

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

From “The Prisoner and Other Tales of Faith” by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern and published by Feldheim. Reprinted here with the kind permission of Rabbi Halpern.

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bore a son. And she saw that he was a goodly child and she hid him for three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him a box made of reeds, and daubed it with clay and with pitch, and put the child in it; and she laid it in the rushes by the river’s brink. And his sister stood herself from afar, to know what would be with him. And the daughter of Par’o came down to bathe at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river’s side; and when she saw the box among the rushes, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she opened it, she saw the child: and, see! a boy crying. And she had compassion on him, and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.” Then said his sister to the daughter of Par’o, “Shall I go and call for you a wet-nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?” And the daughter of Par’o said to her, “Go!” and the girl went and called the child’s mother. And the daughter of Par’o said to her, “Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.” And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him to the daughter of Par’o, and he became her son. And she called his name ‘Mosheh’ saying, ‘Because I drew him out of the water.’

(Shemos, 2 : 1 — 10)

It was only mid-morning, and the day was the sixth of the third month, yet it was hotter than on a midsummer noon, and most of the children in the village had gone down to the river. But Miryam had stayed behind; sitting in the shade of the whitewashed hut, her eyes fixed on the distant hills. She was thinking ...

She had much to think about. In her seven years — though people always said she looked and spoke like one much older — she had seen much sadness, and she was trying to find out what it all meant, and how it might end.

Her father had told her the main things, of course: That G-d had a plan in everything, though men could not understand it until it was ripe, and how even now He might be

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

shaping things for the day when He would fulfil His ancient promise. Had He not done wonderful things to make Yosef free and mighty, even whilst his father was mourning him for dead?

A great teacher was Miryam's father. Indeed, he had come to this part of the Nile valley only to teach his poor brothers, whom Par'o had moved here. He himself could have stayed in Goshen, for he was of the tribe of Levi, a free man.

That was before Miryam was born. In the year she was born, Par'o had started to make the work so terribly hard for the Hebrews, and stopped paying them for it. That was why she had been called Miryam, her mother had told her, for Miryam meant bitterness. But she did not feel bitter. Whenever she saw some new cruelty, she would think of the day when G-d would make them free and give them the wonderful land to live in.

Meanwhile, of course, it was hard. She often went with her mother to help people who had become ill from hard work and cruel punishments; and although she felt like crying herself, she always tried to cheer them up. "Don't despair," she might say. "Do not think of yourselves as slaves! One day we shall all be free and happy again, and then we shall know why G-d sent us all this. Won't it be lovely when we'll all have our own fields and trees and houses?"

And the beaten men would smile and say: "Look at her, listen to her! Doesn't she sound like a little prophetess? Pray G-d that her words come true! But soon, O G-d, soon ..."

And one day her father himself had called her a prophetess, in real earnest. And this was how it happened:

Three years before, just about the time her little brother Aharon was born, Par'o had started a most wicked and terrible thing: he ordered that all baby boys of the Hebrews were to be killed. At first he tried, secretly, to make the midwives strangle them as soon as they were born, and pretend that they had been born dead. But he soon found out that the midwives were not obeying him, so he sent his soldiers to look for newborn babies and throw them into the Nile. Anyone who tried to resist them was tortured to death.

When that happened, her father was sad and serious for many days; then he said to her mother: "I have thought long about what I have to do, and it looks to me that since I can do nothing to save the babies, I must at least see that no more are born to be killed." He had taken her mother's hands in his and continued: "I love you dearly, Yocheved; but I must divorce you, until G-d shows His mercy, and stops this bitter affliction!" And they both wept. Miryam wept too, though she hadn't quite understood what it meant. Later when he had packed his things and was going away, she ran after him and cried: "Where are you going, Daddy? Why are you going away from us?" He had picked her up and

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

kissed her: “Don’t cry, darling. I’m only going to live in the next village for a time; I have to; and you can come over every day and tell me how Mummy and baby are doing.”

Yochevved had taken it quietly. “Your father,” she told Miryam, “is a great and wise man. If he says it is the right thing, you can be sure that it is so.”

But as time went on, Miryam felt more and more sure that it was *not* the right thing, that something was wrong. She often wanted to say so to her father, but how could one tell one’s father a thing like that — especially such a wise and good man as Amrom?

But one day she had seen her mother handling the baby clothes that Aharon had long outgrown, and crying quietly ... And she had understood that Yochevved was longing for another baby.

Then Miryam had become terribly excited, and run all the way to her father. Panting and flushed, she had fairly shouted at him: “You are even worse than Par’o! He kills the boys, but you are destroying the whole people! Do you know that there is not one baby in the whole village this year? It must be because of what you have done, for people have followed your example!”

She had said more then, but she hadn’t known what it was, until her father had told her later. She had said: “Hear this, Amrom ben Kehoss: The baby that Yochevved is praying for will be the man who will free the Children of Israel from this place!”

But all that Miryam herself remembered was her father rocking her in his arms; when she opened her eyes, he said, ever so tenderly: “Hush, my child, calm yourself. You are right and I was wrong. I should have trusted in G-d, and left it all to Him. Let His will be done.”

Soon the wedding was celebrated — and a strange wedding it was, with Miryam dancing before the bride and groom, and cuddly little Aharon too with his funny steps. And soon there were many such weddings.

And three months ago the baby was born. And the moment he was born, a great light shone in the house, brighter than a summer day. Their friends felt it too, and came rushing to the cottage. They looked at the baby and said: “How good he is, anyone can see that he is good. May he bring goodness and light into this dark, evil time!”

So he was called Toviah which means “G-d is good.” And Amrom patted Miryam and said: “I believe that what you said about this baby will come true. It was G-d who spoke through you. My little daughter is a prophetess!”

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

She loved the baby. He was so good and so clever. They had to hide him, of course, for the Egyptians often came to see if any babies had been born. They had hollowed out a niche in the wall, behind the bed-curtains, and there baby Toviah slept. He never cried, as if he understood how dangerous it was. But he had no need to cry, for Miryam was always looking in to see if he was awake, and if she saw by the way he moved his lips that he was hungry, she took him straight to her mother.

So far all was well, thought Miryam. If only the Egyptians did not make a real search ...

Suddenly, Miryam became aware of running feet. A minute later, an elderly woman from the next village, a friend of Yocheved, arrived, gasping for breath. Miryam took her inside and she told them her terrible news:

“The soldiers are in our village! Searching every house ... under the beds ... tapping the walls ... They carry babies with them and make them cry, so that our hidden babies cry too. They say they must find every baby now, on their own lives, for this is the last search. The Royal astrologers have told him that the Hebrew leader has been born already, and they must find him. After this, they say, they will leave the babies alone.

“I don’t know what you can do, but I had to tell you, and you must carry the news to your neighbours, and to the other villages. I must hurry back, and pretend I have been working in the fields, or they will torture me for telling you.”

Yocheved went at once to tell the neighbours. Amrom told Miryam: “This is terrible news, but do not despair. G-d can always help. I pray that He will grant us a plan of wisdom now. Stay with the babies until your mother comes. I shall be back soon.” And he went outside, as he often did when he had to be alone with his thoughts.

Miryam was left with little Aharon, who went on playing happily with his toys, and the baby. She took him out of his hiding place, and kissed him. She was weeping, but he smiled at her, and soon she was smiling too, and playing with him. Miryam prayed, ‘Please, G-d, do not forsake such a lovely, good baby!’

Yocheved came back; she was frightened and weeping, but when she saw the children playing so happily, she grew calmer. “Give him to me,” she said, “let me feed him once more ...” Miryam watched her feeding him, and saw her becoming restful and at peace. Indeed, she thought, in the midst of danger, G-d sends us His peace ...

