

**Speech at International March of the Living Education Seminar  
Mexico City  
Monday, February 6, 2012  
Eli Rubenstein, National Director, March of the Living Canada**

In the story of the Exodus we are currently reading in the weekly Torah cycle, we come across two pivotal moments, two moments of moral decision making that were to change the course of the Jewish people, and indeed the future of much of humanity.

These two moments are especially relevant to our young participants on the March of the Living – they are, as they say in the profession, eminently “teaching moments”.

The first moment I want to discuss occurs when Moses, the prince of Egypt, encounters an Egyptian smiting an Israelite.

What shall he do? After all he is the son of an Egyptian princess, he is a member of the royal household, expected to be loyal to his position and to his country.

But, what about his real ancestry, what about his own downtrodden brothers and sisters, what about justice?

Moses then makes a critical decision, despite the enormous personal cost.

He intervenes, slaying the Egyptian to save the life of the Hebrew slave.

Before Moses slays the Egyptian, the text says, “Vayar ki ein eesh” and “Moses saw there was no man” – i.e., no-one was looking, according to the simple meaning of the text. But the rabbis give us a more profound interpretation. They explain that Moses saw there was no one willing to be a man, to take a stand, to be a mensch – so Moses decided he was the one who had to step forward, to save his fellow Israelite. As the rabbis teach us, *“Bimkom She’eyn eesh, Tishtadel Leyot Eesh”*: When no-one is acting like a real human being, you must be the one to act like a true person.

The message of this critical moment is especially relevant to our March of the Living students. We, the Jewish people, have to take care of our own, we have to stand up for each other, for Am Yisrael and for Israel. Too often, the world has simply looked away in the face of the persecution of the Jewish people, or even worse, actively participated.

But there is a second, more universal message from the March of the Living also connected to the story of Moses. As you all know, Moses was saved by the actions of many, all female as it happen (that’s the subject of another speech) – the Egyptian midwives who refused to listen to the evil King’s edict to throw the Hebrew male babies in the Nile, his mother who spirited him down the Nile in a basket and served as his wet-nurse thus reminding him of his true identity, and his sister Miriam who followed the progress of the basket, and suggested his mother nurse him.

But the most dramatic role in his rescue was played by Bat Pharaoh, the Egyptian princess and daughter of Pharaoh, who heard the infant Moses’ cry, gazed upon the child and took him under her protective wing.

She too faced a moment of moral choice. Until that time, it appears she failed to act. She doubtlessly knew of her father's heartless command, she knew of the suffering of the Israelites, but like so many people then and today, failed to act. But when confronted with the suffering of an innocent child, she looked into his eyes, and, unlike the majority of her countrymen - did the right thing.

In that split second, the Egyptian princess was faced with a clear choice – to turn her face away from the crying infant or to rescue the innocent child. She chose the latter.

Had her actions taken place during WWII, no doubt Yad Vashem would consider her one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" for her courageous act.

So what shall our young March of the Living students learn from this second moment of critical decision making?

First of all, Hacarat Hatov, that we must have exceptional gratitude for the role of all the Hasidei Umot Haolam during the Holocaust, the close to 24,000 thousand documented "Righteous Among the Nations" (and countless others, whose stories will perhaps never be known) whose actions not only saved thousands of lives, but indeed, as it has been argued, the very reputation of humanity.

The second lesson is one of example: We must empower our young people to follow the example of Pharaoh's daughter and the "Righteous Among the Nations" and never be bystanders in the face of the oppression of innocent people – we must stand up and be counted. Further, our efforts must only not be confined to protecting our family, our fellow citizens, or those who are most like us. Indeed, we must reach our helping hands out to all members of the human family, to all who need our life-giving efforts.

As Senator Romeo Dallaire, the heroic soldier who tried (but failed) to stop the Rwandan genocide reminds us, "No human is more human than any other human". There is no greater and more poignant reminder of this noble sentiment than the actions of Pharaoh's daughter and the "Righteous Among the Nations" who reached out across all ethnic boundaries and religious lines, to save others.

The story of Moses – so central to the Exodus saga - thus contains two critical lessons for our March of the Living students:

A) Stand up for the Jewish people – sadly history has taught us we cannot rely on the majority of humanity.

B) Stand up for all oppressed people.

We, who know all too well what it feels like to be abandoned, to be labeled the "other", have the inspiring example of the "Righteous Among the Nations" to show the way. We also know there never would have been a Jewish people had not Pharaoh's own daughter responded to the cry of an innocent child floating down a river more than three millennia ago.

Our young students will face many moments of critical decision-making in their lives.

Within the story and the lessons of the heroic rescue of Moses and his own courageous actions, you have in your hands a most powerful teaching tool for our March of the Living participants.