

There are 24 Books of the Bible, 5 books of Torah (which includes stories with and about the Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah); eight books of the Prophets/Ne'viim (of which Deborah is the only woman of the 13); and 11 books of Writings/Kesuvim (of which two are named for women, Ruth and Esther).

Women don't get frequent or top billing in our texts. But they do play crucial roles, which is one reason this parsha, Vayakhel, gets quite a bit of attention by rabbis and scholars, especially those of the egalitarian persuasion, who are looking to link our ancient past with our present. But, our Matriarchs—those whose names we recall and those remembered only by their deeds—are absolutely essential to our history, to making us who we Jews are and who we Jews will be.

Think about it: What would have happened if Sarah hadn't forced Hagar and Ishmael into the desert? Where would we be if Miriam hadn't put Moses in the basket? And would Moses even "be" if Shifrah and Puah hadn't performed what may have been the first recorded act of civil disobedience?

Of course it's worth noting that women are included explicitly among the Israelites called to contribute their talents and donations to the building and furnishing of the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of the Divine presence. But I think an equally important area to consider about today's parsha isn't so much *what* talents and donations the Israelite women contributed to the making of the Tabernacle but *why* they contributed. The parsha says the Israelites who gave were "all whose hearts moved them." So the real question is, "What moves a heart?" (If you've sneaked a peek at your handout, you know where this is going.)

Our soon-to-be permanent Senior Rabbi, Rabbi Adam Raskin, has a number of his sermons online. (If you haven't already, I urge you to treat yourself to some of the most intellectually engaging and spiritually invigorating sermons I've had the joy of reading and, in the case of Rabbi Raskin's Sermon at the Church of the Incarnation, listening to. Just go to www.congregationbethtorah.org.)¹

In one of those sermons, Rabbi Raskin says,

"The Midrash Tanchuma teaches that all souls of Jews who were living at that time as well as all the souls of Jews who would ever live in the future were present at Mt. Sinai. People who would be born Jewish, and people who would choose to become Jewish...some part of their inanimate life, something of their spiritual matter was present along with the 600,000 Jews who stood together at the base of that Mountain when we went from a band of slaves to a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹

In that same sermon, Rabbi Raskin proposes that "Jewish destiny is encoded, not so much in our DNA as deep within our souls." He says that "[p]art of us is flesh and bones, and part of us, the *nefesh*, the *neshamah*, is the intangible yet animating substance that fills our physicality with life," a notion he says is "[c]rystallized into a beautiful, powerful mystical concept known often by its Yiddish name: *dos pintele yid*, or for you Hebraists out there: *Netzotz ha' Yehudi*."

In this sermon, appropriately titled "Abraham Lincoln and the *Pintele Yid*," Rabbi Raskin says he "would love to imagine" that Abraham Lincoln's declaration "to take on slavery...with a vengeance...came from a certain *pintele yid*, a spark of Sinai that emerged in [Lincoln's] soul and made him revile what he saw."

It is, in my opinion, a powerful and beautiful idea that the prime motivator for everyone – even those whose mothers, like Abraham Lincoln's and mine may not have been Jews – the prime motivator for everyone who performs any act of courage, kindness or justice is *dos pintele yid/Netzotz ha' Yehudi* (the little bit of our Sinai mothers). And how is that spark

¹ www.congregationbethtorah.org/congregation/sermons.html

² Abraham Lincoln and the *Pintele Yid*, Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, *Parashat Yitro*, February 14, 2009; 20 *Sh'vat* 5769

Of course there are those who consider that approach some mystic mumbo jumbo. For those in that camp, here's the scientists' approach: Everything that was, is or will be—material and energy—is a manifestation of the substance of Creation—residue of the Big Bang. It's not as poetic as the Midrash, but the conclusion is pretty much the same.

passed from generation to generation? Words—those written and those repeated; and actions—those witnessed and those performed.

