

## The Evolution of Biblical Women: From Genesis to Exodus

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### Source 1: "The righteous women of that generation"

**תלמוד בבלי, מסכת סוטה יא:**  
דרש רב עורא: בשכר נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור, נגאלו ישראל ממצרים. בשעה שהולכות לשאוב מים, הקדוש ברוך הוא מזמן להם דגים קטנים בדיקהן ושואבות מנחה מים ומנחה דגים, ובאותן ושופות שתי קדרות, אחת של חמין ואחת של דגים, ומוליכות אצל בעליהן לשדה ומרחיצות אותן וסכות אותן ומאכילות אותן ומשקות אותן ונוקקות להן בין שפתיים, שנאמר: "אם תשקבון בין שפתיים" וגו' (תהלים ס"ח, 14).... וכיון שמתעברות, באות לבתיהם, וכיון שמגיע זמן מולדיהן, הולכות ויולדות בשדה תחת התפוח, שנאמר: "תחת התפוח עוררתיך" וגו' (שיר השירים ח', 7). והקדוש ברוך הוא שולח משמי מרום מי שמנקיר ומשפיר אותן כחיה זו שמשפרת את תולד, שנאמר: "ומולדותיך ביום הולדת אותך לא כרת שרך ובמים לא רחצת למשעלי" וגו' (יחזקאל ט"ו, 4), ומלקט להן שני עגוליו, אחד של שמן ואחד של דבש, שנאמר: "ויניקהו דבש מסלע ושמן" וגו' (דברים ל"ב, 13). וכיון שמפירין בהן מצרים, באין להורגן, ונעשה להם יס ויבלעין בקרקע ומביאין שורים וחורשין על גבן, שנאמר: "על גבי חרשו חרשים" וגו' (תהלים קכ"ט, 3). לאחר שהולכין, היו מבצבצין ויוצאין פעשב השדה, שנאמר: "ורבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך" (יחזקאל ט"ז, 7), וכיון שמתגדליו, באין עדרים עדרים לבתיהן, שנאמר: "ותרפי ותגדלי ותבאי בעדי עדיים" (יחזקאל ט"ז, 7). אל תקרי "בעדי עדיים", אלא "בעדרי עדרים". וכשנגלה הקדוש ברוך הוא על הים, הם הפירוהו תחלה, שנאמר: "זה א-לי ואנוהו" (שמות ט"ו, 2).

### Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah 11b

Rabbi Avira expounded: On account of the righteous women who lived in that generation, the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt. When they went to draw water, God summoned small fish in their pitchers for them, and they drew half water and half fish. They went and heated two pots, one of hot water and the other of fish, and they brought them to their husbands in the field and bathed them and anointed them and fed them and gave them to drink and had relations with them between the sheepfolds, as is written: "If you lie among the sheepfolds" (Psalms 68, 14).... When they became pregnant, they went to their houses, and when it came time to give birth, they went to give birth in the field beneath the apple tree, as is written: "Under the apple tree I roused you" (Song of Songs 8, 7). And God sent from heaven one who would cleanse them, like an animal that cleans its newborn, as is written: "As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, and you were not bathed in water to smooth you" (Ezekiel 16, 4), and gather for them two cakes, one made with oil and the other with honey, as is written: "He fed them honey from the rock, and oil" (Deuteronomy 32, 13). And when the Egyptians realized, they came to kill them, and they were miraculously saved by covering them with soil and bringing oxen and plowing the ground over them, as is written: "Plowmen plowed across my back" (Psalms 129, 3). After they left, they would rise to the surface and break through like grass, as is written: "I let you grow like plants of the field" (Ezekiel 16, 7), and when they emerged, they would come in flocks to their homes, as is written: "And you continued to grow up until you

reached womanhood” (Ezekiel 16, 7). Do not read “womanhood”; rather, read “in flocks.” And when God was revealed at the sea, they recognized God first, as is written: “This is my God and I will enshrine Him” (Exodus 15, 2).

Guiding questions:

1. What were the Israelites’ women’s husbands doing (“in the fields”) while they were preparing food and drink and a bath for them?
2. Note the string of verbs used to describe what the women did when they visited their husbands in the fields (line 5 in the English: “bathed... anointed... etc”). What is surprising or unexpected about this description, given what you know (or infer) about marriage in biblical times?
3. The women went out to the fields to become pregnant, then went home during their pregnancy, and went back out to the fields to give birth. Why?
4. Why did the babies have to emerge from the ground on their own and make their own way home? Why didn’t their mothers help them?

