

**Strangers: Heroines of the Exodus**  
**Shabbat Shmot 5779 – 12/29/18**  
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I approve of one and only one Cardinal Sin.

When I attended college at Wash U in St. Louis, it didn't take long before I heard of the famed local custard shop. Ted Drewes' is to St. Louis like Lou Malnati's is to Chicago. But Ted Drewes' custard is Kosher, which means I can order a Cardinal Sin sundae. Creamy vanilla custard, thick hot fudge, and tart cherries make this the local favorite named after the red-clad Cardinals baseball team. That's right, this Cardinal Sin is Kosher.

Here's the story of how the chain became Kosher:

About twenty years ago Ted Drewes Jr., the owner, had complications from a surgery. The cardiologist on duty stayed by his bed throughout another long surgery though Drewes wasn't his direct doctor. This cardiologist, an Orthodox Jew named Dr. Craig Reiss, struck up a connection with the patient and later became friends with Drewes. At some point the doctor asked about the ingredients in the custard to see if it was easy to become certified Kosher. It was, and they remain so today.

The legend is that Drewes made it Kosher so the doctor and his family could eat there. The doctor says, "When people in the Jewish community see me they say, 'That's Dr. Reiss who made Ted Drewes kosher,' instead of 'That's Dr. Reiss the cardiologist.'"

This is a sweet story. At its core, this is a story about kindness to strangers. I love that the kindness of one man benefitted so many more, ultimately the Kosher community in St. Louis. And I believe that Drewes was captured by the doctor's *kindness to him*, remaining by a stranger's bedside for endless hours, as much as his surgical acumen.

Be kind to the stranger: they may grow up to change the world, or at least yours.

Certainly you already know the importance of being kind to the stranger. We intuit this from personal experience. Each of us has been a stranger at different points in our lives whenever we were new to a certain place.

You also know that being kind to the stranger is a Mitzvah from the Torah. Deuteronomy 10:19 says, "Love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." We the Jewish People experienced the utmost cruelty when we were strangers, so we have a double responsibility to never let that happen to anyone else. This much we already knew.

The surprise, at least for me, is that Parshat Shmot, today's opening Parsha in the Book of Exodus, itself focuses *repeatedly* on interactions with strangers. The Parsha articulates two extreme reactions to the other, the stranger. The first view opposes them with utmost force. While the second is an equally forceful embrace.

Only eight verses into the story do we read an ominous verse:

*VaYakom Melech Hadash Al Mitzrayim Asher Lo Yada Et Yosef.*

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know of Joseph.

Suddenly the Israelites are no longer the royal vizier's family but the enemy of the state. This new Pharaoh embodies xenophobia. He tells his people that because the Israelites are numerous, they are a mortal threat. For the sake of Egypt, they must be enslaved.

Pharaoh sees the stranger as an adversary. Of course Pharaoh will be defeated in the Exodus story, but this is not only a *military* defeat. It's also a *philosophical* defeat. G-d's deliverance represents an obliteration of Pharaoh and his wicked worldview. G-d is on the side of the strangers, in Egypt and beyond.

But this mistreatment of the Israelite strangers is only half the story. The Torah demonstrates the *positive value* of reaching out to the stranger in three courageous acts that follow Pharaoh's genocidal decree.

- The first is Shifra and Pua.
- The second is Pharaoh's daughter.
- And the third is a young Moses.

Shifra and Pua are the Hebrew midwives charged with delivering the Israelite babies. Pharaoh commands them to kill the baby boys but let the girls live. The Torah continues, "The midwives feared G-d and did not do as the King of Egypt instructed. They let the boys live" (Ex. 1:17). When Pharaoh saw Jewish babies being born, he confronted Shifra and Pua. "How could you let them live?" he cried out. They replied, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are vigorous. Before the midwife can reach them, they've given birth" (Ex. 1:19).

If courage had a Hall of Fame, these two women would stand at its entrance. Are these women Jewish? I don't believe so. "Hebrew midwives" can mean midwives for the Hebrews. Why would Pharaoh ever expect a Jewish woman to murder Jewish babies? Instead they are two Egyptian women who fear G-d more than Pharaoh, who refuse to take part in a crime against humanity. Shifra and Pua see the stranger as themselves and are thus worth saving. Who knows who these innocent babies might grow up to be? We do. Moses was one of them. Moses, whose people would

one day create in the state of Israel a Tel Aviv maternity hospital at the intersection of Shifra and Pua Streets.

