

Parashat Shemot Exodus 1:1-6:1

As we have just started a new year of 2021 this Shabbat begins a new book of Torah: Shemot or Exodus, the 2nd book of Moses. The portion is called Shemot, meaning “names” for the names of Jacobs sons that are mentioned at the beginning of the portion. We learn that there is a new Pharoah who did not know of Joseph. He was fearful because the Israelites had become so numerous and he was worried that they might turn against him, and so he enslaves them and decrees that their newborn male sons be drowned in the Nile. One mother saves her son by defying the order, and saves him. Within the 5 books of Moses that center mainly around our Patriarchs and our male ancestors, we hear in this portion about 6 brave and courageous women, who helped Moses became one of the most significant Jewish leaders of all time, and thereby saving the Jewish people, by leading the Israelites out of Egypt to freedom. I would like to focus my Devar mainly on these 6 women.

The first two women I’d like to talk about are Shifrah and Puah. It is uncertain whether these midwives were Hebrew or Egyptian midwives. The Hebrew says: Lamyaldot Ha-ivriyot, which means: The midwives of the Hebrew women. It doesn’t state whether the midwives were Hebrew or Egyptian, though. Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides believed they were Jewish and reasoned that Jewish

tradition forbids murder, so they had no choice but to follow Jewish law. They defied Pharaoh's order as an heroic act against the oppression of their people. Their actions were justified because they were obeying the law of God and ensuring the survival of their people. Rabbi Akiba goes on to say that "God liberated the Jewish people from Egypt because of the heroic and righteous deeds of the women." However, what if they weren't Jewish? Why would they put their lives at risk by disobeying the Pharaoh? Both Philo from Alexandria, a Philosopher (20BcE – 40CE) and Flavius Josephus, a general-historian (37 BCE-105 CE) believed they were Egyptian. David Luzzatto said that it was only logical that the Pharaoh would only trust an Egyptian to carry out his orders. Modern biblical scholar Nahum M. Sarna states that Shiphra and Puah refused to carry out Pharaoh's order because they "feared God and believed in the Sanctity of life." He states that this is the first recorded case of civil disobedience in defense of a moral cause." Their names were Semitic, not Egyptian, in origin. Shiphrah suggests the translation of beauty and the name Puah, found in Ugaritic (Canaanite) literature can be traced to a word for a "fragrant blossom" and came to mean a young girl. The root pa'ah can also mean "to murmur" or to "gurgle". Rashi inventively suggests it is the sound a nurturing woman makes to soothe an infant. Regardless, Shifrah and Puah heroically disobeyed the

Pharaoh's command to kill the newborn boys. Their resistance went far beyond non-cooperation to a direct defiance of Pharaoh through lying to him. Verse 19 says that they told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women were hardy and would give birth before the midwives even came to them.

Abraham ibn Ezra proposes that Shiphrah and Puah would have had to be supervisors of whole battalions of midwives, who may have disobeyed the Pharaoh's orders. Commentators have surmised that it would have been impossible for them to help so many Hebrew women give birth since they were so prolific, and that these names were the names of overseers of two guilds of midwives- or names of the guilds themselves. Either way, it is quite important that while the Pharaoh's name is never mentioned the names of these two women are preserved in this portion! In verse 21, we learn that God rewards these midwives by establishing households for them. Some scholars believe that the biblical text mentions Shiphrah and Puah by name because those were lineage names known to the text's ancient audience. There have been, though rarely, genealogies that mention women's names in this capacity.

Moses' mother and sister are also heroines in this portion, although they are not given names yet in this particular parasha. Moses' mother, in later portions given her name,

Yocheved, takes a wicker basket called a tevah in Hebrew or ark in English. This is the same word used for Noah's ark in Genesis. She caulks it with resin and pitch to ensure it would not sink. The story uses water as an important theme as in the ark in the Noah Flood story. Water plays a decisive thematic role in Moses' life and career. Moses is borne safely on the water, which is how Pharaoh had imagined destroying all Hebrew males. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote: "It was Yocheved who, at the height of Egyptian persecution, had the courage to have a child, hide him for three months, and then devise a plan to give him a chance of being rescued. We know all too little of Yocheved. However, we are left in no doubt about her bravery and resourcefulness. Not by accident did her children (Miriam, Moses and Aaron) all become leaders."