Source 2: Moshe's wife (Yocheved)

**שמות ב'**

ב ותהר האשה ותלד בן ותרא אותו כי טוב הוא ותצפנהו שלשה ירחים:  
ג ולא יקלה עוד הצפינו ותקחלו תבת גמא ותחמרה בחמר ובזפת ותשם בה את הילד ותשם בסוף  
על שפת היאר:

**Exodus 2**

- (2) The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months.
- (3) When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.

**ספר הפרשיות בעריכת אליהו כי טוב, על פי המדרש והראשונים**  
"ולא יקלה עוד הצפינו" - הילד הולך ומתחזק וקולו נשמע; שלמו תשעה חדשים מליל חלומנו של פרעה וישליחו כפר החלו יוצאים בכל בית ובית ובולשים במחילות ובמערות; -  
אותה שעה, הגתה יוכבד עצה עמוקה בלבה וכונה דעתה לדעת המקום, ואולם מלבא לפומא לא גלגא, לא גלתה עצתה לשום איש אף לא לעמרם בעלה. אמרה: "מחשבה מועלת אפילו לדבר מצוה", כל שכן שהדבור בוגד; החרישה לדעת אם יצליח ה' עצתה.  
אמרה יוכבד בלבה, והלא כל עצמו של פרעה ואשר גור על מקדים, לא התבנו אלא על ילד זה; והילד הזה היה יתה כי טוב הוא ואין הקדוש ברוך הוא עושה נסים לחנם; והילד הזה כל זמן שהוא בביתו, הוא בחזקת סכנת ודאי, יוציאוהו מחוץ לביתו - כל שכן שהסכנה גדולה יותר; שלשה חדשים צפנתי אותו וחשבתני שמתוך כך תבטל גזרת פרעה, והרי היא לא בטלה, ולא עוד אלא שחזקה יותר וכבר איני יכולה להצפינו עוד - משמע שגזרת פרעה צריכה להתקיים בו - ואף על פי כן היה יתה ויגדל מושיע ישראל - כיצד יתקומו שני הדברים הללו יחד? -  
אשליכהו לאור, אני בודי, ואעשה לו הצלה וחיים שם, בתוך היאור.... הגזרה תתקיים ומיניו ישמר; -  
הלכה ועשתה כעצתה.

**Sefer HaParshiot, edited by Eliahu Ki-Tov, based on the Midrash and medieval commentaries**

"She could hide him no longer" - The baby got stronger and stronger, and his voice could be heard. Nine months had passed since the night of Pharaoh's dream<sup>1</sup>, and his agents had already begun to enter every home and search in tunnels and caves; -

At that moment, Yocheved thought of an ingenious plan, in keeping with God's intention, but she didn't breathe a word of it, not to anyone, and not even to her husband Amram. She said, "An improper thought disqualifies even a religious act," and even more so speech disqualifies it; she kept quiet and waited to find out if God would help her plan succeed.

Yocheved said to herself, All of Pharaoh's being, and his decree against the children, is aimed exclusively at this child; and this child will surely live because he is good, and God doesn't make miracles in vain; for as long as this child is in his house, he is absolutely in danger, if he is removed from his house - he will certainly be in even greater danger; for three months I hid him and thought that, by so doing, Pharaoh's decree would be revoked, but not only was it not

1. Nine months had passed since the night of Pharaoh's dream - On the night that Moshe was conceived, Pharaoh dreamt that the redeemer of the Israelites had been conceived.

revoked, it was strengthened, and I can no longer hide him. It seems as though Pharaoh's decree must be fulfilled through him - and even so, he will surely live and the savior of Israel will grow - how can these two things both come to fruition?

I will throw him into the Nile with my own hands, and I will provide deliverance and life for him there, in the Nile.... The decree will be fulfilled and his life will be protected; - she went out and did as she had planned.

