



Parashat Shemot 5779

What Might a Feminist Brit Milah Involve?

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This issue of the FJMC Unraveller, a weekly commentary explaining the aspects of Jewish history, ideas and thought, is being sent to you by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. We hope you enjoy it and find it intellectually challenging.

Last Thursday, my wife Karen and I had the blessing and opportunity to give our newborn son his Hebrew name in front of our family and community. Before I explained how we named him Lev Aharon ("Aaron's heart," after her paternal grandfather and my paternal grandmother), I posed to those in attendance the question of how we might make this ancient circumcision ritual into a feminist one. I told the crowd that this was a serious query for us to ponder together given how difficult the experience of Brit Milah had been for Karen that morning and for so many other young mothers among our family and friends. How might we grapple with their difficulty watching a newborn son undergo what amounts to religiously-obligated, but otherwise-elective, surgery just eight days after his birth?

While I offered several responses to my own question, my main answer was not an apology from medicine (Karen and I both already knew and trusted the evidence from public health studies about the benefits of circumcision) but rather a reflection on my observations of how the all-female team in Karen's operating room in certain ways represented a modern version of the Hebrew midwives in the first chapter of Exodus. Those early leaders of resistance to tyranny in Egypt took courageous action that undermined Pharaoh's oppression by protecting the very women and children among a marginalized migrant minority that he targeted. The connection between the midwives and Aaron, however, remained far more subtle for me until I re-encountered a passage of Talmud that I had last taught for the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2016 before Karen and I got married.

There are many reasons why the Exodus narrative tells us the names of these heroines but never reports the name of the Pharaoh, which is not a name but instead a title for each of Egypt's ancient kings. On the other hand, the midwives' names, while of clear Semitic origins as shown in parallel texts from the ancient Mediterranean, are not actually Hebrew monikers. Our ancient rabbinic sages regarded neither of those features of the first chapter in Exodus as accidents; on the contrary, that juxtaposition of a nameless male tyrant with two mysteriously-named women from unknown backgrounds gave the early rabbis ample room for interpretation.

Indeed, the ambiguity in the phrase "Hebrew midwives" gave rise to a debate that lasted for centuries, and in some ways it continues today. Ancient rabbinic sages asked whether those

midwives were Hebrews themselves or rather Egyptian allies supporting their Hebrew sisters in childbirth. (Both are legitimate ways of reading the Biblical Hebrew text, depending on how one parses that phrase.) A pair of Babylonian rabbis in the Talmud, who agreed that the midwives must have been Hebrews, address the matter of their non-Hebrew names by saying those were just Egyptian nicknames for Israelite heroines otherwise identified later in Exodus.

In BT Sotah 11b, Rav and Shmuel concur that one of the two midwives was definitely Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Their dispute focuses on whether the other midwife was Yocheved, the mother of those three central figures of the Torah's middle books, or rather Elisheva, the wife of Aaron and mother of his famous priestly line known for millennia as Kohanim. While that debate deserves exploration, I believe the common ground between Rav and Shmuel about the Hebrew midwives' true identities carries greater significance, especially for how their interpretations can help us to imagine Aaron's personal transformation into the Israelites' first High Priest.

In order to appreciate how and why Aaron's direct relationship with the Hebrew midwives is so important, we must note that the debate between Rav and Shmuel arises partly in response to the teaching of their counterpart Rav Avira. His teaching that "on account of the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from [slavery in] Egypt" actually opens the extended Talmudic passage on BT Sotah 11b in which Rav and Shmuel discuss Yocheved, Miriam and Elisheva as rebels in their own right. This vision of Aaron's mother, sister and wife as subversive agents of resistance helps us better understand Aaron's character development. Even though he and these women initially get scant attention in the text, the implication of the Talmudic passage above is that only by virtue of his female counterparts does he become the leader who assists Moses first in confronting Pharaoh and then in bringing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to become a "nation of priests" at Mount Sinai and in the Wilderness.

For almost ten years, I've taught the material above as feminist bible interpretation. After the past two weeks, I now see it as inspiration for my feminist spiritual activism as the son, brother-in-law, husband and colleague of strong women working in their own ways to repair a broken world. Aaron is our son's middle name in Hebrew not just because it honors Karen's late paternal grandfather, but because that biblical leader stood at the nexus of ancient female leaders whose righteousness merited the redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. That is the moral of the story, so to speak, and I share it with all of you now so that women's power - especially in its subversive and redemptive forms - can become even less hidden and even more intrinsically a part of our son's upbringing. Karen and I hope that our son Lev Aharon will learn from the strong female leaders in his family and his community so that, like his namesake in Exodus 28:30, "Aaron shall carry the judgment of the people of Israel upon his heart before the Lord at all times."

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Secular New Year!

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