

Parashat Sh'mot
“Chazak: Holding Fast to Our Values”
By Rabbi Emily Howard Meyer

Last week, we finished the book of Genesis, and at the same time, we finished our secular year. *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek* (Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened.) As you know, we usually say this when we complete each book of the Torah. The word *chazak* is usually translated as “Be strong!” But like so many other words, it has additional meanings: to be steadfast, courageous, to support, or to hold fast. It is often used as a powerful encouragement to persevere, uphold values, and find inner fortitude.

This week, it feels like we need some inner strength and fortitude. We need perseverance to uphold our values. These are important qualities when the world around us may feel uncertain or in chaos. In *Parashat Sh'mot* this week, we see several instances of people holding fast to their values in the face of unbelievable adversity.

Some of us may remember that this is the *parashah* where we learn about Moses in the basket and the burning bush. The *parashah* begins with a listing of the children of Jacob, followed by a phrase that makes my blood run cold every time: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” From this point on, it is clear that things will not go well for the children of Jacob, who have become numerous in the land. They will face enslavement, malnutrition, beatings, and killings. From this introduction, we then meet Moses and learn about his early life.

Often, the stories of Pharaoh’s hatred, the wonder of the burning bush, and questions about leadership and the nature of God are emphasized when discussing this *parashah*. This year, however, I want to highlight lessons of perseverance, bravery, kindness (*chesed*), and mercy (*rachamim*).

We begin with the midwives, Shifrah and Puah. Later, Rabbinic Sages want to attach such impressive women to great biblical names, and so they are said to be Miriam and Yocheved, Moses’s sister and mother, but the text itself does not say this. I prefer to think of them as two women standing alone against violence and oppression. They were told to watch the birthing stool. If the child was a boy, kill it. If the child was a girl, let it live.

Now, you feminists out there, I see your hackles going up. I am with you. I mean, Pharaoh, if the idea was to end the Israelite people, why let the girls live? Who do you think will have those babies? The Rabbinic Sages reasoned that the boys might grow up to be men who would wage war, and girls would not do such a thing. I guess they never heard of Devorah, Yael, Judith, or even Joan of Arc.

We acknowledge the sexism here, but we should also remember who foils Pharaoh’s plan. It’s the midwives! The women! They let all the children live. Shifrah and Puah take a stand at great risk

to themselves. Would you stand up and defy the ruler of your country? Is it such an easy thing to do?

The Torah says their actions were motivated by a fear of God, but that translation is not accurate. They were more in *awe* of God than in fear. You know, we need to strike the word “fear” from the entire Torah, it’s just not correct. *Awe* is a better choice. *Awe* might contain fear, but it is not entirely fear-based. It includes admiration, reverence, and wonder. Think of a time when you felt awe: at the birth of a child, a beautiful sight in nature, or a magnificent piece of art or architecture. Could it be that they felt the magic of each birth and did not want to destroy the new life that had entered the world? Could that be the awe described here?

In the end, it does not matter what inspired them. They let the children live and gave Pharaoh a foolish excuse for it. God saw this and rewarded them. Yet did they want or expect that reward? Isn’t it important to do something simply because it is the right thing to do, regardless of reward? Isn’t it important to uphold your values and beliefs?

The next story is really one of *chesed* and *rachamim*. Pharaoh’s daughter was bathing in the Nile. She comes across a baby in a basket. What are the possible outcomes of this encounter? She could have drowned the baby in the basket, good riddance to this Hebrew baby! Or she could have let the basket continue its way down the Nile. Or she could have let a guard or servant handle it. But no, she takes the child, finds sustenance for him, and raises him as her own. It might be because she was unable to have children of her own, or it might be because she felt the pull of one vulnerable human to another. It doesn’t matter; she knew that this child—this Hebrew, outcast child needed help and she gave it to him, regardless of punishment or reward, or of what people thought or what they might do. It truly was an act of kindness and mercy.

The next two situations involve Moses. One is where he strikes down an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew slave. The language here is interesting:

וַיִּפֹּן כֹּה נֹכַח וַיִּרְא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּדֹּ אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל:

“He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”

The unanswered question is this: if he had seen others around, would he still have struck the Egyptian? How might that have changed the story? We may never know. We do know that he saw a person in danger and acted. He felt the pull of humanity, much like his Egyptian mother, and he saved another person. Of course, his act was noticed, which caused him to flee Pharaoh’s house for Midian. And here, we see the final act of bravery and kindness in this *parashah*.

Moses is at a well, and the seven daughters of Yitro, the Priest of Midian, who have come to water their flocks. Shepherds drive them away, but Moses rises to their defense and waters the flock himself. This is reminiscent of how Rebecca and Rachel met their husbands, through acts

of kindness at a well. Watering someone else's animals was not just an act of kindness. It was an act of hospitality, diligence, and a sign of moral character.

Today, we get water from turning a tap, but back then, watering animals required great effort. One did not simply lead them to a trough. One had to pull up bucket after bucket to quench the thirst of a large animal, like a camel, or in Moses's case, an entire flock of sheep. It required physical strength, generosity, and a gracious spirit.

These stories, found at the beginning of a book about redemption, are not moments where God performs miracles or saves us. They are about people helping people. One could even say they are about the Godliness that is created or shown in us when we help others. It is about bringing those attributes of God, *chesed* and *rachmim* into this world.

Recently, I have been reading books about the various ways Jews understand God. Some see God as an energy flow that connects all of nature, almost like a large pipe or conduit. When we do harmful things in the world, we disrupt that energy flow and block it. Kindness, mercy, generosity, and charity become a kind of primordial Drano for the world's energy flow. Today, it seems especially important to unclog the world's pipes and allow that good energy to flow freely.

How do we do this? We strive to live our beliefs, to uphold our values, to persevere against the darkness in our world. We find Godliness in others and in ourselves. We try to be kind, to understand, to listen, and to learn the why and wherefore of another's heart. We can't move forward without dialogue. We can't remain silent, but we *can* listen and discern.

And one more thing. Many people make New Year's resolutions that are often forgotten by Valentine's Day. I want to give you a different assignment. I don't want a whole list or even a phrase, I want one word, just one word, that will embody your year. It might be love, kindness, hope, perseverance, belief, family, friends, chocolate, or anything meaningful to you. Write it down and put it somewhere you will see it each day, on your bedside table, on the fridge, or even on your ceiling. Start your day with that word. Live that word this year. Hold onto it. Believe in it. Nurture it.

As you move through your year, I want each interaction with your world, your friends, family, those who are near or far, and even those you meet for only a moment to reflect that word. If we all do this together, we may be able to help unclog the world's pipes. Think about a clogged kitchen drain, or God forbid, a toilet. We need to keep the good energy flowing, because if we do not, our world will have to deal with that kind of mess, and no one wants that. Shabbat Shalom.