

# The Story behind Aishes Chayil

*Why did King Solomon sleep in during the Temple's inauguration, and how did that inform the Israeli response in Haiti?*

## The Response

In 2009, a devastating earthquake struck Haiti, and countries from around the world rushed to provide aid. Among them, one response stood out: the second-largest aid contingent to arrive in Haiti came from Israel—a tiny country that's not always easy to spot on a map. Despite its size, Israel sent a team that made a huge impact.

In contrast, out of the 57 Muslim countries in the world, only Turkey sent a small group to assist. What's even more remarkable is that Israel's team was equipped to perform surgeries on the ground, something not even the American aid teams managed to do.

And here's the twist: this is the same Israel that's so often criticized on the global stage for its so-called "disproportionate responses" to conflicts. Yet, when Israel offered an overwhelmingly disproportionate response of kindness and aid to Haiti, nobody was outraged.

## Who Wrote the Song

We're all familiar with the song *Eishes Chayil—A Woman of Valor*—sung at the Shabbos table every Friday night. Written by Shlomo HaMelech, King Solomon, and included in the Book of *Mishlei* (Proverbs), it's a poetic tribute to the ideal woman. But why do we sing it on Shabbos? Because, on a deeper level, *Eishes Chayil* is an ode to Shabbos itself, which is symbolized as a woman—the "Shabbos Queen."

This raises an interesting question: what inspired King Solomon to write these beautiful verses? What motivated him to craft this poetic description of the *Eishes Chayil*, the ultimate woman of virtue?

When King Solomon ascended to the throne, his first major undertaking was building the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple—a massive project that took seven years. During this time, he also worked to establish diplomatic relations with foreign rulers and nations, even as far as Africa. Back then, one common way for kings to form alliances was through royal marriages. This tradition lasted well into modern times, as it was seen as a way to cement partnerships between nations.

A fascinating example of this is from just a few years ago: Australia and Denmark, two countries you wouldn't immediately associate, actually strengthened their diplomatic and trade relations. How? Through a royal wedding. Mary Donaldson, an ordinary young woman from Australia, met Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark, and today, as Crown Princess of Denmark, she's become a key reason behind several business deals between the two nations.

Now, back to Shlomo HaMelech.

## The Temple

King Solomon had a grand vision: to bring the entire world closer to the belief in G-d. To achieve this, he converted many foreign princesses to Judaism and married them, hoping that through these unions, he could inspire them—and their nations—to recognize G-d and His greatness. As the Talmud Yerushalmi (Sanhedrin 2:6) explains, "Concerning the verse that [states that] he loved heathen women… Rav Yosi says [that he did so] to draw them to the words of the Torah and to bring them close under the wings of the Divine Presence."

This strategy of forming alliances reached its peak with the marriage of the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter. According to the Midrash, this wasn't just any royal wedding. On the very night that Shlomo HaMelech celebrated the completion and dedication of the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple, he also celebrated his wedding to Pharaoh's daughter. The Midrash paints a vivid picture of the occasion: "On the night that Shlomo completed the work on the Holy Temple, he married the Pharaoh's daughter, and there was heard jubilation for the Temple celebration and for the Pharaoh's daughter's celebration—but the joyous cries for the Pharaoh's daughter rose higher than the joyous cries for the Temple."

In other words, the crowd was far more excited about the wedding than about the dedication of the Temple itself. And surprisingly, no one voiced any objection. Why? The Midrash explains: *kula mischanfin l'malka*—everyone was flattering the king.

But the story doesn't end there. The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 12:5) adds an intriguing detail: throughout the seven years that Shlomo HaMelech was building the Beis Hamikdash, he lived as a Nazir. He refrained from drinking wine and cutting his hair, following the stringent vow of a Nazirite. However, on that historic night—the night the Temple was completed and he married the Pharaoh's daughter—he broke his Nazirite vow and drank wine.

## Sleeping In

After such a grand celebration, it's no surprise that King Solomon went to bed, placing the keys to the newly completed Holy Temple under his pillow. His new wife, the Egyptian princess, wanting to ensure her husband slept soundly, closed all the curtains to keep out the morning sun.

But the next morning, trouble arose. The entire Jewish nation had woken up early, eager to bring the very first *Tamid* sacrifice—the daily morning offering—in the new Temple at the earliest possible moment. There was just one problem: the king was still asleep. And since the keys to the Temple were tucked safely under his pillow, no one could enter to begin the service.

As the Midrash describes, "The Jews were distressed because it was Temple Dedication Day, and they couldn't do anything because Shlomo was sleeping, and they were afraid to wake him for fear of the king's wrath." After all, who would dare disturb the king? And so, the hours dragged on until finally, the Midrash tells us, "he slept until four hours into the day."

Now imagine the scene. The Temple, a project that took seven years to build, was finally complete. Though it had been finished months earlier, Shlomo delayed its dedication until the following Tishrei, a month associated with the patriarchs—Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov—adding even more significance to the moment. The excitement and anticipation for this first offering were immense. And yet, when the time came, the king overslept.

