

Eugene rabbi offers a modern rendering of Moses

“Moses: A Stranger Among Us” strives to provide a better understanding of his life

BY RANDI BJORNSTAD

The Register-Guard

Published: **Sunday, Mar 18, 2012 05:00AM**

As told in a new book by Eugene Rabbi Maurice Harris, even in the age of pharaohs strong women played critical roles in the political and social life of ancient Egypt.

So much so, in fact, that the towering Biblical figure of Moses owed his life to five women — two midwives, his mother, his sister and the Pharaoh’s daughter herself — for their collective bravery, sneakiness and backbone.

That’s one aspect of “Moses: A Stranger Among Us,” but as another well-known local religious figure, the Rev. Dan Bryant, puts it in his foreword to Harris’ book: “We all recognize Moses because we think we know him, or at least we know about him. But would we know the man surrounded by five determined sisters who think they can challenge the law given by God? Or how often have we considered the possibility that the marriage of Moses to Tziporah is a model of interfaith marriage? Would we recognize a Moses who, instead of ‘laying down the law’ for all to follow and obey, shows adaptability and willingness to incorporate ideas and principles from other cultures?”

Those are concepts far beyond the Hollywood portrayals of the stern and bearded Moses contending with the burning bush, parting the Red Sea (which Harris says really should be translated as the Sea of Reeds) and receiving the stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments from the hands of God.

Indeed, there’s nothing stuffy about Harris’ book, which promises to present Moses as “the adopted child, the ex-con, the failure and the intermarrier.”

It also has the cachet of being published locally by Cascade Books, a division of Wipf and Stock, a Eugene company.

In fact, Harris said, he wrote most of the book while sitting in Theo’s Coffee House in downtown Eugene, where it shares space with Cozmic, also known as Cosmic Pizza.

“Unbeknownst to me as I was writing it, Wipf and Stock, the publisher, was literally right above my head, on the second floor of the same building,” he said.

“I submitted the book to many publishers around the United States before I ever learned about Wipf and Stock. A professor of mine from seminary actually contacted me from Boston to tell me about them, and only after she contacted me did I discover them and then submit my book to them. They were the ones who said ‘yes.’”

Because he was a local author — “and it’s unusual for them to have one of their authors be local,” Harris said — he even got to take a personal tour of Wipf and Stock’s publishing house, complete with printing press and bookbinding machine room.

Harris, who graduated from Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and served as one of two rabbis at Temple Beth Israel for eight years, presents the story of Moses in the context of both contemporary and biblical issues.

He takes a look at apparently conflicting texts in the Torah that on the one hand describe God and Moses as having “face to face” conversations with each other and a few verses later God telling Moses that “no human may see me and live.”

He portrays the two as a kind of “dynamic duo,” as when three sisters come before Moses to challenge Israelite law, which doesn’t allow women to inherit after their sonless father dies.

“Dramatically, it’s as if all eyes are on Moses, waiting to see how he will react,” Harris writes. “Will he take their challenge as an unacceptable affront to his (and God’s) law? Will he censure these women for even daring to speak?”

On the contrary.

“What Moses and God end up doing has huge implications for how we choose to look at law, whether in a religious or a secular context,” Harris concludes.

“First, Moses doesn’t act threatened by the appeal, and in fact simply seems stumped ... (and) takes the case directly to God.”

The upshot is that “God hears the case, considers it, and then rules in favor of the sisters. A new, revised law is proclaimed ...”

The whole book takes on that colloquial, back-and-forth tone, probably unusual for a religious tome, that makes it easy to read and easy to think about.

As S. Tamar Kamionkowski, associate professor of Bible at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College enthusiastically puts it on the back cover of Harris’ book, “Moses is one of the most famous personalities among the Abrahamic religions, but how well do we really know the biblical Moses ... Harris lifts the veil of centuries of interpretation to show us Moses in a new light. Harris has succeeded in doing what few others can — he has brought Moses into the 21st century.”

“What Moses and God end up doing has huge implications for how we choose to look at law, whether in a religious or a secular context.”

RABBI MAURICE HARRIS
AUTHOR OF “MOSES: A STRANGER AMONG US”

MOSES: A STRANGER AMONG US

Rabbi Maurice Harris’ new book has just been published, by Wipf and Stock Publishers in Eugene.

Availability: wipfandstock.com/store/ or amazon.com

Information: info@wipfandstock.com or 541-344-1528

Copyright © 2012 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA