

WHY WOMEN SAVED THE DAY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

On the holiday of Pesach we remember the bondage of the nation of Israel in Egypt and the nation's subsequent miraculous exodus. We celebrate the fact that the nation was able to emerge as just that: a people who had grown in number, in size, in fortitude and strength, ready to serve G-d.

The Talmud (Sotah 11b) relates that there was a correlation between the perseverance of the nation and the departure: "Rav Avira expounded: In the merit of the righteous women who lived in that generation, the nation of Israel was delivered from Egypt. When they went to draw water, the Holy One, Blessed be He, arranged that small fishes should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fishes. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field, and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had marital relations with them among the sheepfolds. . . ."

Pharaoh was worried that the people living in his land would overpower the natives. He devised a scheme to ensure that he and the Egyptian people would retain supremacy over the descendants of Yaakov living in his land. The people were to be enslaved. They were to be broken, in mind and spirit. The men would be forced to work for long hours, so that they could not return home to their wives. The result would be a decline in the birth rate. The nation would not grow, in numbers, in strength, in resolve. However, the women of the nation of Israel had a different plan in mind.

The women realized that the nation had to grow and continue to exist. They would not let the Egyptians succeed in their nefarious task. The Maharsha explains that the women wanted to provide support for their husbands. They went to draw water for their husbands, so that they would have enough to drink. Drawing water, the Iyun Yaakov notes, is no easy task. It is a difficult job that was traditionally done by the men. However, the women desired to strengthen their spouses, enabling them to get through their difficult ordeal. G-d assisted the women in their noble task, by causing small fish to swim into the pitchers as the water was being drawn. The men then not only had water to drink, but they had food to eat as well. The women provided the foundation the men needed to survive.

In addition, Pharaoh's decree initially had its desired effect. The men did not return home, Married life, family life as the people knew it, had come to an end. Couples no longer had any intimacy in their lives. The holy bond that ties families together was threatened. Yet, the women knew that in order for the nation to survive, the families had to remain in tact as well. The women remained true to their spouses, never allowing their desire for intimacy to violate their marital union. The women

took a proactive role in rebuilding the intimacy of their relationships. They went out to the fields where their husbands were laboring, and gave them food and drink. They washed and anointed them, making them feel refreshed and invigorated. They then rekindled that spark of intimacy that Pharaoh had tried to extinguish. The woman became pregnant and had children, thereby ensuring that the nation would indeed grow and persevere. In the merit of these holy actions of the women of the nation of Israel, the entire nation was redeemed.

The women did not merely recognize that the nation's existence was in danger. They took action to assure that not only would the nation continue to exist, but it would grow and thrive as well. As we sit in exile, subject to assaults, (albeit different in style but not in substance,) we must recall the valiant efforts of the women in Egypt. They realized that survival of our nation depended on strength of spirit and strength in numbers. Devotion, to G-d, to one's people, to one's family, to one's spouse, is integral to our survival. When we sit down at the Seder, recalling how we were enslaved and redeemed, we must take some time to contemplate how we have put into action that which we learned from the righteous women in Egypt.