

**The Light
at the
Heart of
Darkness****COVENANT &
CONVERSATION**
*Family Edition***WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION**

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.

**PARSHAT SHEMOT
IN A NUTSHELL**

With *Shemot*, the defining drama of the Jewish people begins. In exile, in Egypt, they multiply, until they are no longer a family but a nation. Pharaoh, fearing that they pose a threat to Egypt, enslaves them and orders their male children killed. Moses, an Israelite child adopted by

Pharaoh's daughter, is chosen by God to confront Pharaoh and lead the people to freedom. Reluctantly, Moses agrees, but his initial intervention only makes things worse, and on this tense note the *parasha* ends.

**THE
CORE IDEA**

Pharaoh's daughter is one of the most unexpected heroes of the Hebrew Bible. Without her, Moses might not have lived. The whole story of the exodus would have been different. Yet she was not an Israelite. She had nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by her courage. Yet she seems to have had no doubt, experienced no reservations, made no hesitation. If it was Pharaoh who hurt the children of Israel, it was another member of his own family who gave them hope: Pharaoh's daughter.

This is how it happened. Pharaoh had decreed death for every male Israelite child. Yocheved, Amram's wife, had a baby boy. For three months she was able to conceal his existence, but no longer. Fearing his certain death if she kept him, she set him afloat on the Nile in a basket, hoping against hope that someone might see him and take pity on him. This is what follows:

Pharaoh's daughter went to bathe in the Nile, while her maids walked along the Nile's edge. She saw the box in the reeds and sent her slave-girl to fetch it. Opening it, she saw the boy. The child began to cry, and she had pity on it. "This is one of the Hebrew boys," she said (Exodus 2:6).

Note the sequence. First she sees that it is a child and has pity on it. A natural, human, compassionate reaction. Only

then does it dawn on her who the child must be. Who else would abandon a child? She remembers her father's decree against the Hebrews. Instantly the situation has changed. To save the baby would mean disobeying the royal command. That would be serious enough for an ordinary Egyptian; doubly so for a member of the royal family.

More than that, she is not alone when the event happens. Her maids are with her; her slave-girl is standing beside her. She must face the risk that one of them, perhaps after an argument, or even just to gossip, will tell someone. Rumours spread quickly in royal courts. Yet she does not shift her ground. She does not tell one of her servants to take the baby and hide it with a family far away. She does not flinch. She has the courage of her compassion.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think it would it have been understandable for Pharaoh's daughter to not save the baby?
2. Why do you think she did it despite the risks?
3. What does the word hero mean to you? Was Pharaoh's daughter a hero? Who are your other heroes and why?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat, was sent, at the age of thirty-two, to be part of the Swedish diplomatic mission in Budapest in July 1944. By then the mass extermination of Hungarian Jews was under way. Over 400,000 of them had already been killed in Auschwitz.

With courage, imagination and a single-minded sense of purpose he resolved to do what he could to save at least some of those who remained. He printed and handed out Swedish protective passports. He created safe houses where Jews could take refuge. In some cases, he even rescued people who'd already boarded the transportation trains. And he managed to delay Adolf Eichmann's (one of the main organisers of the Holocaust) planned massacre of Budapest ghetto, so that when the Russians reached the city two days later they found over 90,000 Jews still alive. One way or another he saved more than 100,000 lives.

We don't know what happened to him. Suspected of being an American spy, he was taken to Russia, and there all

traces of him disappear. He remains the hero without a grave. But as long as humanity remembers those days, his name will remain a symbol of courage in the face of seemingly invincible evil. He stood firm. He refused to be intimidated. He resisted, knowing that in dark times what we do makes a difference. The good we do lives after us, and it's the greatest thing that does.

BBC 'Thought for the Day', 4th March 2004

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What similarities are there between the story of Pharaoh's daughter and Raoul Wallenberg?
2. What do you think you would have done in Raoul Wallenberg's situation or in Pharaoh's daughter's situation?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Immediately after discovering the crying baby, Miriam the baby's sister reveals herself to Pharaoh's daughter and presents her audacious plan: "Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?" (Exodus 2:7) She proposes a plan brilliant in its simplicity. If the real mother is able to keep the child in her home to nurse him, we both minimise the danger. You will not have to explain to the court how this child has suddenly appeared. We will be spared the risk of bringing him up: we can say the child is not a Hebrew, and that the mother is not the mother but only a nurse. Miriam's ingenuity is matched by Pharaoh's daughter's instant understanding and consent.