Consider the written words of our Biblical mother Ruth to her late husband's mother, Naomi, **16** And Ruth said:

1:16 Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; **17** where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the LORD do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me. ³

Following this declaration, Ruth and Naomi take off together and in the end, Ruth, the convert, becomes the great-grandmother of King David. And so Ruth's spark is passed on l'dor v'dor via the lesson that real love – love of a parent, child, spouse, God, Judaism – is action. (A couple of years ago I heard Oprah repeat Ruth's lesson to an abusive husband, saying, love is what you do not what you feel. Perhaps it was her *pintele Yid* talking.)

Coming up next month is Purim and we will read the Megillah, the Book of Esther. In Chapter one, we'll hear

10 "[W]hen the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded ... the seven chamberlains **11** to bring Vashti the queen before [him]..., to show the people and the princes her beauty; **12** But ... Vashti refused to come ... [and]... the king's...anger burned in him.**17** and [t]he king ... commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.⁴

In fifth century BCE Persia, Vashti's refusal to objectify herself was genuine *chutzpah*. The author doesn't attribute any words to Vashti, simply recounts her actions. Was that because Vashti's story only set the stage for Esther, or were Vashti's actions so important in their own right that the author felt compelled to pass them on? Either way, whoever wrote of Vashti's actions passed on two lessons: One, everyone, regardless of gender or social status has the right to be treated with respect; and two, self-respect is more important than life.

Later on, after Esther becomes the king's wife and she learns what's in store for Jews throughout the land, she says,

16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.⁵

Esther's lesson: Sometimes a woman's got to do what a woman's got to do. Sometimes, even the prospect of death must not deter us from doing the right thing, especially if that "right" thing has the chance of saving our people.

But the lessons that prompt us to do what we do are not always good lessons. Consider what Esther says in chapter 9:

13 Then said Esther: 'If it please the king, let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows.' **14** ...and they hanged Haman's ten sons. **15** And the Jews that were in Shushan...slew three hundred men....; **16** And the other Jews...slew seventy and five thousand; **29** Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abigail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote down all the acts of power...**32** and it was written in the book.⁶

³ www.mechon-mamre.org

⁴ www.breslov.com

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ www.mechon-mamre.org

And we read that book, the whole Megillah, and have a jolly good time year after year. We name our daughters after Esther (well not so much these days) and we dress them up like the queen for the Purim carnival. This woman saved our people! This woman called for the murder of children! Her words caused the sanctioned killing of more than 75,000 men! Really? This is a matriarch we want to emulate??

If Vashti and Esther came back today, I wonder if they would even recognize themselves. Would they agree with how we portray them? Would Vashti agree that her refusal to entertain the troops, as it were, was the act of an early feminist? Would Esther own the cold-blooded request for the death of Haman's sons?

Then there's Deborah. Unlike Naomi, who begged Ruth to return to her people and let Naomi travel on alone, Barak says he won't go into battle unless Deborah comes with him. And while Deborah assures Barak that she will accompany him, she also preddicts that it won't be Barak who defeats the opposing army's general:

4:9 *I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thy honour; for the LORD will give Sisera over into the hand of a woman.*⁷

And Deborah (whose name is an anagram for "she speaks") was correct, it was the hand of a woman that did in Sisera:

4:21 Then Jael Heber's wife took a tent-pin, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly unto [Sisera], and smote the pin into his temples, and it pierced through into the ground; for he was in a deep sleep; so he swooned and died.⁸

Lovely.

And what do these mothers teach us? Well Deborah, whose song describes her as a "mother in Israel," must have been one heck of a woman. She and Esther are the only women the keepers of our written tradition have considered worthy of including in the Writings. Deborah is, in fact, the only female Prophet. As for Jael's message, perhaps it's as simple (or as complicated) as "Use what you've got to get what you want." Naturally the "what you want" part can be restricted to things you want for the good of the many. (When you have some time on your

hands, think about how or if that's a lesson we also can draw from the Vashti/Esther stories. Vashti refused to use what she had – her beauty – to preserve herself. Esther used what she had – her beauty – to preserve her people.]

I think we can say unequivocally that not every lesson taught by word or deed by every woman of the Bible is a "good" lesson. However, I contend that every lesson is a *valuable* lesson, because it teaches us what to do and what not to do. The cumulative effect of all those lessons is what softens, hardens, moves our hearts.

