish what needs to be done or whether he can reach his goal. First let him do whatever he can. If a person acts with a full heart and good intentions, God will help him and assist him to reach beyond his normal capabilities. It is not uncommon to hear people in synagogue life say, "We already tried that; it can't be done," or "We don't have the ability, resources, manpower to accomplish that?" What can we learn from the daughter of Pharaoh about reaching beyond our normal capacity?

1. What do you think motivated Pharaoh's daughter to retrieve Moshe's basket and to save him? Why do you think she and her servants were down by the river bank in the first place?
2. Does attitude really make such a big difference in how you act?

Exodus Rabbah 1:27

The sages said: The daughter of Pharaoh was stricken with leprosy; so she went down to the River. (She went down to the river to bathe because of the disease.) As soon as she touched the basket she was healed; therefore she took pity on Moshe and loved him even more.

1. This Midrash suggests that touching Moshe's basket cured her disease. Instead of reading this Midrash literally, consider its message. What is the connection between helping and healing?
2. How does serving others help us? How can it heal us when we are depressed or upset with life? Have you ever had this experience? Share examples with others of times when you have experienced this connection between helping and healing in your own life or in the life of other people you have known.

Glossary:

Rabbi Isaac Kalisch of Worka – Hasidic Rebbe founder of a dynasty; he lived in Poland from 1779 – 1848. Rabbi Isaac was known as the "Lover of Israel"

Rashi - Rabbi Solomon Ben Isaac, the preeminent commentator on the Talmud and Bible. He lived in France from 1040 - 1105

*"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*

Copyright 2004: Rabbi Mark B Greenspan