

Shemot 5781 **The Audacity of Birth**

When the Rabbis of the Talmud look at the book of Shemot, they comment:

Bizchut nashim tzadkaniot nig'alu avoteinu mimitzrayim

“it was through the merit of righteous women that our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.”

The Exodus story teems with dynamic women. Yocheved, Miriam, Tzipporah. Pharaoh's daughter, who rescues Moses from the rushes. Serach the daughter of Asher, who the Rabbis credit with pointing out where Joseph's bones had been thrown into the river. And the first two women, the two who make the whole narrative possible: the midwives Shifrah and Puah.

The Torah tells us:

The king of Egypt spoke to the midwives, one of whom was named Shifrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”

The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?”

The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”

And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.

And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

It's a total of 7 verses - hardly anything in terms of the rest of the Torah. And yet these two women and those seven verses power the whole story of the Exodus.

So who are these two heroes, without whom we wouldn't be having this conversation? The tradition can't make up its mind. There are many commentators who understand them as being 'Hebrew midwives.' Rashi, basing himself on a page from the Babylonian Talmud, concludes that they are Yocheved and Miriam - Yocheved is Shifrah because she 'improved' - *meshaperet* - the newborn babies by cleaning them up, and Miriam is Puah because she 'cooed' - *po'ah* - to them.

But the Hebrew word *meyaldot* can be understood differently. There's a fragment from the Cairo Genizah which makes it very clear that Shifrah and Puah were thought of as being Egyptians, to be included for all generations in a list of other righteous women who started their lives outside the Israelite nation. And some of our other traditional commentators - most notably Don Isaac Abarbanel, the sixteenth-century Portuguese-Jewish courtier - also reason that the story makes better sense if we think of these two women as acting in defiance of their own king - who, we should remember, was thought of as a god.

Egyptian or not, it is unusual for the Torah to describe women by their calling. Our attention is being specifically drawn to the fact that they are midwives. So let's explore that a little.

The English word comes from old English mid+wyf meaning 'with a woman' and the Hebrew word means 'enabling birth' or 'helping to bring to birth.' How does this daily experience inform Shifrah and Puah?

To answer that question I spoke with two women who do this work. Dana Keren is a doula - a midwife - here in the New Orleans community. My cousin Lyndsay Lev is a maternity nurse at Boulder Community Hospital. Here's what they shared with me.

First, their sense of wonder. It is extraordinary, incredible that women's bodies can create new life. It never stops being that way. Even for Lyndsay, for whom New Year's Eve was about three births, one after the other, each new birth is always a miracle, humbling in its power. Nothing can hold birth back - not convenience, not adversity. A new life will stop at nothing. And the task of a midwife is to recognize that, and marvel at it, and assist it.

Second, the extraordinary intimacy of helping a woman birth a child. The Torah places Shifrah and Puah *al haovnayim*, next to the birthstones where women labor to bring a new life into the world. They are right up close to the experience. They know it, in that deep sense of knowing that the Hebrew word *yada* connotes . Helping bring a baby into the world is a further example of 'knowing in the Biblical sense' and a reinforcement of the way that word echoes through the early narrative of Shemot.

Third, birth is not a single moment. It has a past and a future. Dana spoke about the whole process of working with a family during pregnancy, gradually helping them step towards the time when that new life will arrive. Lyndsay wrote to me how COVID has forced a reduction in the number of people who attend both before and after a birth:

this delicious, special time is shared just between the parents and their newborn. That includes during labor, at delivery, and even in the first day or two post-partum. In the past, especially at our facility, sometimes there were up to 10-15 family members and/or friends present, which was exciting, but so overwhelming. A silver lining, without question, has been the ability to maintain and secure the precious time around the arrival of newborns.

And fourth - birth changes everything, for everyone involved. My friend Gabrielle Kaufman, a specialist in maternal mental health, pointed out to me that a midwife doesn't just birth a baby, but also a mother, and a family. Nothing after a birth will be the same as it was before. Everyone in the constellation is different, now.

So now maybe we can understand better why the Torah draws our attention to these women. Their work draws them into miracle, into intimacy, into time, into change. It sets their priorities, giving them a deep, countercultural understanding of what is, and what isn't important. It is sacred. Never mind politics, never mind statecraft, never mind orders from above - midwives foster life and the connection to life, even if it means defying a god-king. They are as audacious as birth itself.

There's a photograph that showed up in many rabbis' Facebook feeds this week. It's from the Capitol, and it shows two young women, masked. They are both wearing black and white - one print dress, one checked. Slung

between them is a box - obviously an antique box, made of dark wood and leather, with many straps and buckles. In this box, and others like it, were the physical electoral votes for Wednesday's ceremony. These two women were photographed bringing them to the ceremony - and they were likely the two who rescued them when chaos broke out. My colleague Rabbi Ari Hart commented:

I don't know who the aides in this picture are, I don't know their names, I don't know which side of the aisle they are on. But I know that they are heroes. Today, for me, they are the Shifra and Puah of our democratic process. They, and so many other anonymous aides, security guards, janitors, cafeteria workers, who work long difficult hours in normal times and even more in these extraordinary times, to make our democracy real and alive.

So as we read about Shifrah and Puah this year, we can ask: who are the midwives of today - or are they us? Do we ourselves have a sacred task to help birth something out of chaos and adversity? Whatever it is, may we have a share of Shifrah and Puah's audacity, and their knowledge, and their presence, and their power to change everything.

Shabbat shalom.