

Pharaoh's Daughter

By Danny Siegel

Imagine: After a few verses in the Book of Exodus and Pharaoh's daughter — nameless in the narrative — disappears from the Biblical story. Just compare it to the 14 chapters devoted to Joseph, more than one-fourth of the entire Book of Genesis.

And yet, by the time Jewish tradition has finished (and is still finishing) her story, she has a name, a Hebrew one (Bityah, daughter of God (alternatively: Beloved One of God), was the only firstborn to survive the 10th plague, and one of the fortunate nine mortals to have entered Paradise alive, in such glorious company as the likes of Elijah. The Midrash even adds that Moses had many names, but the one he is forever known as is the one given him by his rescuer — Pharaoh's daughter.

So much is missing in Exodus, so many gaps, unexplained details. Naturally, the Midrash of hundreds of years' duration, will add, embellish, create "facts" as well as miracles to teach us how this brave young woman saved Baby Moses, and as a result, here we are today, three thousand or more years later, Jews in Seattle, Jacksonville, Mississippi, London, even Katmandu, Bangkok, and Singapore.

The very first thing we have to establish is that we would never be here if this were the story of Pharaoh's son. Though most certainly we may assume that Pharaoh's wife or wives gave birth to many children, I picture her as the only daughter. Not that Pharaoh didn't want sons; he had to have a male successor. But it may very well be that after two, several, many sons, he finally was given a daughter.

I see her as sitting on this all-powerful ruler's knees as a young child, playing, making childish prattle, making this one-of-many-gods of all Egypt smile, laugh, do silly things. Fine her a pet co snuggle with at night, possibly getting down on the floor of the palace to play card kid card games or jacks with her.

I see her as the dear one, the favored one, an early model of Daddy's Little Girl who wrapped him around her little finger. How else explain him tolerating having a Hebrew child grow up in his palace (some say for 20 years, others for 40). And to tolerate for the two or three years he was breastfed, a wet nurse who spoke Egyptian with a Hebrew accent and who most definitely *looked* like a Hebrew. It may be that Yocheved was kept on as a kind of governess. How else to explain that the Prince of Egypt knew that the slaves were his brothers and sisters. But even if her terms of employment were only those two or three years, how much could she have taught him about what it is to be a Hebrew whose single and singular God revered Life and rejected the worship of death and the dead? There was no Shema yet to recite with the infant before he went to sleep. What possibly could his birth mother transmit to him in that brief span of his life to so intimately identify with the Hebrews, despite being immersed in the grandeur and trappings of Egyptian royalty. When he was 19, did he remember something from infancy much as 50 years later some people can still recite all the words to the Rock and Roll songs "Wake Up Little Susie", "Heartbreak Hotel", and "It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To". Recalling the TV show "Name That Tune", the contestants had to give the name of the song after hearing only the first one or two notes. Yocheved must have dug deep down into the Hebrew consciousness to make such powerful memories. There are still so many unknowns about the human mind, as is discovered in our day, for example, how people with Alzheimer's disease who cannot remember their own name still connect to reality through music, through the presence and contact dogs and cats and baby dolls.

Especially if we accept the theory that she was kept on as an *au pair* and did not totally give up Moshe to Pharaoh's daughter when he was only two years old, she had innumerable opportunities to implant in his Hebrew soul that that's who he *really* was, a Hebrew. The text itself says that when the child grew up, Yocheved brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, apparently implying that for several years he actually lived at home with his natural parents. But what did "grew up" mean in that ancient society? Age 12? 10? Think of young children the sweatshops of England not so long ago. And think of our beloved bar and bat mitzvah drop-outs, then living

as Jewish adults living with a religious school education. Engulfed in the enormous pull of the world of the Egyptian palace, how well could he hold on to her teachings?

But then, even if after that Yocheved was kept on as a nanny, there were few intimate moments comparable to that of when she nursed him. Egyptians were everywhere, listening, watching. And if we accept the Midrash's statement that he was breathtakingly gorgeous and everyone wanted to be around him, it would still be difficult for Yocheved.

These are just some of the scenarios, and after reviewing them, a Torah student wonders why there is virtually nothing in the text about these crucial years of his life.

There are more unexplained details, most of which the commentators and geniuses of Midrash "solve";

Why did Pharaoh's daughter go down to the Nile to bathe? Were there not the most elaborate places to bathe in the palace? (Think of mansions of the Rich and Famous with their 14 marble and gold bathrooms.) Furthermore, can there be any doubt that the Nile swarmed with crocodiles and various other deadly-to-humans creatures? (Commentators: It was really a small lagoon off the Nile, clear and placid.)

Two reasons are given for her bathing in this lagoon: (1) She had been sorely afflicted with a wretched disease (some say leprosy), and she believed that washing in the waters would cure her, and (2) she was so revolted by the pagan ways of her father and his murderous campaign against the Hebrews, she wanted to cleanse herself of these detestable things. How she kept the second reason from her father is also missing from the text. Sketchiness seems to be the rule in this heroic tale.

