



Courageous Compassion • Parshat Shemot

Parshat Shemot describes Moses' dramatic rise to leadership. We get a glimpse of his emotional maturity, character development, and moral fortitude. Yet, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues, Moses' growth did not occur in a vacuum. The text describes "six extraordinary women without whom there would not have been a Moses" ("Women as Leaders," *Covenant & Conversation*). The most intriguing of them all, according to Rabbi Sacks, is Pharaoh's daughter. While unnamed in this narrative, she is generally referred to in rabbinic literature as Batya, literally translated as "the daughter of God." She is the one who had the courage to save a Hebrew boy and raise him in the palace, despite her father's genocidal decree. What motivated Batya to save Moses?

When she sees the basket amongst the reeds in the river, Batya "opened it and saw him, the child, and behold, the child was crying. She had compassion for him and said, 'This is one of the Hebrew boys'" (Exodus 2:6). Rabbi Nissan Alpert, quoting Rabbi Aaron of Sanz, questions the order of the verse. Presumably Batya should have realized immediately upon seeing the boy that he was one of the Hebrews. Yet, the verse highlights that she first felt compassion and only then declares he was a child of the Hebrews. What's the significance of this strange sequence?

In their article "Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review," Jennifer Goetz,

Dacher Keltner, and Emiliana Simon-Thomas provide an extensive overview of compassion from the psychological literature. They define compassion "as the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help." From an evolutionary standpoint, they note that compassion is not unconditional, but is bound by a cost-benefit ratio. The decision to be compassionate should be more likely when the sufferer is related to the individual and when the benefits of acting outweigh the potential costs. "Without consideration of the costs of devoting resources to others," they caution, "one could easily be exploited or expose oneself to too many risks to emerge as an evolutionarily stable strategy."

Viewed from this calculated perspective, it is unlikely that Batya should have felt compassion or acted upon this emotion. Not only was Moses an outsider, but his people were an enemy and threat to Pharaoh's reign. Her beneficent act would also likely raise the ire of her maniacal father. Yet, Batya does feel compassion and does act courageously to save and then raise Moses.

Rabbi Alpert suggests that this is why the verse indicates that she first felt compassion, and only then does she say that "This is one of the Hebrew boys." Her compassion was automatic and unmediated by class or concern. Only afterwards did the dangerous realization that this boy was a Hebrew emerge. After already being moved by her

intuitive moral emotion, she is able to overcome the calculated evolutionary rationality that would have otherwise deterred her from saving Moses.

This is the same compassion Moses expresses in the subsequent story when “he went out to his brethren and observed their burdens” (Exodus 2:11). As Rashi notes, “he set his eyes and mind to share in their distress.” This empathy and compassion motivate him to act at risk to his

own life. If he would have been evolutionarily deliberative and calculated, he would likely not have acted.

The juxtaposition of these two stories suggests that Moses learns from Batya the moral imperative to alleviate the suffering of the vulnerable. The long reach of Batya’s modeling compassion extends throughout the Exodus story, laying a foundational principle that echoes throughout the Bible.

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Character Challenge: Be attentive to the pain of those around you and respond with compassion. What active steps can you take to alleviate someone’s suffering?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Greatness, even for God, certainly for us, is not to be above people but to be with them, hearing their silent cry, sharing their distress, bringing comfort to the distressed and dignity to the deprived. The message of the Hebrew Bible is that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by how they care for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. What renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable” (*To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 37).