

Let Our People Go: The Power of Being an Upstander

Source Sheet

WHO IS AN UPSTANDER?

Upstander (noun):

One who speaks, acts and/or intervenes in support of an individual or a group of people being intimidated, bullied or attacked or intimidated, often at great risk to oneself.

“We must ask ourselves: Do I aspire to be human, or am I swept up in the enticing and delicious world of hatred?”

Rachel Goldberg, Mother of Hostage Hersh Goldberg Polin, United Nations Speech, October 24, 2024

As you read the following quotes and biblical texts, ask yourself:

- Who the upstanders are in each case?
- What characteristics do they share?
- What risks did they take?
- Were they public upstanders or did they act in quieter ways?
- What can we learn from them?

THE HEBREW MIDWIVES

1. Exodus 1:15-19

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדוֹת הָעִבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֵחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה: וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיִלְדוֹךָן אֶת הָעִבְרִית וּרְאִיתָן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אִם־בֵּן הוּא וְהַמַּתָּן אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בַּת הוּא וְחָיָה: וְתִירָאן הַמִּילֵדוֹת אֶת־הָאֵלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְתַחֲיִין אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מְדוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְתַחֲיִין אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: וְתֹאמַרְנָן הַמִּילֵדוֹת אֶל־פְּרָעָה כִּי לֹא כְנָשִׁים הֵמָּצְרִית הָעִבְרִית כִּי־חַיּוֹת הֵנָּה בְּטָרָם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילֵדוֹת וַיִּלְדוּ:

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”

2. Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem:

“I’m a religious woman; I have a lot of faith that when God gives you the opportunity to do a mitzvah and step up to the plate – helping your neighbor, helping your city, helping your street, or school – whatever God gives you the opportunity to help others – you step up to the plate and just do it.”

- Who are the upstanders in this story?
- What do you think inspired them to act up and act out?
- What role might belief in God or practicing religion play in being an upstander?

YOCHEVED AND MIRIAM

3. Exodus 2:1-4

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־לֵוִי: וַתְּהֵרָה הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֹתוֹ כִּי־טוֹב הוּא וַתְּצַפְנֵהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים: וְלֹא־יָכְלָה עוֹד הַצִּפְיָנוּ וַתִּקַּח־לוֹ תֵּבַת גָּמָא וַתַּחְמְרָהּ בַּחֲמֵר וּבַצֹּפֶת וַתִּשֶׂם בָּהּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל־שִׁפְת הַיָּאָר: וַתַּתְּצַב אַחֲתוֹ מֵרָחֵק לְדַעַה מֵהַיַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ:

A certain member of the house of Levi went and took [into his household as his wife] a woman of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

4. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, former United States Supreme Court Justice:

“Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you. So often in life, things that you regard as an impediment turn out to be great, good fortune. Don’t be distracted by emotions like anger, envy, resentment. These just zap energy and waste time.”

Sometimes acting as an upstander comes with certain risks. These could be physical threats to safety, or could include being fearful of making unpopular decisions.

- What can we learn from these two texts?

PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER

5.Exodus 2:5-10

וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וַנְּעִרְתָּהּ הַלִּכְתָּ עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתְּבָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אִמָּתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ:
וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה נֶעֶר בֶּכֶה וַתַּחֲמַל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לִדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה: וַתֹּאמֶר אַחְתּוֹ אֶל־בַּת־פַּרְעֹה הַאֵלֶּךְ:
וַקְרָאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקַת מִן־הָעִבְרִית וַתִּינַק לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד: וַתֹּאמֶר־לָהּ בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ הָעַלְמָה וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־אִם הַיֶּלֶד:
וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַּת־פַּרְעֹה הִילִיכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינַקְהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֵּן אֶת־שִׂכְרְךָ וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּנְיָקְהוּ: וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד
וַתִּבְאֶהוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׂיתָהוּ:

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew child.” Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”



MOSES

6. Exodus 2:11-12

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אָחִיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאָחִיו:
וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּךְ אֶת-הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל:

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

Sometimes people think that only those with power and privilege can act as upstanders.

- Looking at these texts, do you think Pharaoh's daughter and Moses saw themselves as powerful and privileged?
- Do you think they had concerns going against the king in power?
- What stands out in their words and actions as upstanders?

7. Exodus 3:9-11

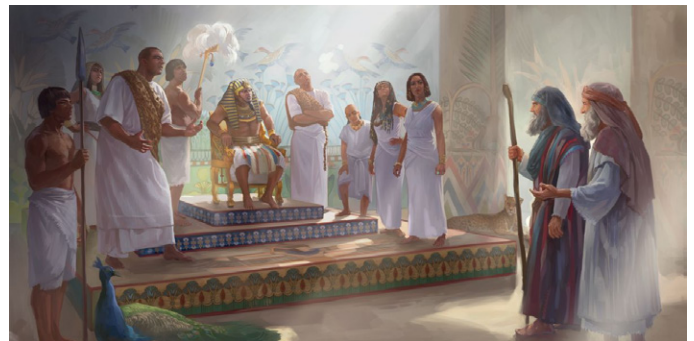
וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צָעַקְתָּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָזְנֵי אֱלֹהֵי וְגַם-רָאִיתִי אֶת-הַלַּחֲץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וְעַתָּה לָכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל-פְּרַעֲה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת-עַמִּי בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִי אֵלֶךְ אֶל-פְּרַעֲה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם:

Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?”

8. Exodus 5:1

וְאַחַר בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-פְּרַעֲה כֹה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיְחַגּוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר:

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says יהוה-יה, the God of Israel: Let My people go, that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.”



9. Emma Goldman, political activist (1869-1940):

“The history of progress is written in the blood of men and women who have dared to espouse an unpopular cause, as, for instance, the black man’s right to his body, or woman’s right to her soul.”

Looking back at history, how are you inspired to act as an upstander?

- What, if any, apprehensions do you have?