

Shabbat Shmot 5786
From Pharaoh's Daughter to Ahmed El Ahmed
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Less than one month ago, we witnessed humanity at its darkest capacity. Yet on that very same day, in the very same place, we also saw humanity at its greatest potential.

December 14th, 2025 was supposed to be a joyous Hanukkah celebration in Sydney, Australia on Bondi Beach. We were all devastated to learn that instead two terrorists killed 15 Jews who had gathered there. Not long after the initial headlines, though, the news began to report that a civilian was rumored to have confronted one of the terrorists, saving many lives. Once the story was confirmed, I felt a deep need to know this person's name. Who was this hero, who risked his or her life to save these strangers?

Do you remember his name? If you do, say it.

Ahmed El Ahmed is a 43-year-old Syrian Australian Muslim. Completely unarmed, he approached one of the terrorists from behind, dislodged the weapon, and was then shot several times by the other terrorist. Thank G-d Ahmed survived.

This non-Jewish stranger risked his life in order to save many lives of complete strangers. Later, he said in an interview: "My target was just to take the gun from [the terrorist], and to stop him from killing a human being's life. I know I saved lots, but I feel sorry for the lost."

It's vital that we all know there were upstanders that day. And that we all know his name. Something critical would be missing if we heard this story but didn't know his name. For a name is a window into the soul.

There were other unsung heroes that day who sprang into action to save lives, including many volunteer lifeguards. But today I want to focus on Ahmed.

It's revealing that he is Muslim. For him, Jews were not the enemy, but fellow human beings, deserving of life like everyone else. Since October 7th, many Israelis and Jews have sometimes felt as though the whole world stands against us. Or that all Palestinians stand against us. Or that even all Muslims stand against us. It's true that many in the world stand against us, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. But Ahmed El

Ahmed reminds us that we can't judge *everyone* perceived to be on the other side as an enemy. That sometimes, even in the very place of darkness and death, others emerge who shine light and choose life.

The Torah teaches us the very same lesson in our reading today. In Shmot, baby Moses survives Pharaoh's genocidal decree because five women act heroically:

Shifra and Pua, the Hebrew midwives, defy Pharaoh's edict to drown the Jewish baby boys in the Nile. They fear G-d more than mighty Pharaoh.

Yocheved, Moses's mother, gives birth to a Jewish child during this very dangerous time.

Miriam, Moses's sister, watches over baby Moses floating in the wicker basket on the Nile. She then courageously approaches Pharaoh's daughter to arrange for Moses to nurse at home.

Four heroes. Four names.

And then there's Pharaoh's daughter, *Bat Par'oh*. She sees Moses floating in the Nile, lifts him from the water, and raises him as her own son in her home, the royal palace. Here is everything the Torah says about her: "The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, 'This must be a Hebrew child.'"

Then she has a brief conversation with Miriam, who brings him home for their mother to nurse him.

The passage concludes: "When the child grew up, [Miriam] brought [Moses] to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining 'I drew him out of the water'" (Ex. 2:5-10).

What a remarkable woman! She raises an orphan as her own son. Dayeinu. An enemy of the state. Dayeinu. In defiance of the most powerful man in the land, Pharaoh, who *was also her own father, in his own house*. Dayeinu.

But this remarkable story is missing one thing: her first name. The Torah refers to her only as Pharaoh's daughter. Why?

For me, this is like hearing that a bystander saved Jews in Australia, but never sharing his name. The missing detail is critical.

As it turns out, the rabbis share our desire to identify our heroes by name. The rabbis of the Talmud note that the biblical book First Book of Chronicles, in the course of its genealogies, identifies a certain daughter of Pharaoh as Bitya. The rabbis believe this was the Exodus Pharaoh's daughter, the same one who raised Moses. Bitya, afterward known as Batya, means "daughter of G-d." Why would the Bible name the enemy's daughter "G-d's daughter"?

The Midrash imagines G-d saying 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." Her name Batya thus bestowed upon her the ultimate honor: G-d's blessing.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, takes up the question of why the Torah utilizes her father's name instead of hers. He 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."

In other words, the Torah conceals her name in order *to magnify* her bravery and courage. To make sure we know this was the *least* likely place for justice to emerge. And yet still she raised him as her son.

What was the end result of Pharaoh's daughter's kindness to this child? He grew up to be Moses, the man who would champion freedom for all for all time. The Torah subtly lauds her ultimate kindness by only using the name *she alone* gave the child: Moses. The Midrash says, "Even G-d did not call him by any other name." Every time people utter the name Moses - and that is quite a tally over the millennia - we honor Pharaoh's daughter by following her wishes.

Rabbi Sacks writes of Hitler and Stalin. Very sadly, the list of enemies of Israel and Jews has continued to the present day. We do have real enemies who seek our destruction, and we must be clear-eyed about the very real dangers and threats. At the same time, Rabbi Sacks's interpretation endures: we continue to have a moral obligation to not assume that everyone on the "other side" is an enemy. Some might even be heroes one day. Like Pharaoh's daughter. And like Ahmed El Ahmed.

Shabbat Shalom.