Then Amrom returned. There was on him a grave calm, and his eyes shone. He remained standing, and spoke slowly, quietly:

“G-d has answered my prayer. He has sent me good counsel, in a strange way ... You see, I found myself thinking of only one thing at first, which seemed to have nothing to

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

do with our problem, and it was this: not once did the Egyptians mention drowning the children; they always say: ‘Put them in the river.’ Not: ‘Drown them’ but: ‘Put them in the river.’ ... Then suddenly, I knew what we must do. The safest place for our baby is — in the river!”

“In the river?” cried Yocheved. But immediately she understood. “Oh yes! No one would look for a baby in the river! If he is hidden there, in a tiny boat, he might be safe until the search has passed ... And this is the last search, they said ... We might be able to pretend that he was born afterwards ... But, oh, it is so dangerous: suppose the boat overturns, and no one with him; suppose the soldiers stay a long time — he might starve. Suppose someone hears him cry ...” And she started crying again.

Amrom put his arms round her: “Of course it is dangerous, my dear; but thousands are in the same danger. At a time like this we must be strong. G-d expects us to do the best we can think of and then to rely on Him. But now let us think of how we are to do it, for there is not a moment to lose.”

Yocheved pulled herself together. She brought out a basket woven of dried rushes, and made it waterproof with pitch and clay. Into it she put the baby; on top she put the lid, also of basketwork, which she had not tarred, so that air could come in.

Miryam went out halfway to a quiet part of the river, and when she had signalled that no one was in sight, Yocheved quickly followed after her and hid the basket amongst the bulrushes, a fair distance from the bank. With an effort, she tore herself away and hurried home.

But Miryam would not go away. She found a spot a little further along the river from where she could watch the boats on the river. The sun burnt down mercilessly, but she was determined to stay there until she would know what happened.

Time passed. She saw the soldiers go into the village. She prayed ...

Suddenly, she heard the noise of many riders on the highway along the river. Soon she could make out horse-soldiers and chariots. They might be another detachment of searchers. She stepped into the water and stood between the rushes hoping she would not be noticed.

They stopped — not far from where the baby was hidden. When she looked round she saw that the soldiers had dismounted, and were forming a cordon round the area. What could this mean? Surely it was impossible that someone had betrayed them?

Then she saw a distinguished lady stepping from a chariot. Many attendants and servant-maids crowded round her with large fans and sunshades. With them the lady walked

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

down to the riverbank. There she threw off her mantle and, clad in light linen garments, went into the river.

“What does this mean?” thought Miryam. “A royal lady wishes to go bathing, and of all the miles and miles of river, she has to choose this spot! If she comes any nearer, she will see the basket. Oh, G-d, please, please, keep the baby safe!”

But the lady was swimming nearer; her maids walked alongside her on the bank. Now — Miryam shuddered — she had called out to them.

One after the other, several maids tried to reach the basket, but although it was quite easy to wade out to it, they all slipped and fell into the water. They could not get up, and others came to help them.

Miryam crept closer. The soldiers had not noticed her, and were now facing the outside of their square; the servants were far too busy to notice the little girl.

Now she could see the lady in the water. She was Princess Bityoh, the daughter of Par’o! Miryam had seen her in Processions.

The Princess herself had reached for the basket and reached it. Tensely, Miryam watched her. “O, G-d!” she prayed, “even now You can help.”

The baby started to cry. The Princess bent down and picked him up, and he stopped crying and smiled at her. For a while she stood with the baby in her arms, then she waded ashore. Her face had a soft and tender expression, like that of a mother holding her own baby.

When she was on the bank she turned to one of her ladies-in-waiting: “This must be one of the Hebrew babies.” And she stood there playing with him.

“We must report this, your Royal Highness,” said her companion. The Princess straightened up, holding the baby more firmly. “Are you giving me orders?” she asked sternly.