Desperate, the people turned to the one person who could do something about it: the Queen Mother, Batsheva. She alone had the audacity—and the authority—to wake the king. As the Midrash recounts, she went to his chambers, woke him up, and delivered a sharp rebuke. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 70b) records her words: "Everyone knows that your father, David, feared Heaven. Now people will say that his mother made him wicked!" Rashi elaborates: "They won't blame your father… so why give them the chance to mock you

as my son?" She even added a stinging critique: "He to whom all the secrets of the world are revealed drinks wine and gets drunk!" It was a stinging rebuke for a man renowned as the wisest of all.

In the end, the *Tamid* offering was brought that day—but only four hours after sunrise, far later than intended. Yet this wasn't just a logistical issue; it was a moment of reflection for Shlomo HaMelech.

This event became the backdrop for the song *Eishes Chayil*. Shlomo, disappointed in his new wife, who had thoughtlessly darkened the room to ensure he slept in, began to reflect on the true qualities of an ideal woman. In his frustration and longing, he penned the words: *"A woman of valor, who can find?"* As if to say, "If only I had found someone like that…"

## The Comparison to Batya

But the Midrash adds a fascinating twist to this story. It tells us that King Solomon's lament about the daughter of Pharaoh wasn't just about the Egyptian princess he had recently married. Instead, he was also reflecting on a very different daughter of Pharaoh—the first one mentioned in history, the one who had saved Moshe Rabbeinu from the river.

This brings us back full circle to this week's Torah portion, where we read about the Plague of the Firstborn. In this devastating plague, every firstborn in Egypt died, as the Torah states (Shemos 12:30), *"For there was no house where there was no dead."* Rashi explains that this wasn't limited to biological firstborns. The oldest member of the household was also considered a firstborn, so no family was spared.

But here's the remarkable exception: the Midrash tells us that even the firstborn daughters of Egypt perished during the plague—except for one. Who was that lone firstborn Egyptian girl? None other than Basya, the daughter of Pharaoh, the woman who had drawn Moshe from the river and saved his life.

Why was she spared? Because, as the Torah says about Moshe, *"She saw him, that he was good."* Her act of kindness in rescuing him and recognizing his greatness merited her survival. And in his lament, King Solomon alluded to this very moment in *Eishes Chayil* when he wrote: *"She senses that her enterprise is good, so her lamp is not extinguished at night."* Which "night" was he referring to? The Midrash ties it directly to our Torah portion, quoting the verse: *"It came to pass at midnight."*

King Solomon, the wisest of men, was reflecting on these two daughters of Pharaoh. The first, Basya, was a woman of unparalleled greatness. She saw the goodness in Moshe, defied her father's decrees, and risked everything to save him, ultimately becoming an icon of courage and kindness. In contrast, the second daughter of Pharaoh—his own new wife—was far from ideal. Her actions on the morning after the Temple dedication revealed a lack of understanding and sensitivity, leaving Shlomo HaMelech deeply disappointed.

What we learn from Basya, the daughter of Pharaoh who rescued baby Moshe from the river, is the power of moral courage. In a world where babies were being murdered, she stood against the tide. She defied everything she had been taught, rejected the values of her upbringing, and risked her very life to save a Jewish child. Her act of bravery wasn't just an act of kindness—it was an act of rebellion against an empire, led by her own father, to do what she knew was right.

This is why I began by talking about the Jewish response to the tragedy in Haiti. Basya's spirit—the willingness to stand up for others, even against overwhelming odds—is the foundation upon which the Jewish nation was built. From its earliest moments, the Jewish people have carried this sensitivity to human suffering, this profound awareness of the pain of others. And so, it comes as no surprise that when disaster struck Haiti, Israel—a tiny nation on the world map—sent one of the largest and most capable rescue teams to alleviate the suffering of its people.

This trait, rooted in the Exodus from Egypt, remains a defining characteristic of the Jewish people to this very day. Throughout history, we've been sensitive to the needs of others, recognizing that every human being is created in the image of G-d. And for this, we thank G-d, who instilled this empathy in our nation.

The Rebbe often spoke about the importance of spreading the Seven Noahide Laws, encouraging us to inspire the nations of the world to faith in the One G-d. Perhaps the tragedy in Haiti reminds us that while our humanitarian efforts are vital, they are only part of the picture. As Jews, we have a spiritual responsibility to the world—a responsibility to share not just material help but also the message of hope, purpose, and faith that comes from a connection with G-d.

Above all, the Jew must never lose sight of our ultimate mission: to transform ourselves spiritually and, through that, to elevate the world around us. This is our purpose, our calling, and, as the Rebbe would

say, our destiny. It is through this work that we bring light into the darkest places and help fulfill the ultimate vision of a world united in goodness and G-dliness.