

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.