“Your Royal Highness will forgive her servant,” replied the lady-companion, “but His Majesty has issued an order. Surely those of his own house must obey him, even more than anyone else?”

No one else dared to speak, and for a moment the Princess stood still, tears in her eyes. Then she hung her head and stumbled back into the river.

She put the baby back in his basket, and covered him. She turned to go back, but she did not go. She stayed rooted to the spot, her hand on her forehead, her eyes closed. ”Is she

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

ill?” thought Miryam. What would happen now? She did not know what to pray for. Only G-d knew what was best now.

The Princess moved again. She took the baby back, and came to the bank. Her expression was transformed. She looked ... thought Miryam, she looked... like one who has prayed deeply and earnestly.

Firmly she spoke to her ladies: “From to-day, this child is my son. I, Bityoh, so desire it!”

“Your Highness ...” faltered the companion imploringly, kneeling to her.

The Princess spoke to her softly now: “You care for me, do you not? I tell you, my life is bound up with that of this child. Something tells me that he belongs to me and I to him. It is a Divine command, and whatever happens, I must obey. Come nearer and look! See what has happened to my rash! She bared her shoulder. “You remember how bad it was this morning. How does it look now?”

The companion looked at her shoulder: “Your Highness is cured!” she said, astonished.

“Healed,” said the Princess, “Healed this moment by the G-d Who watches over this child! Can I disobey Him?”

Her companion bowed deeply: “My life is yours; do what you will.”

The baby began to cry. “He must be hungry,” said the Princess. “Bring me my cloak!” she ordered, “and call the Captain!”

The Captain of the Guard came running up; he saluted the Princess. “You and your men,” she addressed him, “have sworn me loyalty. I command you all that nothing you see here to-day shall pass your lips. Now, take a chariot and fetch me a wet-nurse! No, wait! Fetch as many as you can find in the Palace. I want to choose the best.” And she rocked the baby and spoke soft words to him. Miryam was standing among the ladies now. No one took any notice of her. They were all standing round the Princess, admiring the baby.

After some time, the Captain returned with three nurses.

The Princess selected one, and gave her the baby; but the baby would not drink, and turned his head away. “I can’t understand this,” said the woman, “he is hungry, but he will not drink. Perhaps there is something about me that he does not like.” But the same thing happened with the other two.

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

Miryam felt that she must speak now. With all the courage she could muster, she stepped forward, and knelt before the Princess. “Shall I go, Your Highness,” she asked, “and call you a nursing mother of the Hebrews to suckle the baby for you?”

The Princess showed no surprise. “Yes, go!” she answered, and went on rocking the baby.

As fast as she could, Miryam ran to the village and called her mother; on the way she told her what had happened. All Yocheved could say was: “Wondrous are the ways of G-d!”

Hiding their feelings, they came to the Princess.

“Take this baby,” said Bityoh, “and suckle him.” He drank at once. The Princess watched tenderly. When she finished, the Princess said: “Keep him for me and nurse him, and I shall pay you well; but if you let anything happen to him, you will answer with your life.”

So they took him home. Often the Princess would send for him and she loved him more and more.

Yocheved’s heart was heavy when finally the baby was weaned and she had to return him to the Princess. But Miryam said, “Mother, once before I have spoken about him, and father said it was the truth. I tell you now that we are not losing him. He will remain a Hebrew and a servant of G-d, even in the palace of Par’o. Perhaps you will see a sign for it to-day.”

And the last thing the Princess had to ask was: “What word do you use in Hebrew for pulling something out of the water?”

“‘Mosheh,’ Your Royal Highness,” answered Yocheved.

“‘Mo-se’?” repeated the Princess. “That is a good name in our language, too. So let it be ‘Mo-se,’ for I drew him out of the water. But it was your G-d Who told me to do it, and he belongs to Him as much as he does to me.

“I am sure he will be a good and great man one day.”