

Grassroots stories of the Exodus

by Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg • January 19th, 2007

In the 1950's a Black man named Esau Jenkins ran for the school board on Johns Island, a community off the coast of South Carolina. Although he was a respected and accomplished leader in his community, he was defeated, because so few Blacks were registered to vote. At that time Black people faced impossibly unjust barriers when they wanted to vote, including tests based on knowledge of the constitution. At that time, many labor-class African Americans did not have access to education and didn't know how to read, let alone take a test on the U.S. Constitution. For vast numbers of American Black people, basic rights of citizenship were inaccessible.

Esau Jenkins supplemented his income with a bus he used to carry tobacco workers and longshoremen to work in Charleston. One of his passengers, Alice Wine, told him she had only been to third grade, but that she wanted to register to vote and learn to read and write. So Jenkin's bus became a rolling school, and Alice Wine learned enough to be able to pass the voting test and register.

Later, this developed into a group who wanted to continue to learn. At that time, the white community in South Carolina was hostile to any organized efforts by Blacks to create institutions for themselves, schools in particular. Jenkins and his group bought a run-down building, fixed it up, turned the front part into a grocery store front and the back rooms into a school. By the early 1960's, 37 Citizenship Schools had been established in the region, and Black voting strength increased significantly. These schools not only turned out voters but created involved citizens. Students went on to create other institutions for their community such as a nursing home, a kindergarten and a credit union. (Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 72-75)

During the time of our people's slavery in Egypt, there was a woman from the tribe of Levi who gave birth to a son. At this time, the Pharaoh had decreed that all Hebrew baby boys be thrown into the Nile. But this woman – we learn her name much later to be Yocheved – she hides her baby for a month and then takes a desperate risk to save him by placing him in a basket in the Nile, hoping that someone will take him in as a foundling.

As our Exodus story progresses, it focuses mainly on the man who this baby grows up to be - Moses – the figure and who leads our people out of Egypt and to the Promised the Land. The story develops into one that takes place mainly on the political stage – with Moses and God and Pharaoh taking the spotlight in the struggle for Israelite freedom. The myths of these elite figures tend to overshadow the stories of regular people.

But let's not forget Yocheved – and Shifra and Puah, the two midwives who stand up to Pharaoh and save the newborn Hebrew boys rather than strangle them on the birthstool. In fact, you have to wonder if Yocheved is the only mother who saved her boy. It's hard to imagine any parents not saving their own children – there must have been hundreds of thousands of Yocheveds and Shifras and Puahs, finding ways to get around Pharaoh's decree in order to preserve their sons.

We only learn about Moses' mother because Moses becomes the leader with the big name and the towering legacy.

But in order for there to have been a mass movement to overthrow slavery, there had to be local leaders and families who formed a unified Israelite voice for God to hear and respond; there must have been a group of parents of young children who refused to follow Pharaoh's decree; there had to be neighborhood leaders who organized the flight of hundreds of thousands of people out of Egypt – there must have been more than one story of leadership.

Last weekend we celebrated two towering figures of resistance and liberation. Our nation marked the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on Monday, and the Jewish community remembered the 100th birthday of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel last Shabbat. Many of us are familiar with the famous photo of Heschel and King marching together for Civil Rights in Selma Alabama. On their own, these two men were vitally important figures who inspired thousands of others to join the cause of Civil rights, and later, the anti-war movement.

That photo from Selma is quite powerful – the Black preacher and the bearded rabbi standing at the front of the march. But just as powerful are the photos of the masses of people lined up behind them, the footage of hundreds of people assembled at mass meetings in churches organizing themselves and motivating each other to make the personal sacrifices necessary to move the movement forward. Just as powerful as the story of MLK Jr. in the Birmingham jail is the story of Annell Ponder and June Johnson, two young African American Civil Rights activists who were imprisoned in Winona, Mississippi for integrating a white restroom. The prison guards beat them with nightsticks and leather straps until they lost consciousness. (I've Got the Light of Freedom, p. 225-227)

Not that the Heschels and the Kings and the Moseses don't deserve the recognition and the honor that we give them. They too made immense sacrifices and took enormous risks for the sake of justice and freedom. Heschel's activism was not enthusiastically embraced by the Jewish establishment or by his fellow faculty or the administration of the Jewish Theological Seminary where he taught. And King's assassination tragically testifies to what it means to lead a movement to transform a nation.

Torah teaches us something important by including not only the story of Moses, but the story of the midwives and of Moses' mother. And later Jewish tradition also fleshes out more stories of what regular people were doing to defy Pharaoh's decrees. For instance, a midrash that tells of how the Israelite men stopped making love to their wives – they preferred to prevent children from being born at all rather than to have to throw their baby boys into the Nile. But the Israelite women wooed their husbands and drew them out into the orchards and the fields, enticing them to continue to procreate, with the intention of somehow finding a way to save their newborn sons, and with the hope that they could somehow overcome their enslavement.

Regular people used the tools that they had to resist Pharaoh even in the most private and intimate ways. Jewish tradition teaches us that we need the contributions of all kinds of leaders in order to transform the world. Movements for change do not just happen because of presidents and mayors, rabbis and preachers – they are fueled and sustained and led by fathers and mothers,

of teachers and laborers, of business owners and college students, of bus drivers and tobacco workers, of church and synagogue members.

As we retell the stories of Moses and Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel we can walk away with a sense that they were larger than life and that we can never live up to them – or with the gripe that there aren't any Kings or Heschels in the world anymore. But we regular people don't have to be Kings or Heschels. We can let their legacies remind us of the smaller-scale, quieter stories of people like Esau Jenkins and Yocheved. And these stories can inspire each of us to find our own ways to act. We can gather others around us and speak together with a powerful voice, and move the world towards healing.