Then comes the final surprise: When the child matured, [his mother] brought him to Pharaoh's daughter. She adopted him as her own son and named him Moses. "I bore him from the water," she said. (Exodus 2:10) Pharaoh's daughter did not simply have a moment's compassion. She has not forgotten the child. Nor has the passage of time diminished her sense of responsibility. Not only does she remain committed to his welfare; she adopts the riskiest of strategies. She will adopt him and bring him up as her own son. This is courage of a high order.

Yet the single most surprising detail comes in the last sentence. In the Torah, it is parents who give a child its name, and in the case of a special individual, God Himself. It is God

who gives the name Isaac to the first Jewish child; God's angel who gives Jacob the name Israel; God who changes the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. We have already encountered one adoptive name – *Tzafnat Pa'neah* – the name by which Joseph was known in Egypt; yet Joseph remains Joseph. How surpassingly strange that the hero of the exodus, the greatest of all the prophets, should bear not the name Amram and Yocheved have undoubtedly used thus far, but the one given to him by his adoptive mother, an Egyptian princess.

A Midrash draws our attention to the fact: "This is the reward for those who do kindness. Although Moses had many names, the only one by which he is known in the whole Torah is the one given to him by the daughter of Pharaoh. Even the Holy One, blessed be He, did not call him by any other name." (Shemot Raba 1:26) Indeed Moshe – Moses – is an Egyptian name, meaning "child," as in Ramses (which means child of Ra; Ra was the greatest of the Egyptian gods).

Who then was Pharaoh's daughter? Nowhere is she explicitly named. However, the First Book of Chronicles (4:18) mentions a daughter of Pharaoh, named Bitya, and it was she the sages identified as the woman who saved Moses. The name Bitya (sometimes rendered as Batya) means "the daughter of God." From this, the sages drew one of their most striking lessons: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her:

‘Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.’” (Vayikra Raba 1:3) They added that she was one of the few people (tradition enumerates nine) who were so righteous that they entered paradise in their lifetime.

Instead of “Pharaoh’s daughter” read “Hitler’s daughter” or “Stalin’s daughter” and we see what is at stake. Tyranny cannot destroy humanity. Moral courage can sometimes be found in the heart of darkness. That the Torah itself tells the story the way it does has enormous implications. It means that when it comes to people, we must never generalise, never stereotype. The Egyptians were not all evil: even from Pharaoh himself a heroine was born. Nothing could signal more powerfully that the Torah is not an ethnocentric text;

that we must recognise virtue wherever we find it, even among our enemies; and that the basic core of human values – humanity, compassion, courage – is truly universal. Holiness may not be; goodness is.

Outside Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, is an avenue dedicated to righteous gentiles. Pharaoh’s daughter is a supreme symbol of what they did and what they were. I, for one, am profoundly moved by that encounter on the banks of the Nile between an Egyptian princess and a young Israelite child, Moses’ sister Miriam. The contrast between them – in terms of age, culture, status and power – could not be greater. Yet their deep humanity bridges all the differences, all the distance. Two heroines. May they inspire us.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Judaism has a unique dual structure of ethics. On the one hand there is the covenant of Noah, which binds all humanity on the basis of seven fundamental commands. On the other is the Abrahamic and later Sinai covenant that binds Jews by a more detailed and demanding system of commands. Judaism is constituted by this basic tension between the universal and the particular. Its way of life is intensely particular, yet its God and ultimate gaze are universal, concerned with all humankind, indeed all creation. How are we to understand the significance of this duality?

Helpful in this context is the distinction suggested by the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit between *morality* and *ethics*. Morality refers to the universal principals we use in dealings with humanity in general: our relationships with strangers. Ethics, by contrast, refers to our relationships with those with whom we share a special bond of shared memory and belonging: family, friends, fellow countrymen, or people with whom we share a faith. The two systems have a different tonality: ‘Morality is greatly concerned, for example, with respect and humiliation... Ethics, on the other hand, is greatly concerned with loyalty and betrayal...’

This is the best way of understanding the difference between *tzedek* and *mishpat* on the one hand, *chessed* and *rachamim* on the other. *Tzedek* and *mishpat* belong to morality. *Chessed* and *rachamim* belong to ethics. The

former are about justice, the latter about loving attention, for which the simplest English term is *care*. Justice is and must be impersonal. ‘You shall not recognise persons in judgement’, says Deuteronomy (16: 19). The beauty of justice is that it belongs to a world of order constructed out of universal rules through which each of us stands equally before the law. *Chessed*, by contrast, is intrinsically personal. We cannot care for the sick, bring comfort to the distressed or welcome a visitor impersonally. If we do so, it merely shows that we have not understood what these activities are. Justice demands disengagement. *Chessed* is an act of engagement. Justice is best administered without emotion. *Chessed* exists only in virtue of emotion, empathy and sympathy, feeling-with and feeling-for. We act with kindness because we know what it feels like to be in need of kindness. We comfort the mourners because we know what it is to mourn. *Chessed* requires not detached rationality but emotional intelligence.

