

THE GREATEST JEWISH MOTHER EVER

TEXT: Exodus 1:22 – 2:10

We all know about Jewish mothers. They fuss over their kids, they make chicken soup for everything from a bad cold to a case of the blahs. The stereotype is one of endless caretaking and boundless self-sacrifice by a mother who demonstrates her love by constant overfeeding and unremitting solicitude about every aspect of her children's welfare. Comedian Jackie Mason once described stereotypical Jewish mothers as parents who have become so expert in the art of needling their children that they have honorary degrees in "Jewish Acupuncture".

I would guess that many of you remember one of the early Jewish mother figures in American popular culture - Molly Goldberg, portrayed by Gertrude Berg, in the situation comedy *The Goldbergs* on radio from 1929 to 1949 and on television from 1949–1955. Molly was sensible, warm-hearted, and a moral guide. More recent Jewish mothers might include Sylvia, the overbearing mother of Fran Fine, the famous *Nanny*, or perhaps *Seinfeld's* mother, or even the mothers in many of Woody Allen's movies.

But today I want to look at the life of one particular mother. Yes, she was a Jewish mother, and she embodied the virtues of wisdom, courage, faith and love. She set an example that is hard to duplicate in the annals of history, whether Jewish, or Christian, or any other faith. Her story is told in the early verses of the second chapter of Exodus. Yet her name is not a household word. Her name is Jochebed, which means "glory of YHWH." Jochebed was the mother of three famous people: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. She was from the family of Levi and she married a Levite named Amram (who was actually her mephew). So Amram's wife was also his aunt.

We know far more about her children than we do about Jochebed. Moses, of course, was the great lawgiver of Israel. Aaron was the first of Israel's priesthood. Miriam was the

gifted prophetess and musician who saved the baby Moses in the river Nile and led the Israelites in celebration after the crossing of the Red Sea.

Jochebed's most famous deed, of course, was the clever way she attempted and succeeded to save her baby boy from death. Pharaoh's program of population control through forced partial-birth abortion was failing because the Hebrew midwives were not cooperating. His next directive involved sacrificing all male Hebrew babies to the god of the Nile, a crocodile-infested river.

Let's look at Jochabed's life and her journey in faith. She was born at the very moment when Jacob, her father, and his entire household had just entered the gates of Egypt. She was the youngest member of the seventy souls that made up Jacob's household.

Jochebed was the chief Jewish nurse in Egypt. She was a great lover of Jewish children, and devoted her time to helping young Jewish mothers and their newly born babies. Her daughter, Miriam was her helper.

It was late in her life when the troubled times began for her people, when cruel Pharaoh ordered all newly born baby boys of the children of Israel to be put to death. Pharaoh sent for Jochebed and Miriam and told them that it was up to them to see to it that his order was carefully carried out. But Jochebed, in an early act of civil disobedience could not follow the ruler's order. She and the others, when asked by the pharaoh why they were not killing the boy babies as commanded, replied that the Hebrew women were "too vigorous" and popped those babies out before they could get to them.

But Jochebed found herself in a real dilemma. She was expecting her third child and she knew what faced her if it was a boy. Well, we know that it was in fact a son. And we know that Jochebed had decided to do all in her power to keep and protect him. And we know that this baby would be Moses.

For three months after Moses was born, Jochebed hid him from Pharaoh's officers, who went from house to house to search for Jewish baby boys. Then she knew that she could no longer hide him. Rather than give up the boy to the cruel Egyptians, Jochebed decided to entrust him to God. She made a little box out of wood, made it water-tight, and placed in among the reeds in the Nile, with a prayer to God to save him. Her mother instincts and her faith kicked in and she sent her baby down the river. Imagine her fear, imagine her tears, imagine her faith!

Well, you know what happened to little Moses, and how he was saved by Pharaoh's daughter Bithya. Little Miriam, who stood by to see what would happen, came up to the princess. She did not tell her that it was her little brother, but she said that she had better get a Jewish nurse for him, for he would not tolerate any other. Then she ran to her mother and Moses was actually nursed by his own mother without any stranger knowing about it.

