Eshet Chayal-im and Modern Ruths

Moshe Taragin

This war is being fought by every sector of Israeli society. We take immense pride in the empowerment of women in this country. A checkpoint near my home Gush etzion is routinely manned by young Ethiopian women. Every time I pass the checkpoint I well up with tears of pride- much to the derision of my children. Unfortunately, throughout the world, Black females face routine discrimination, yet, in our country they are empowered, and it is I who must answer security questions to them. Thankfully, women in Israel have been granted equal opportunities in all sectors of the army, and they proved their abilities and their mettle on October 7th. Sadly, many women soldiers, particularly those who manned military lookout sites, were murdered on that tragic day. While we applaud women on the battlefield of Azza let us not forget the less public heroes whose bravery unfolds every day, right in our own backyards.

Every component of the Mishkan was symbolic of a fundamental religious value. The mishkan wasn’t merely a Temple for ritual sacrifices but served as a metaphor for overall religious identity. The copper water basin or "kiyor" situated at the entry to the mishkan, was used to wash the hands and feet of the priests before religious ceremonies. Obviously, as it cleansed the priests from their impurities, the washing station symbolized human purity.

Where did the Jewish people acquire copper in the desert? Gold is used for ornaments and silver was employed as currency and presumably, each had been acquired from the Egyptians. How though, did desert travelers secure enough copper to fashion a water basin?

The copper was donated from an unlikely source. If copper is sufficiently buffed it can used as a rudimentary mirror. The Torah reports that Jewish women freely offered their mirrors for the kiyor water basin. Understandably, as the midrash reports, Moshe Rabeinu was appalled at the thought of employing copper mirrors for a water basin of purity. Mirrors, he reasoned, were instruments of vanity and had no place in the mishkan, let alone as the raw material for a water basin of purity.

Quiet Heroes

Correcting Moshe, Hashem declared that the mirrors were more precious than any other material. Despite the brutal Egyptian slavery Jewish women maintained their hygiene, their beauty, and their marital routines. Under nightmarish conditions, the mirrors helped them preserve their appearance. By maintaining family life, they were able to raise families despite the unspeakable hardships. The children born during those dark and gloomy days of persecution, would, one day, march out of Egypt and receive the Torah. The mirrors were female instruments of heroism and defiance.

This quiet, almost unnoticed, heroism of Jewish women didn’t attract the same attention as Moshe's dramatic miracles. Yet their quiet strength preserved our spirit, lifted our morale, and paved the road to our ultimate triumph. Without their quiet courage, our liberation from Egypt would have been hollow.

Heroic Mothers

Our own war would not be effective without the quiet heroism of women on the home front. Pressed into emergency response, mothers have, for months, juggled family and profession without their husband's assistance. In many cases, they are "single-parenting" large families of younger children. They are carrying this heavy burden while living with constant fear about their husband's welfare. Many mothers are also evacuees, managing their families without husbands and without homes.

Understandably, the media focuses upon the victims and survivors of the massacre, the families of the hostages, and the soldiers bravely defending our country. These women however are our quiet heroes. Shabbat after Shabbat without a husband to bring flowers and to recite eishet Chayil for them. Day after day, dropping off children at school or gan, visiting doctors, preparing meals, cleaning homes, reviewing homework, and putting children to bed. Alone, frightened, but trying their best not to display fear to their children.

Heroism comes in many varieties, and it isn’t always loud and public. These are our silent heroes, without whom this war will not succeed.

Modern Day Ruths

The original woman referred to as an eshet chayil was a young widow named Ruth who accompanied her aging mother-in law back to Israel. They didn’t exactly expect an enthusiastic greeting. Naiomi was viewed as a traitor who had abandoned her people in the midst of a famine while defecting to an enemy country. Their chances of receiving charity and support were not great.

Yet, Ruth was staunchly loyal to her new people. Aware of their desperate condition and their likely fate, Ruth declared "where you journey, I will follow, where you die, I will die." Ruth faced death, but didn’t flinch.

Tragically, we now have too many young Ruths. The war has produced too many young widows. The manner in which they have responded to unspeakable tragedy is awe-inspiring. We have listened to their courage and have been stirred by their unbroken spirit. Their pride in the sacrifice of their husbands inspires us. They have expressed immense pride at the honor and privilege to have been married, even if their time together with their husbands was tragically truncated.

Their strength and courage are unfathomable. It is almost as if a higher force is giving them this overwhelming strength and providing them with these powerful words.

This voice is speaking to us. This voice is compelling us toward greater courage, greater faith, and greater perseverance. The modern Ruths are providing strength and hope to an entire people.

Ruth's valor produced Dovid Hamelech and launched Jewish dynasty. We pray that the valor of modern Ruths protect our people in our newly sovereign state.