

Bo, Exodus 10:1-13:16

“Babies; from Bulrushes to a Bris”

The reference to babies in this week's Torah portion is quite chilling, actually. Parashat Bo, in Exodus 12:29-30, speaks of the final of the 10 Plagues. As Exodus 29 states: “In the middle of the night The Eternal stuck down all the male first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon.” The great translator Robert Alter expresses that a “great outcry” is heard throughout the Land of Egypt at this painful moment. The suffering of the first-born, of any children, pulls at our hearts.

Exodus has really included an intense focus on children, on the offspring that become the descending generations. Early in the book, we learn that the Israelites have multiplied in Egypt. Pharaoh is concerned and tries violently to limit this growth. Ironically, the very pain that is unleashed upon the Egyptians this week, the slaying of the first-born, is the pain suffered by the Israelites themselves. However, Exodus's grand story also introduces Moses as a baby, who experiences quite a journey in the water to the palace, and eventually to the desert, then returning to lead a march towards freedom. In the midst of the theology and geopolitics of Exodus, we have a very human, emotional focus on babies.

If Moses can start as a baby and then begin a journey towards great leadership, so do we think of the potential at the time of birth of any newborn. I was honored to be part of Cantor Ben and Lily Ellerin's new son's Bris this week. At the start of the ceremony, Sam was placed on a pillow on a chair. This Elijah's Chair symbolized the possibility that this newest member of BHC might some day grow to be a great heroic leader, bring peace to the world. This baby shares a journey with Moses, has been blessed with the hope that he avoids the harsher fates in these chapters, and even arrives in the community with a scent of being King David's descendant. That last thought is the traditional idea that a messianic figure might arrive who will help transform the world towards a more perfect time. As Reform Jews, we may not fully embrace this concept, but surely we can be open to the possibility that this new baby, as with any new baby, may grow to have a crucial role for good in the world. We don't mean to pile too much responsibility on his 8-day old shoulders, but we also rejoice at the myriad possibilities in his future.

Congratulations to the Ellerins, who have welcomed a new member to their family and to BHC. May the sweetest hopes of our tradition for children come true, and may any challenges be mitigated. As we welcome this child into the community, we hope that he will embrace the song and the study of Torah as part of his life, as surely as we are able to study this portion on his behalf. Moses was taken by Pharaoh's family from the bulrushes. This baby has been welcomed with the joy of a bris.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Busch

For more Torah learning, please join us for Torah Talk, Saturdays, 9 AM at BHC.