Guiding questions:

1. According to the *midrash*, Yocheved gave birth to Moshe at the beginning of her seventh month of gestation. Why is this significant to this plot line?
2. Why didn't Yocheved tell Amram about her plan?
3. The Jewish legal context for the rule that "an improper thought disqualifies even a religious act" is regarding Temple sacrifices. In what way(s) is this legal context an appropriate analogy to Yocheved's situation?
4. How does Yocheved's plan of hiding Moshe in the Nile fulfill both Pharaoh's decree and God's intention?
5. Think of a dilemma similar to Yocheved's that one of the matriarchs faced (for example, Sarah's desire to protect Yitzchak from Yishmael's influence - Genesis 21, or Rivkah's desire to protect Ya'akov from Esav - Genesis 27). What actions did she take, and how do these compare to Yocheved's actions to protect her son?

Source 3: Moshe's sister (Miriam)

**שמות ב'**

א וילך איש מבית לוי ויקח את-בת-לוי...

ד ותתצב אחותו מרחק לדעה מה-יעשה לו...

ז ותאמר אחותו אל-בת-פרעה האלף וקראתי לך אשה מינקת מן העברית ותניק לך את-הילד:

**Exodus 2**

- (1) A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.
- (4) And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.
- (7) Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you ah Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?"

**תלמוד בבלי, מסכת סוטה יב.**

"וילך איש מבית לוי" - להיכן הלך? אמר רב יהודה בר זבינא: שהלך בעצת בתו. תנא: עמרם גדול הדור היה. פיו שראה שאמר פרעה הרשע, "כל הבן הילוד תשליכוהו", אמר, לשוא אני עמלני. עמד וגרש את אשתו, עמדו כלן וגרשו את נשותיהן. אמרה לו בתו: אבא, קשה גזרתך יותר משל פרעה, שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים, ואתה גזרת על הזכרים ועל הנקבות; פרעה לא גזר אלא בעולם הזה, ואתה בעולם הזה ולעולם הבא; פרעה הרשע ספק מתקומת גזרתו ספק אינה מתקומת, אתה צדיק בודאי שגזרתך מתקומת, שנאמר: "ותגור אומר ויקום לך" (איוב כ"ב, 28). עמד והחזיר את אשתו, עמדו כלן והחזירו את נשותיהן.

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah 12a**

"A certain man of the house of Levi went" - Where did he go? Rav Yehudah bar Z'vina said: He went with his daughter's suggestion. We learned: Amram was the greatest scholar of his generation. When he saw that the evil Pharaoh had said, "Every boy that is born shall you throw into the Nile," he said, Our work is in vain. He went and divorced his wife, and all the Israelites went and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him: Father, your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's, for Pharaoh decreed only against the boys, and you decreed against the boys and the girls; Pharaoh decreed only in this world, and you decreed in this world and in the world to come; the evil Pharaoh, maybe his decree will be fulfilled and maybe it won't, but you, a righteous man, your decree will surely be fulfilled, as is written: "You will decree and it will be fulfilled" (Job 22, 28). He went and remarried his wife, and they all went and remarried their wives.

Guiding questions:

1. What is the textual problem or anomaly that Rav Yehudah bar Z'vina tries to solve with this *midrash*?
2. Why does Pharaoh's decree cause Amram to be engulfed in despair ("Our work is in vain")? Is his despair total, extending to every aspect of his life, or is it limited to his family life? Explain.
3. In what way(s) can divorce, or refusal to procreate, be considered a decree not only in this world, but also in the world to come?

4. Miriam makes two additional appearances in Exodus 2: in verse 4 -

"וַתִּתְצַב אָחוֹתוֹ מֵרֹחַק לִדְעוֹתָהּ מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ."

"And the sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him."

and in verses 7-8 -

"וַתֹּאמֶר אָחוֹתוֹ אֶל־בֶּת־פַּרְעֹה הַאֵלֶּה וְקָרָאתִי לָהּ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקוֹת מִן הָעִבְרִית וְתִינַק לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד.  
וַתֹּאמֶר־לָהּ בֶּת־פַּרְעֹה לְכִי וְתִלְדִי הַעֲלֵמָה וְתִקְרָא אֶת־אִם הַיֶּלֶד."

"Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?' And Pharaoh's daughter answered, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother."

What similarities and differences do you notice between the ways in which Miriam acts and speaks in the *midrash* and in these two further appearances? How do these references fill out the portrait of Miriam as a young girl?

