

Three Women Who Dared

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Be happy, it's Adar!

The new month of Adar began last Monday. Next weekend, we celebrate Purim. Spring is finally almost here.

In addition to sending *sh'lach manot* and eating *hamentaschen* and dressing up in costumes, the central celebration of Purim is the public reading of the Book of Esther, *Megillat Esther*.

Esther is the prime example of a woman who dared. She dared to speak up to King Achashverosh. She dared to enter his throne room without his permission, risking death. She accused Haman, powerful counselor to the king, of plotting to kill the Jews. In doing so, she revealed to the king that she, herself, was Jewish. If she had failed, she would have shared in the fate of all the Jews of Persia in being killed by Haman and his followers.

Before these exploits, Esther was unsure what to do. Her uncle Mordecai urged her to use her position as queen to save the Jews.

We need to back up a little in the story to understand the exchange between Mordecai and Esther and the key line in that exchange that still speaks to us today.

Megillat Esther tells us that the king had promoted Haman and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials. All the king's courtiers knelt and bowed low to Haman according to the king's order, but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low. He refused to do so, he said, because he was a Jew.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down to him, Haman was furious. Rather than punishing Mordecai alone, however, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews throughout the Persian kingdom.

In response to a request from Haman, the king issued a decree to “destroy, massacre and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions.”

Mordecai sent a messenger to Esther, directing the messenger to show the decree to Esther. Mordecai charged her to go to the king and to appeal to him and plead with him for her people.

Esther hesitated. She sent the messenger back to Mordecai with the following reply:

All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him – that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.

Mordecai returned the messenger to Esther with the following message for her:

Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, release and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish.

And then here comes the key question that Mordecai asked Esther: "Who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." "*Mi yodea, im l'eit cazot biga'at lamalchut.*"

That question, *mi yodea*, who knows but perhaps this moment was meant exactly for you to act, is the central question of life that the dean of my rabbinical school often cites as a key question for all of us to consider, particularly in times of crisis.

What is needed in such a time, in any time of crisis, is a person who dares. And Esther was that person in this crisis.

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Another such person, another woman who dared in times of crisis, is a Nineteenth Century former slave. Her name, a name she chose for herself? Sojourner Truth.

That was not her name at birth. She was born Isabella Baumfree in or about 1797 in Swartekill, New York. She was known in her childhood and youth as Belle.

Her father was a slave captured in the part of Africa that is now Ghana; her mother was a daughter of slaves captured in Guinea.

Slavery was lawful in New York State until 1827. Ownership of slaves, like the ownership of any property, passed to the heirs of the owner when he died. Belle and her family were inherited by the son of the original owner in 1806. She was then about nine years old.

The next year she and a flock of sheep were sold for the joint price of \$100. Her new owner was harsh and violent. She would be sold twice more over the following two years before she came to be owned by her final owner, John Dumont.

Around 1815, she fell in love with a slave named Robert from a neighboring farm. The two had a daughter. Robert's owner did not allow the relationship to continue, however, since that child and any subsequent children produced by the union would become Dumont's property as Belle's owner. As a result, Belle never saw Robert again.

In 1817, Dumont compelled her to marry an older slave named Thomas. Their marriage produced three additional children.

The state of New York, which had begun to negotiate the abolition of slavery in 1799, finally emancipated all slaves on July 4, 1827. The shift did not come soon enough for Belle. Dumont promised to emancipate her but changed his mind. Belle escaped to freedom in 1826.

Shortly after Belle's escape, she learned that one son, Peter, then five years old, had been illegally sold to a man in Alabama. She took the issue to court and secured Peter's return from the South. The case was one of the first in which a black woman successfully challenged a white man in a United States court.

In 1843, Isabella Baumfree changed her name to Sojourner Truth. Thereafter she devoted her life to the abolition of slavery.

In 1844, she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Northampton, Massachusetts. The association supported a broad reform agenda including abolition of slavery, women's rights and pacifism. Truth met many leading abolitionists at Northampton, including the subject of my last sermon, Frederick Douglass.