To Heal a Fractured World, p. 51

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Did Pharaoh’s daughter and Raoul Wallenberg act in the way they did from a moral perspective or from a perspective of ethics?
2. Which do you think would be more heroic in their stories?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

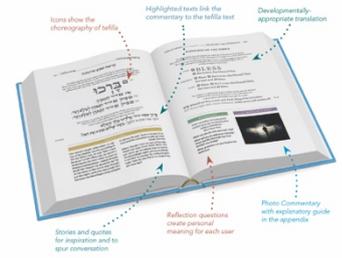
1. Is the decision Pharaoh’s daughter took a heroic act or the least we could expect of any human in such a situation?
2. Was Miriam also a hero in this story?

3. What is the message of the *Midrash* when it points out that Moses was only ever known by his Egyptian name *Moshe*?
4. What message are the sages giving us when they identify Pharaoh's daughter as "*Batya*"?
5. What message from this week's Covenant & Conversation made the biggest impact on you?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. It would have been understandable for the daughter of Pharaoh, the very instigator of the genocide of the Israelite males, to turn the other way and ignore the child. As a product of the society that produced a ruler such as Pharaoh, and having grown up in his house, it is easy to understand that she would have found it difficult making the moral courageous decision to save the child. The move was also of great personal risk to her, and the repercussions may have been great. The question is morality innate and therefore should she have implicitly understood the right and wrong of the situation. And if you believe so, would that override the concern of personal risk. These are some of the factors involved in considering these questions.
2. She is a model of moral courage and innate morality. A hero is a person noted for courageous acts or nobility of character. Rabbi Sacks considers her a hero in according to this definition.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The stories are very similar, and both personalities could be described as *Righteous Gentiles*. Raoul Wallenberg also took great personal risks to save Jews. He was under the same societal pressure not to do anything, while the monstrous Nazi genocidal machine was carrying out its work.
2. We obviously would like to think we would do the right thing. But it is impossible to know how we would react. The question is, should we find empathy and understanding for bystanders that did nothing?

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Both their actions were first and foremost an act of moral courage. They were acting on the innate values of justice and what out of a conviction for what is right. However, it is hard to imagine they were not also acting upon the values of love, empathy, and sympathy, for fellow human beings. If you relate to another human being as a brother, seeing them as a fellow created equally in the image of God, then your act of justice can be said to also be one of love and kindness.
2. In the case where love of a fellow you have a personal relationship with is the main motivating factor, while still heroic, it is less astounding than saving the life of a stranger, simply because they are a fellow human being. This then is the greater example of moral courage, and Pharaoh's daughter and Raoul Wallenberg were true moral heroes

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea* question 1.
2. Rabbi Sacks says yes. Apart from the brilliance of her plan, she also took great risk to address the Royal princess, and with some audacity. How does a child – not just a child, but a member of a persecuted people – have the audacity to address a princess? There is no elaborate preamble, no "Your Royal Highness" or any other formality of the kind we are familiar with elsewhere in biblical narrative. They seem to speak as equals.
3. Moses, the greatest of all Jewish leaders, who spoke to God "face to face", is only ever known in the Torah (and therefore throughout Jewish literature) as *Moshe* – the Egyptian name for child. Despite no doubt receiving a Hebrew name from his parents, and he could also have received name directly from God (as Avraham and Ya'akov did). The *Midrash* says this is powerful statement - a reward to Pharaoh's daughter for her kindness and bravery.
4. *Batya* is clearly a Hebrew name meaning the daughter of God. This was almost certainly not the name by which she was known. But the sages are saying that despite who her biological father was (a character on a par with more modern variations on the same theme such as Hitler and Stalin) she should be known and remembered as the daughter of God. A title such as this is earned, and any human, created in the image of God, who walks in the path of God, deserves this title.
5. Some suggestions could include: the power behind the act of moral courage of Pharaoh's daughter; the heroism of two women; the extent to which rabbinic Judaism acknowledges this righteous gentile; how inspiring stories of righteous gentiles are and the hope for mankind that it represents; and the difference between morality and ethics.