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“Who is Wise?”

I was 10 years old when I learned from my brother that you should always check your pant pockets for gum wrappers before doing a load of laundry. I was 12 when I learned that you really can become friends when a former bully if they apologize and mean it. I was 21 when I learned from my dad that education is the one thing nobody can take away from you. I was 25 when I learned from my students that patience really is a virtue. I was 28 when I learned as the coach of a middle school tennis team that dedication and hard work pay off. It was in rabbinical school when I truly began to understand when the rabbis ask in *Pirkei Avot*, “who is wise” and answer “the one who learns from everyone.”¹

We just read *Parshat Shemot*, the introduction to book of Exodus where the Pharaoh who had once allowed Joseph, Jacob, and their families to reside peacefully in Egypt during the years of hardship had become a new Pharaoh in a new generation. The new Pharaoh that arose did not know of this arrangement and was not particularly fond of this

¹ Ben Zoma in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1

ever-growing people that lived amongst his nation. He began oppressing the Hebrews through slavery and various other forms of affliction, but that did not stop the Hebrews from continuing to grow. It was not until Pharaoh's decree to his midwives to kill all of the male Hebrew babies that the Hebrews were incited to silently revolt and stop reproducing all together.² Luckily, one young woman realized the flaw in this plan.

In a few weeks, we will read parshat *B'shallach*, where Miriam is referred to as a Prophetess. The rabbis in the *midrash* wonder why all of a sudden Miriam is granted this great title. The *midrash* answers with a story of a young Miriam who told her father, Amram, that the Hebrews must reproduce, as their child would save the fate of the Israelites and free them from their bondage in Egypt. Her prediction was correct, as Yocheved and Amram would soon give birth to Moses, a prophet and hero. It is for this reason that the rabbis in the *midrash* consider Miriam a prophetess and a hero, for her wise words set the story into motion.

From Miriam, we learn several valuable lessons still extremely relevant today. She teaches her family, and her people, that while times are excruciatingly difficult, and the Hebrews were faced with an unimaginable

² Midrash Michilta

affliction, a proper protest is not to stop living. Sure, it seems to give the Hebrews a sense of control in the meantime, but choosing to live life in spite of the severe suffering is actually the strongest protest. Giving up is not the answer. Moses echoes this sentiment in the book of Deuteronomy when he commands the Israelites to “choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

Miriam also teaches that the way that people conduct themselves is crucial, because the next generation is watching. While Miriam was a prophetess and it was a miracle that she was able to communicate to her parents that she thought what they were doing was not right, children in general have the ability to pick up on every little detail, including those we might not even notice, and they may accept what we do as the right thing to do. Keeping that in mind, we can try our best to set examples as righteous people and role model how we want the next generation to conduct themselves.

Perhaps the most important lesson that we can learn from Miriam in this story is later articulated in rabbinic literature as a seemingly simple question and answer. “Who is wise? One who learns from everyone.” Miriam’s parents could have dismissed her as a small child who has no

idea what is actually happening in their world and cannot possibly understand. However, they don't. Yocheved and Amram respect what she has to say, take her seriously, and actually make a change based on this small child's deep wisdom. Miriam and the rabbis teach us that we must not just listen to people who are like us; in order to be truly wise, we should listen to everyone around us. This ancient lesson is especially important to us today, as it seems harder than ever to hear the opinions and thoughts of people who we believe are not like us or with whom we disagree.

My blessing for us all on this Shabbat is that we too open our ears, our minds, and our hearts to Miriam the prophetess and choose life, be righteous role models for the next generation, and learn from everyone.