The Northampton community disbanded in 1846, but Sojourner Truth's career as an activist and reformer was just beginning. In 1850, her memoirs were published under the title The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave. That same year, Truth spoke at the first National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Truth traveled widely and spoke often thereafter at conventions concerned with abolition and those concerned with women's rights. As Truth's reputation grew, she drew increasingly larger and more hospitable audiences.

Even in abolitionist circles, some of Truth's opinions were considered radical. She sought political equality for all women, and chastised the abolitionist community for failing to seek civil rights for black women as well as men. She openly expressed

concern that the movement would fizzle after achieving victories for black men, leaving both white and black women without suffrage.

Sojourner Truth died at her home in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1883. Until old age intervened, Truth continued to speak passionately on the subjects that concerned her.

She was one of the foremost leaders of the abolition movement and an early advocate of women's rights. She began her career as an abolitionist, but the reform causes she sponsored were broad and varied, including prison reform, property rights and universal suffrage.

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Our final woman who dared was an essential actor in the success of our national space program. She is also a central character in one of the most inspiring and disturbing films of 2016. The film is Hidden Figures.

If you have not seen it, you have an assignment from your rabbi: Go see it soon.

The name of this third hero is Katherine Johnson. In August this year, she will be 100 years old.

Johnson was born in 1918 in the little town of White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. She was always fascinated by numbers. She was also very, very smart. By the time she was 10 years old, she was a high school freshman -- a truly amazing feat in an era when school for African-Americans normally stopped at eighth grade for those few who could even get that far.

Her father, Joshua, was determined that his bright little girl would have a chance to meet her potential. He drove his family 120 miles to Institute, West Virginia, where she could continue her education through high school.

Johnson's academic performance proved her father's decision was the right one: Johnson skipped though the subsequent grades to graduate from high school at 14, from college at 18.

In 1953, after years as a teacher and later as a stay-at-home mom, she began working for NASA's predecessor, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

Beginning in 1935, NACA had been hiring women for the tedious and precise work of measuring and calculating results of such things as wind tunnel tests. There were no electronic computers then. The women doing this work had the job title of "computer."

Initially, all these "computers" were white women. During World War II, NACA expanded this effort to include African-American women. NACA was so

pleased with the results that, unlike many organizations, they kept the computers at work after the war.

By 1953, the growing demands of early space research meant there were openings for African-American women to work as “computers” at NASA’s Langley Research Center in its Guidance and Navigation Department. It was here Johnson found a place to put her extraordinary mathematical skills to work.

As one of the “computers,” but working only with an adding machine, pencil and paper, and her own mind, she calculated the trajectory for Alan Shepard, the first American in space. Even after NASA began using electronic computers, John Glenn requested that Johnson must personally recheck the calculations made by the new electronic computers before his flight aboard Friendship 7 – the mission on which he became the first American to orbit the Earth. Glenn didn’t trust the machine, but he trusted Johnson.

Johnson did this work while struggling against both racism and sexism. She worked with a team of engineers, all white and all male, who did not allow her to use the coffee machine in their common room and required her to walk half a mile away to use the segregated bathroom. Despite these oppositions, she did superior work and continued to work at NASA until 1986, combining her math talent with electronic computer skills. Her calculations proved as critical to the success of the Apollo Moon landing program and the start of the Space Shuttle program, as they did to those first steps on the country's journey into space.

From honorary doctorates to the 1967 NASA Lunar Orbiter Spacecraft and Operations team award (for pioneering work in the field of navigation problems supporting the five spacecraft that orbited and mapped the moon in preparation for the Apollo program), Johnson has led a life positively littered with honors. Most recently, in November, 2015, Johnson was awarded the highest civilian honor in America, the National Medal of Freedom.

Do you think it is a complete coincidence that Johnson’s birthday is August 26? I’m not sure. That date is Women's Equality Day, the anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote.

I salute Queen Esther, and Sojourner Truth, and Katherine Johnson, three women who dared, standing up for rights while accomplishing greatly for the societies in which they lived.