Every biblical mother was not a good mother. Not all of our personal mothers were or are good mothers; not all their lessons – or ours – are good lessons; but, again, all their lessons – and ours – are valuable. And thus should be preserved, examined and shared.

At Kiddush you'll see a number of sayings ascribed to the mothers of a couple of dozen of our members. The one I contributed from my mother's volume of adages, cautions and rules to live by is "Good enough is never good enough." My mother's intent was to encourage me to always do the best I could; to avoid shortcuts that produce shoddy end products; to resist taking the easy way when a more challenging way would produce a better result. What came along with those positive lessons, were some not so good lessons; those that made it difficult to cut myself (and others) a break. But if my mother hadn't been so demanding I would not have had to learn how to weigh each situation to determine when good enough is perfectly good enough. In fact, but for that lesson, I probably wouldn't be a Jew today.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Not all mother-child relationships would make G-rated movies. Truth be told, some of our mothers don't like us and some of us don't like our mothers. Nevertheless, no matter how dysfunctional, distant, demanding, loyal, loving and loved our mothers are or were, and no matter how good, bad or baffling their lessons, our mothers and their lessons are eradicable strands of the tapestry that is each of us. And our mothers and their lessons, even those that we wish we hadn't learned, must be remembered so we can pass on that *pintele Yid* and what must be remembered and so that we don't forget what *not* to pass on.

An excerpt of Amy Chua's book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* under the headline "Why Chinese Mothers are Superior."⁹ Commenting on Chua's contention that the discipline and expectations of excellence in all things academic common to Asian mothers' childrearing is a good thing because it produces children who grow up to be extremely successful professionals.

Commenting on Chua's position that the Asian model of childrearing produces the best results, Meredith Jacobs, author of *The Modern Jewish Mom's Guide to Shabbat*, says, that what she wants to be able to say about her children, "more than their careers as doctors or lawyers, is that they are mensches....This," Jacobs says, "is where Jewish mothering excels. Our values and ethics allow us to nurture and shape adults who will not only thrive in the world, they will contribute to it."¹⁰ Her lesson: *Tikkun olam* trumps *summa cum laude*.

Har Shalom also had the privilege of meeting and learning from another Senior Rabbi candidate, Rabbi Robert Tobin. In one of his online sermons (they're all audio, so you can listen while you work), he says, "No matter how long you live, at some point you have to give your life over to those who will remember you."¹¹ And when you're gone, to paraphrase American poet Anne Sexton, it won't matter who any of us were, only who our children remember we were.¹² The booklet you received this morning has a page devoted to why and how to share the lessons that are most important to you. It'll get you started. But don't delay. We are not promised tomorrow. As Hillel cautioned, if we put off studying until we have free time we may "never have any free time."¹³ Speaking of Hillel, for purposes of crafting our legacies, I propose we rewrite one of Hillel's most famous sayings: If I do not tell of myself, who will tell? And when I do tell of myself, what will I tell? And if not now, when?¹⁴

How will we shape memories of us? Will we, as Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum encourages, "focus on the shared task of making Judaism relevant and meaningful in the future"; perhaps implant a *pintele Yid* in each of our children? When I fill in my booklet blanks, the lesson I'll pass to my daughters is the one that moves my heart to do my best when good enough really isn't good enough: Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.¹⁵

Shabbat Shalom.

⁹ The Wall Street Journal, January 8, 2011

¹⁰ www.jwi.org/Page.aspx?pid=2671 (Jewish Woman International, Winter 2011)

¹¹ www.bethshalomkc.org/page.aspx?id=203433, Rabbi Robert Tobin, Yom Kippur, Sept 18, 2010.

¹² "It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was," "A Small Journal," entry for Jan. 1, 1972, *The Poet's Story*, ed. Howard Moss (1974).

¹³ ". . . and don't say I will study when I have time, lest you never find the time" Pirkei Avot 2:4

¹⁴ "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?" Pirkei Avot 1:14

¹⁵ Micha 6:8