

## Hearing the Cry: Miriam, Pharaoh's Daughter, and Moral Courage



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At times of difficulty, uncertainty, and strife, I often find comfort and courage in stories, especially stories about people who connect and transform or resolve conflict. This week's parsha, Shemot (Exodus 1:1-6:1), gives me such a story of hope in its portrayal of the relationship between two people from groups in conflict.

After the triumphant conclusion of the book of Genesis, the rise of a new pharaoh ushers in an era characterized by fear, distrust along ethnic lines, and the imposition of harsh labor. Exodus 1 ends with Pharaoh's ominous decree: "Every [Hebrew] boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile but let every girl live." (Ex. 1:22)

The story hinges on a pivotal encounter between two women, who forge a partnership that bridges across a dangerous social divide: Pharaoh's daughter (unnamed in the text but named Bitya in rabbinic literature), and an endangered baby's older sister (unnamed here but named Miriam later in Exodus). Centering on their process of relationship-building provides us with a model for and transforming a bleak situation into a livable one.

While the midrash imagines that Bitya converted and became part of the Hebrew people, thus providing a rationale for why an Egyptian woman would defy the pharaoh's decree (BT Megillah 13a), for this reading I prefer to think of her as an Egyptian princess who maintained her sense of peoplehood, belonging, and spirituality within the Egyptian context. Thus, when she hears baby Moses cry, she hears not the cry of a fellow Jew but the cry of a fellow human being. When she defies her father's decree, she does so as a person solidly located within Egyptian society. And, when Bitya and Miriam encounter and engage one another, they do not do so as sisters in the Hebrew community, but as two people connecting around common values and purpose, while maintaining their differences, including differences in power.

Like Pharaoh's daughter, the midrash recognizes Miriam as a child of a communal leader, who displayed a courageous inclination to defy community norms. The midrash expands her heroism of accompanying her baby brother to ensure his safety to include a backstory of her challenging her father when he decreed for the Hebrew slave community that not even baby girls should be born (Sotah 12a). However, we cannot assume that Bitya and Miriam engaged each other the same way they did with their families, especially given the fraught circumstances.

A close reading of the text of their story, told in five verses in Exodus 2, reveals distinctive features in each of their voices and postures as they approach each other and their relationship emerges. When reading texts, whether they are contemporary interview transcripts or ancient literary texts, to gain an understanding about a person or character's inner experience, psychologist Carol Gilligan recommends listening for the verbs used by the narrator to describe each character. She advises creating a poem of just those verbs in the order they appear to gain a sense of movement of the person's self, psyche, or spirit over time, as well as listening to the actual words attributed to each character. Through these methods, we hear how Bitya and Miriam's voices sounded and how they postured themselves to make a connection at this precarious time.

Gleaning just the verbs from the text that the Biblical storyteller used for Miriam, we have the following poem:

And she stood	וּתְתַצֵּב
And she said	וּתְאָמֵר
And she went	וּתְלַךְ
And she called	וּתְקַרָא

Miriam's poem consists of four verbs or actions, that are all different. Half are physical - standing still and moving; and half are spoken with two different kinds of speaking.

The Biblical text quotes Miriam's own words to Bitya:

הָאֵלֶּךְ וְקִרְאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיְּבֵרֵת מִן הָעִבְרִית וְתִינֶנְךָ  
לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד:

"Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to nurse the child for you?"

With the Egyptian princess Miriam is deferential. However, her question is not submissive but rather suggestive. Astoundingly, the enslaved girl uses no honorifics in speaking to the princess, showing none of the linguistic deference we might have expected in such an encounter. Miriam's voice is smart, savvy, and strategic. From a disenfranchised and vulnerable position, she is navigating this distressing situation with nuance and subtle leadership. Just as Bitya does not denigrate baby Moses or Miriam, Miriam does not diminish Bitya's humanity by vilifying her.

Listening to the poem of verbs used to describe Bitya also provides us with a window into her inner experience:

And she came down	וְתָרַד
And she saw	וְתָרָא
And she sent	וְתִשְׁלַח
And she took	וְתִקַּח
And she opened	וְתִפְתַּח
And she saw	וְתָרָא
And she felt compassion	וְתִחַמַּל
And she said	וְתֹאמַר
And she said	וְתֹאמַר
And she said	וְתֹאמַר
And she called	וְתִקְרָא
And she said	וְתֹאמַר

Bitya has more narrative, more verbs, and more quotations than Miriam. This poem has a major turning point: Bitya starts off actively engaged and then fully shifts to speaking. When we look back in the narrative, we see in the plot what was happening when this shift took place: it is immediately after she sees - encounters - a crying baby and one that has no one to console it. Crying is the paradigmatic communication that cuts across humanity. Bitya is not only moved by the suffering of another human being, but her compassion is resistance toward the social forces of dehumanization that surrounds her.

Bitya's encounter with the humanity of the baby prompts her shift from acting to speaking and into relationships with multiple other people, as evident by the five times she is

quoted in the text. She recognizes the baby for who he is and speaks for the first time saying, "This must be a Hebrew child." Bitya is presumably speaking with her maidservants, with whom we had not previously heard any verbal exchange. Miriam likely hears Bitya's acknowledgement of the baby and perhaps feels her compassion, and she then ventures to speak directly to her. When Bitya and Miriam each say something, the text notes that they say it to the other. After Miriam offers to find someone to nurse the baby, Bitya instructs her לָכֵי / "Go." Bitya also instructs Yocheved, Moses's mother, to care for the baby and offers her compensation. When Yocheved brings the baby back, the narrator tells us that Bitya uses her speech to give him a name. While Miriam uses her intelligence and gall to diplomatically engage Bitya and promote a recommendation, Bitya conveys a sense of command to bring the plan to action. Each woman finds agency to form their partnership.

This story illustrates two people breaking social norms, resisting the pressures of polarization. They were different in many ways - religion, ethnicity, social status, power - but they connected on a human level. Instead of operating according to a system with Egyptians against Hebrews, they were they rewrote the social structure to be a system that arrayed those who wanted to save the baby against those who did not.

As we navigate our contentious, polarized, vilifying and dehumanizing times, we can be inspired by Miriam's boldness and Bitya's compassion, and their courage in engaging with each other despite their differences.

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