And how was it that Moses' family knew where Pharaoh's daughter would be bathing? Did they live so near to the palace (it seems unlikely) that they observed her comings and goings, and, even if they did, how did they know that on this specific day she would appear at this particular spot. This one remains beyond me.

And while there, she sees a basket with a baby among the reedgrass. Actually, she *heard* the baby before she saw him, because he was crying. My teacher, the distinguished late Professor Nahum N. Sarna pointed out in his commentary to *Exodus* that this is the only situation in the entire Bible when a baby cries. All other references are to adults. This must have been noticed by the Rabbis who knew the entire Bible thoroughly, and they necessarily expanded on this curious fact.

Moshe was three months old, too young to sense that his sister was hidden at a distance to see what would become of him. Up to this point in the text, Pharaoh's daughter had no idea what was his ethnic background, since the basket was first spotted at a distance. In fact, by a slight change of the vowels in the text, the Midrash states that it was 60 cubits (about 90 feet) away, but when she stretched out her to arm to bring it closed, her arm miraculously extended! Foremost in her mind should have been first to search for the baby's family. It could as well have been a child of poor Egyptians who could not afford to sustain her, and once having found the family, she could have used her royal resources to support the family.

But when the basket was near enough for her to *see* the child, she recognized that it was a Hebrew baby. The Midrash says he was surrounded by a certain aura, so she knew there was something very special about the child. But the fact that he was circumcised meant he was a Hebrew. My teacher and friend, Professor Jeffrey Tigay, sent me material that indicates according to Egyptologists, Egyptians were also circumcised, but probably only between the ages of six and 12.

And yet, and yet, knowing she was defying her father at the risk of her own and the baby's lives — there are numerous examples of tyrants throughout history murdering their own family members — she takes him in, along with Yocheved, the Hebrew nurse, because she had compassion for him. This seems to be the meaning of Exodus and is reinforced in the Midrash. For God's sake, *it was an abandoned baby!* She couldn't just leave him there to die of exposure.

Returning to a point mentioned above, Was she herself married? Did she have children of her own? I picture her age 17 or 18, though I have no sense if she was married by then and barren, or for some reason still single, and simple human compassion overwhelmed her. There is a Midrash that says she was Pharaoh's only child and was at that point in her life, childless, and

even later on, when she converted an married (some say to Caleb, one of the 12 scouts Moses sent into the land), she had three natural children of her own. On the other hand, those who favor the idea that she was not married is also understandable. I think nowadays of some man who might happen to be attracted to the daughter of a *Mafioso*. Who needs the Sunday dinners with the *don* and his thugs, thieves, enforcers, the chit-chat at parties with kneecap breakers, extortionists, and murderers? Better to just sigh and drop it. This princess was not like Disney's Belle or Aurora; she comes with psychological and existential baggage too weighty and massive to comprehend.

She did it, even though the Midrash tells us, that many of her servants had warned of her of the extreme danger of what she was about to do. Still, she did it, and where this courage comes from in the human soul is something thought about, written about, played out on the stage and in movies, and still remains ultimately a mystery. One explanation of her personal courage is mentioned in the *Etz Chaim* commentary, namely, that up until this time her father's oppressive decrees were an abstraction in her mind, but when she saw this one very real baby, she grasped the full horrible enormity of what her father was doing.

And still another question, why did Amram and Yocheved keep him in their home for three months when clearly any moment of discovery surely meant death to the baby and the family? As mentioned above, the Midrash goes into wild lyricism about how the baby was so gorgeous. Perhaps Moshe's parents were so powerfully emotionally attached to him (I suspect whether or not he was beautiful), they held on to him as long as they could before taking the drastic step of leaving him in a basket in the Nile for someone, somehow to rescue him. They simply could not part with him. We know from the media about abandoned babies. Los Angeles even has a no penalty law. Leaving a baby at a hospital, and I think at a police station or house of worship, incurs no legal punishment for the parent(s).

From the moment I began to be taken with thinking about Pharaoh's daughter two things were on my mind: The first, obviously, is the voice of Elie Wiesel. And the other is all the Righteous among the Nations, that Yad Vashem has recognized and honored over the years. There are the famous ones, Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Schindler, the lesser-knowns such as Princess Alice, mother-in-law of Queen Elizabeth, the good people of Le Chambon, France, who saved their Jews, and the hundreds whose names we wouldn't know unless we devoted our efforts to do research about them. In 1948, at the time of Israel's founding, there were approximately 130 of them who came to live there. Today there are only 14 remaining and an additional five widowers.

Such is the ancient story of Pharaoh's daughter, and her (eternal) life's story is worthy of telling and re-telling down to the very greatest imaginative detail we can discover. Translating the Yiddish phrase, "It's good for the Jews", and, indeed, for all humanity.