So Jochebed was able to care for her child until he was old enough to be weaned, when she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. The picture on the cover of your bulletin depicts Jochebed bringing the three-year old Moses to Bithya by his loving mother, knowing that he would have a good life in her court. So Moses grew up to become the leader of the Exodus, leading his people out of the land of Egypt.

Today we have a wonderful legacy from this amazing lady, showing us what kind of mothers we should be in our own time. But even beyond mothers, they are lessons for each of us as we try to live our lives in service to God and to others.

I think today about these things in terms of mothers, but the messages are there for all of God's children.

First of all, be a mother of courage. Exodus 2:1-3 reads: "Now a man from the house of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she

could hide him no longer she took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed it with butamen and pitch, and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink."

Jochebed knew she was breaking the law by not killing her baby. She knew the risks. Her whole family could be executed by the authorities. They were nothing but dirty slaves, of no value to anyone, but Jochebed knew there is a higher law than the government. Even if her government had a low view of life, she had a high view of life, and it came from her heritage of the Word of God and the promises to her forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When most mothers were keeping their mouths shut for fear, and giving their babies up to be thrown in the Nile, Jochebed had courage to say NO.

Jochebed's courage and trust had far-reaching consequences for the nation and the world.

Second, she was a mother of wisdom. Exodus 4-8 tell us: "And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, and her maidens walked beside the river; she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to fetch it. When she opened it she saw the child, and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said 'This is one of the Hebrew children. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' And Pharaoh's daughter said to her 'Go.' The girl went and called the child's mother."

Jochebed was nobody's fool. She made that little basket and coated it with pitch, the same as Noah's ark. And Miriam was not just playing in the water. She was on guard. The river is full of crocodiles. And do you think she just happened to place it in the bulrushes upstream from the Egyptian princess's bathing spot? And how do you think a ten-year old slave girl knew what to say to a royal princess? Don't you think someone coached her? Miriam wasn't just standing around the princess's bathing spot offering free nurses to baby boys floating in the river. Jochebed's wise head was behind all this, protecting her child.

And, most of all, Jochebed was a mother of faith. The next two verses read: “And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Take this child away, and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed him. And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son and she named him Moses, for she said, ‘Because I drew him out of the water’.”

Where do you think Moses, Aaron and Miriam got their training, their understanding of the Bible and the covenants and the love of God? It wasn’t in the court of Pharaoh. It had to happen early in their lives. Miriam and Amram taught them, trained them, made sure that they knew their heritage and their faith in God and why they should believe.

Jochebed was a woman of God, used greatly by God because she did not allow crisis in her life to overcome her or her family. She had the unique opportunity to raise three leaders.

This remarkable woman was unknown by man, but known by God. Her life speaks loudly through her children. Although Jochebed was born into slavery, she had kept her faith in God and His faithfulness to His people. She is referred to in the Bible by two other names. In the beginning of the book of Exodus she is called Shifra, which means “Beautiful”. She was called this because she would make Jewish children beautiful and healthy by the good care she gave them. In the book of Chronicles she is called Jebudiah, the Jewess, because she risked her life to save the Jewish people.

Rabbi Judah Hanassi, when speaking of Jochebed, said: “There was a Jewish woman who was the mother of 600,000 children”. He explained that he meant Jochebed, who gave birth to Moses, and who was worth as much as all the people of Israel that came out of Egypt.

Jochebed’s faith carried her in her darkest days and revealed God’s magnificent plans in her children’s lives. After all, they were God’s children first.

If there ever was a Jewish “Mother of the Year”, this woman would certainly rank high on the list! Contrary to the stereotypical Jewish mothers that we described earlier, her name is little known. Like many of us, she is known more by her children than by her own life. And like many of us, she is known more as “Moses’ Mom”. But her legacy is one we can all look to with amazement and wonder. Truly, Jochebed was a woman of God who knew how to grow roses from the thorns of life. She is the greatest Jewish mother ever.