

## Jewish Journal Torah Portion - January 20, 2010

### Unsung Heroes - Parashat Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:16)

By Rabbi Lisa Edwards



Miep Gies died this month, weeks shy of her 101st birthday. Gies worked for Otto Frank's Amsterdam pectin company and was the main caretaker of the Franks, including Anne, and the four other Jews who hid for 25 months in the business' back rooms. Those hiding in the Secret Annex managed, with the help of Gies, her husband and four co-workers, to evade capture by the Nazis until August 1944. Dispersed to various concentration camps, only Anne's father returned alive. Upon hearing of his daughters' deaths, Miep Gies handed Otto Frank Anne's diary, which she had found and stashed in her desk drawer after the hiding place was discovered by the Nazis.

In this week's Torah portion, Bo, we read another frightening escape story. "The length of time the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years; at the end of the 430th year, to the very day, all the ranks of God departed from the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12:40). On the verge of their departure,

Torah tells us that the Israelites had followed instructions and "asked" of the Egyptians silver and gold objects and clothing, and "God had given the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they let themselves be asked of," even to the point of being stripped of their wealth (Exodus 12:35-6).

Certainly the Egyptians were frightened, eager to have the Israelites gone, and the plagues with them. And perhaps that is their only motivation for giving them what they ask for in the aftermath of the horrible 10th plague, the deaths of their firstborn.

Yet midrash posits another possibility. It speaks of three kinds of people among the Egyptians: those who wanted the Israelites to remain slaves died in the plagues; those who were also oppressed by the Egyptians went out of Egypt with them (the *erev rav*, or mixed multitude) (Exodus 12:38); and the Egyptians who gave the Israelites gold, silver and clothing, even to the point of depleting their own treasuries, those are the ones who "supported Israel's bid for liberation and rose in revolt against Pharaoh's stubborn policies" (Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary, p. 388).

Much has been made of the first group and the second, but the less-acclaimed third group includes the unsung heroes — those who risk their lives to help the oppressed and rise up in quiet revolt against "the stubborn policies" of the oppressor.

Miep Gies said that when Otto Frank asked if she would help hide him and his family in the annex behind the company warehouse and bring them food and supplies, "I answered, 'Yes, of course.' It seemed perfectly natural to me. I could help these people. They were powerless; they didn't know where to turn."

In her diary, Anne Frank frequently mentioned Gies' heroic delivery of supplies, food and thoughtful gifts (a cake, for example): "It seems as if we are never far from Miep's thoughts."

Although honored by three countries and countless institutions, Gies said during a 1997 online chat with schoolchildren: "I don't want to be considered a hero.... Imagine [if] young people would grow up with the feeling that you have to be a hero to do your human duty. I am afraid nobody would ever help other people, because who is a hero? I was not. I was just an ordinary housewife and secretary."

In another interview, Gies said: "It is our human duty to help those who are in trouble. I could foresee many, many sleepless nights and a miserable life if I had refused to help the Franks. Yes, I have wept countless times when I thought of my dear friends. But still, I am happy that these are not tears of remorse for refusing to assist those in trouble."

The choices you and I face today may be simpler than the dramatic and life threatening ones faced by Miep Gies or the Egyptians who were sympathetic to the Israelites: to feed the hungry perhaps; or be a Big Brother or Big Sister; teach an adult to read; or fight for a cause not immediately ours. Yet, a seemingly simple choice can change someone else's life — or even our own.

"Yes, I have wept.... But still, I am happy that these are not tears of remorse for refusing to assist those in trouble."

May her memory continue to be a blessing, and may her words and deeds inspire us to action.