There's an inspiring story in my favorite Haggadah, called A Different Night. It goes like this: "One Sunday morning in 1941 in Nazi-occupied Netherlands, a mysterious character rode up on his bicycle and entered the Calvinist Church. He ascended the podium and read aloud the story of the midwives who saved the Hebrew babies and defied Pharaoh's policy of genocide.

'Who is today's Pharaoh?' he asked.

'Hitler,' the congregation replied.

'Who are today's Hebrew babies?'

'The Jews.'

'Who will be today's midwives?'

He left the church, leaving his question hanging in the air. During the war seven families from this little church hid Jews and other resisters of the Nazis."

Shifra and Pua inspired these families to see the stranger as an insider, not an outsider. They changed the world for these families.

In our second act, Pharaoh's daughter sees strangers as worth saving too. We all know that when she goes down to the Nile to bathe, she sees the basket floating in the river. When she opens it she sees a baby boy crying. Knowing this must be an Israelite - because why else would there be a boy floating in a box amidst a genocidal decree? - she raises him as her own child. She names him Moses.

If any Egyptian were to save an Israelite boy, they would display Herculean courage because their life would be at risk by defying Pharaoh. But for this woman, Pharaoh was *her own father*. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Instead of 'Pharaoh's daughter' read 'Hitler's daughter' or 'Stalin's daughter' and we see what is at stake. Tyranny cannot destroy humanity. Moral courage can sometimes be found in the heart of darkness. It means that when it comes to people, we must never generalize, never stereotype. The Egyptians were not all evil: even from Pharaoh himself a heroine was born."

What was the result of Pharaoh's daughter's kindness to this stranger? Moses, the man who would champion freedom for all for all time. The Torah lauds her kindness to the other by using the name *she alone* gave the child - Moses. The Midrash says, "Even G-d did not call him by any other name."

Speaking of names, what was hers?

The Torah never provides a first name but five times uses the appellation "Pharaoh's daughter."

It's the Torah's way of underlining the fact that the tyrant is also her own father, of magnifying her chutzpah. However, the biblical book First Book of Chronicles names a daughter of Pharaoh as Bitya. The Rabbis believe this was the Pharaoh's daughter of Exodus who saved Moses. Bitya, more commonly known as Batya, means "daughter of G-d."

Why on earth would G-d name the daughter of the enemy "G-d's daughter"? The Midrash answers, "G-d said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Moses was not your son, but you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.'"

Like Shifra and Pua, Pharaoh's daughter sees something in the stranger worth saving. That someone - Moses - saves our people and changes the world.

Act three sees Moses stand up to protect innocent strangers at the Midianite well. Moses has fled Egypt because he was seen killing an Egyptian in the act of protecting an Israelite slave. He stops at a well in Midian and sees male shepherds harassing women who have come to draw water for their sheep. But when Moses sees this, he intercedes for them and wins.

Here Moses is not standing up for his family or his people, as he did in Egypt. He's standing up for complete and total strangers. Alone and outnumbered, without the protections of the royal palace, this stranger's kindness to another stranger is nothing short of heroic. This gesture changes the world at large: Mere verses after this, G-d speaks to Moses at the Burning Bush and charges him with leading the Israelites. The juxtaposition tells me it was his intercession for strangers that confirmed for G-d that this man was up to the task of caring for a nation of strangers. This singular gesture changes Moses's own world too - one of the young women he protects becomes his wife Tzipora.

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In only the very *first two chapters* of Exodus, we encounter a hostile rejection of strangers on Pharaoh's part, and the loving embrace of strangers by Shifra and Pua, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses.

Strangerhood is a key takeaway of the Exodus narrative not just because we were slaves, though for that reason alone, Dayeinu. It's deeper than that. Had it not been for the loving embrace of strangers by three Egyptian women, Moses never could have taken the stage.

This time we read the Exodus story, let us not only condemn Pharaoh but also praise his midwives and daughter for their unmatched bravery. The Exodus experience reveals humanity at its lowest point and at its highest.

Most of us, I pray, will not face similar life and death scenarios as did these women. Their model is one that inspires but one that also seems distant. The Moses example is much more common. When one group is bullying a more vulnerable group, the easy thing to do is remain silent. But that's not the Moses thing to do, the Jewish thing to do.

Perhaps even more familiar to our world is the example of Dr. Craig Reiss. There was no danger, no harassment, just the simple gesture of spending time with someone when they needed someone to see them as a person.

We can all do that.

Shabbat Shalom.