5. Think of a sister among the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis (for example, Dinah in Genesis 34). How do her actions, as reported in the text or the *midrash*, compare to Miriam's actions in this chapter?

Source 4: Moshe's wife (Tziporah)

**שמות ד'**

כד ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשוהו ה' ויבקש המיתו:  
כה ותקח צפרה צר ותקרות את ערלת בנה ותגע לרגליו ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי:  
כו וירף ממנו אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת:

**Exodus 4**

- (24) At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him.  
(25) So Tziporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!"  
(26) And when He let him alone, she added: "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."

**תלמוד בבלי, מסכת נדרים לא-לב.**

תנא, רבי יהושע בן קורחא אומר: גדולה מילה, שכל זכויות שעשה משה רבינו לא עמדו לו כשנתרשל מן המילה, שנאמר: "ויפגשוהו ה' ויבקש המיתו" (שמות ד', 24).  
אמר רבי חס ושלום שמשה רבינו נתרשל מן המילה! אלא כך אמר: אמול ואצא, ספנה היא, שנאמר: "ויהי ביום השלישי בהיותם פואבים" וגו' (בראשית ל"ד, 25). אמול ואשקה שלשה ימים, הקדוש ברוך הוא אמר לי: "לך שוב מצרים" (שמות ד', 19). אלא מפני מה נענש משה! מפני שנתעסק במלון תחלה, שנאמר: "ויהי בדרך במלון" (שמות ד', 24).  
רבו שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: לא למשה רבינו בקש שטן להרוג, אלא לאותו תינוק, שנאמר: "כי חתן דמים אתה לי" (שמות ד', 25). צא וראה, מי קרוי חתן? הוי אומר: זה התינוק.  
דרש רבי יהודה בר ביצנא: בשעה שנתרשל משה רבינו מן המילה, באו אף וחמה ובלעוהו, ולא שירו ממנו אלא רגליו. מיד ותקח צפרה צר ותקרות את ערלת בנה" (שמות ד', 25). מיד "וירף ממנו" (שמות ד', 26).

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate N'darim 31b-32a**

We learned in a baraita: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah says: Circumcision is great, because all of the good deeds that Moshe our teacher did weren't enough to offset his neglecting to perform circumcise, as is written: "The Lord encountered him and sought to kill him" (Exodus 4, 24). Rabbi (= Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi) said: Heaven forbid that Moshe neglected to perform circumcision! Rather, this is what he said: If I circumcise and go on a journey, it will be dangerous, as is written: "On the third day, when they were in pain" etc. (Genesis 34, 25). If I circumcise and wait three days, God instructed me: "Go back to Egypt" (Exodus 4, 19). Rather, why was Moshe punished? Because he attended to the lodging arrangements first, as is written: "At a night encampment on the way" (Exodus 4, 24).

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: It wasn't Moshe whom Satan wanted to kill, but rather his baby, as is written: "You are truly a bridegroom of blood for me" (Exodus 4, 25). Go and see, who is called a bridegroom? You must admit, it is the baby.

Rabbi Yehudah bar Bizna expounded: When Moshe neglected to circumcise, Af and Chemah (two serpents) came and swallowed him, and all they left of him were his legs. Immediately "Tziporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin" (Exodus 4, 25). Immediately "He let him alone" (Exodus 4, 26).

Guiding questions:

1. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah and Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi disagree as to whether Moshe's failure to circumcise his newborn son was neglectful or not. In what ways was it neglectful? In what ways was it something other than neglectful? With which opinion do you agree?
2. According to Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, why was Moshe punished? Why is this a punishable offense?
3. In what ways is the term "bridegroom" more applicable to the baby than to the father? (Hint: What is the traditional congregational response to the blessing immediately preceding the circumcision?)
4. According to the *midrash*, why was Moshe unable to perform the circumcision at that moment? How did Tziporah come to the realization that, by quickly performing the circumcision herself, she would be able to save her husband?
5. Think of a crisis similar to Tziporah's that one of the matriarchs faced in relation to her husband (for example, Rachel's concern for her sister Leah's honor on her wedding night - Genesis 29, or Sarah's imprisonment at the hands of Pharaoh - Genesis 12). What actions did she take, and how do these compare to Tziporah's actions to save her husband?