



Parashat Shemot

Saving Our Youth from the Crocodiles

by Martin Rawlings-Fein on Friday January 08, 2010

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Exodus 1:1 - 6:1

Shemot, or Names, is this weeks Parashat and in it we follow the life of Moses through birth, exile, and his eventual return to Egypt. We begin by reading the names of those sons of Israel who have followed Joseph down to Egypt and then we turn left and end up with a Pharaoh who just happens to either not know, or care, that Joseph ever existed. As the reading goes on we find that this new Pharaoh says to his people, "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are. Get ready, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase, and a war befall us, and they join our enemies and depart from the land". (Exodus 1:9-10) He starts off slow with a tax to build grain houses but the Hebrews happily give and continue their stay in Egypt. "So the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with back breaking labor". (Exodus 1:13) And when they continued to multiply even under such a heavy burden, the gloves came off in a way that chills.

And he [the Pharaoh] said, [to the Midwives] "When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall put him to death, but if it is a daughter, she may live". (Exodus 1:16)

We are told the names of the Midwives, but Torah never reveals the name of the Pharaoh. The Egyptian ruler is a vehicle to drive the story rather than an individual of note.

Moses' parents bear him under this oppressive regime, and his mother hides him for three months until she can safely take him to the Nile marshes and send his sister to watch over him. The baby is plucked from the Nile by the Pharaoh's daughter. She names him Moses and he goes on to lead the Israelite people out of Egypt. Moses' new mother is a G-d send to the little child in the reeds. Upon seeing the distress and the way he was sent down the Nile, she knows that this must be a Hebrew child. She takes him in as her child and finds a Hebrew woman, his birth mother, to nurse him. The nurturing kindness that the Pharaoh's daughter shows is in direct opposition to her father's wickedness.

Moses' birth parents sent their three month old infant into the treacherous waters of the Nile and then they sent the older child, Miriam, to watch over him. What kind of parent sends their



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children into such a terrible place with threat of bull hippos and large crocodiles abounding? Moses' birth mother exposed her children to these dangers in order to save their lives. A hard task for any mother to undertake.

This part of the Parsha reminds me of the fear that many parents have about their queer children. Some would rather send their children out into the cold wet world than bear rejection by their communities because of having a queer child. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 575,000 to 1.6 million homeless and runaway youth are living on the streets from New York City to Los Angeles. Of these, between 20 and 40 percent are LGBT , according to the 2007 seminal study, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness" by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). Approximately 800 -1,600 queer homeless youth are estimated to live in San Francisco alone. A staggering 50 percent of queer teens experience a negative reaction from their parents when they come out and 26 percent are kicked out of their family homes by those same parents (1).

The other children, like Miriam in the Moses story, are left as intermediaries between parent and queer sibling. These straight siblings pass along messages to parents about health and well being of their queer offspring but sometimes keep their relationship with such siblings a complete secret. These siblings act as the only connection to the young person's roots. In fact, many queer youth will come out and disclose their sexuality to their siblings before anybody else in their families (2). The bond of siblings is one of familiarity beyond that of parent and child. However, some siblings will be like the parents and drop contact with their queer family. This causes queer youth to piece together a "chosen family" from friends and those in similar situations.

These new forms of chosen family afford the support and encouragement that sustains these queer youth who have been cast aside by their birth families. Like Moses, queer youth are forced out of their homes and into the wide world. Where they either sink or swim depending on the current. They could find that they are eaten by the modern crocodiles of substance use or survival sex, or they just might find siblings and or chosen family that sustains and nourishes their soul; helping them thrive in a culture that does not value their humanity. Our own government devalues what it means to be queer, when they deny us equality on very basic rights like marriage and burial (3). These issues are not merely about our queer youth, they are societal and affect us all.

When families and parents reject and neglect their children, when fear overrides the urge to nurture, then we as a people have to rise up and say "No More!" And in turning this Parashat around until it speaks to us as modern progressive Jews, we find the deeper meaning of G-d's remembering his people during their bondage. G-d has not forsaken those who have been expelled from their childhood homes out of fear and ignorance, G-d remembers them and sends inspiration to sustain and nourish their chosen families. And in turn those families will



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become stronger and thrive in this harsh world. Like with Moses, G-d sends the Pharaoh's daughter, in the form of chosen family, to take in both queer youth and adults alike and give them the love and understanding that they deserve.

If in some form or another G-d eventually softens the hearts of those blinded by fear of difference, may we be ready to embrace our birth families when they are drawn to open those connections once again. Let's not let the Pharaohs of the world win with their dastardly plot to take our children and throw them to the crocodiles, instead let's nurture, inspire, sustain and nourish our communities and chosen families. Because if I have learned anything from Shemot, it is that every human being has a potential greatness that transcends all beginnings.

References 1. http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/homeless_youth 2. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/a45044h7x4005r45/fulltext.pdf> 3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-segal/rhode-island-governor-vet_b_354888.html



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