

WRJ CENTENNIAL



# D'var Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

Caregivers and Guardians of Moses  
Shifrah and Puah, Jocheved, the Egyptian Princess, and Miriam  
Executive Directors of NFTS/WRJ  
Exodus 1:1 – 2:25

At the beginning of Parashat Sh'mot (meaning "names"), we read, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase...'" (Ex 1:8-10). We learn in the following verses that Moses, born during a difficult time in the history of our people, was reared as a prince in the house of Pharaoh and later went on to lead our people from slavery to freedom. According to Susan Niditch, however, "The liberation of the people Israel from slavery in Egypt begins with the saving acts of women." (*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. "Another View", p 324)

Who were these women and what did each do?

- Midwives Shifrah and Puah refused to kill Hebrew children at birth.
- Moses' mother Jocheved refused to allow the Egyptians to kill her son and hid him in a basket in the reeds.
- Pharaoh's unnamed daughter found Moses and saved him.
- Moses' sister Miriam watched over him and made certain that his own mother would nurse him.

Without these five women, there would have been no Moses story, and perhaps there might have been no Exodus... and no Jewish people!

Susan Niditch specifies, "Through this conspiracy of enterprising women who collaborate with each other across ethnic, class, and religious lines, the future leader of the Exodus is spared – and with him the entire people Israel." (*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. "Another View", p 324)

Could this be the first written example of collaboration of women? Was this sisterhood of biblical women *Stronger Together*?

In the early years of NFTS, no *Stronger Together* tagline existed. There was, however, a keen observation that women needed to bond together to accomplish what they could not do alone or even in their own communities. As always, having leadership was another requirement for success.

Throughout our history, our organization has been led by capable, visionary leaders. Respect, trust and collaboration among lay and professional leaders are a testament to our success. Prior to having an Executive Director, NFTS employed an Executive Secretary who handled administrative tasks. Rabbi George Zepin first served from 1913 to 1929, followed by Helen Strauss, who served from 1929 to 1933.

Since those early days, only five women have held the position of Executive Director of NFTS/WRJ. We celebrate them as we acknowledge their vision and determination to move women from the margins of our people's history to the center of its leadership and dynamic work.

Dr. Jane Evans became the first official NFTS Executive Director and served from 1933 to 1977. Eleanor "Ellie" Schwartz led from 1977 to 1992, followed by Ellen Y. Rosenberg from 1992 to 2004. Shelley Lindauer led WRJ from 2004 to 2011. Interim Executive Director Robin Cohen led during 2011. Rabbi Marla Feldman began her tenure in 2012 and leads WRJ today.

Rabbi Feldman commented, "Throughout the ages, women have joined together for sisterhood, mutual support and to work towards the betterment of the community. So too, Reform Jewish women have come together for 100 years to build the institutions of Reform Judaism, support the future leaders and teachers of our Movement through their seminary studies, teach the next generation of Reform Jews, and have fun in the process. *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek* -- Going from strength to strength, we continue to strengthen each other throughout the generations."

WRJ has always demonstrated a sacred, respectful partnership between its lay and professional leaders. Each Executive Director left an indelible mark on WRJ, transitioning it from generation to generation. Now, during this centennial year celebration, may we work to further our visionary leaders' paths, strengthening our local affiliates, our congregations and Reform Judaism across the globe, and may we continue our journey even *Stronger Together*. Amen!

*This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.*