Miriam, Mose's sister, also is not yet named until Exodus 15, verse 20. Although there is no indication that her mother or father instructed her to do so, she follows her brother to ensure his safety. Miriam also does not hesitate when she sees that the Pharaoh's daughter will save her brother. She immediately devises a clever plan to reunite Moses with their mother and family by asking if she can find a wet nurse for him. This highlights Miriam's fearlessness and ingenuity. In verse 9, she works out a wet nurse agreement, which was commonly found in ancient Near Eastern documents, stating that a wet nurse might act as the guardian of a child during the first few years of their life. So Miriam has made an arrangement

that pays her mother to nurse her own child! There are documents that show that in Egypt and elsewhere in the Near East, mothers usually weaned their children at around 3 years old, so most likely, Moses lived with his family until he was 3. In verse 10, it says, "And the child grew" indicating that he had reached the age of weaning probably at the age of 3, by which time, he would have acquired Hebrew as his first language.

The Pharaoh's daughter, a righteous non-Jew, is our next heroine who saves Moses when she saw the child. The princess must have known the boy was a Hebrew since it was hidden in a basket and she would have surely known about her father's edict to kill all newborn Hebrew male children. Her compassion for the child compelled her to save the Moses. In so doing, she is also bravely defying the Pharaoh and his decree. However, she had the courage to rescue him and bring him up as her own in the very palace where her father was plotting the Israelite peoples' destruction. Could you imagine the daughter of Hitler, Eichmann or Stalin being brave enough to do the same thing? She is also nameless like her father. The Torah does not mention her name but the first Book of Chronicles (4:18) references a daughter of Pharaoh, named Bitya, who was identified as the woman who saved Moses. The name Bitya, sometimes called Batya, means "the daughter of God". From this comes a striking lesson from the sages: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: "Moses was not your son, yet you called him your

son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.”

Once Moses was a grown man, he went among his people and saw an overseer beating an Israelite. In his anger he struck the overseer, killing him. In fear the Pharaoh would kill him for his actions, he runs away and finds himself in a Midianite town. In chapter 2, verses 16-22, he meets his future wife with her 6 sisters, very much like other narrative motifs that occur in betrothal type scenes in the Bible. In this scene, Moses becomes the hero, and defends the women and waters their flocks (unlike Rebecca giving Jacob’s servant water and watering his flocks before becoming Isaac’s wife). With our previous 5 heroines, combined with these 7 daughters, we have 12 women in this portion that contribute to saving Moses’ life. The Women’s Torah commentary points out parallels of this to the twelve Hebrew tribes. We do not know why Tzipporah, whose name means bird, was chosen as Moses’ wife, but it could be because she was the oldest or that Moses chose her. She was the daughter of a Midianite priest, but nonetheless accompanies Moses on his journey to Egypt, even though she had no reason to risk her life on such a hazardous venture.

Because of this, she becomes our last heroine who saves Moses in this portion. The section I have chosen to read tonight tells why. It is a strange interlude in chapter 4, verses 24-26, where Zipporah rescues Moses. The Women’s Torah commentary writes that she saved Moses’ life by performing a circumcision on their son. The impression we gain of her is a figure of monumental

determination who, at a crucial moment, had a better sense than Moses himself of what God requires. This is an old, no longer understood story placed here because of the connection between the slaying of the first born mentioned in the preceding verse and the blood of circumcision of Tzipporah's son. Later blood will mark the Israelite's homes, where the first born will be spared. In both cases, blood is symbolic of a folk magic of warding off evil and in this case, death. In verse 24, it says, "sought to kill him.", but it is unclear as to who the intended victim is-Moses or Gershom, his son. Aside from God, the only name mentioned in this episode is Tzipporah's. This is the only place in the Bible that explicitly mentions a woman's performing the rite of circumcision. It begs the question of why Gershom wasn't circumcised before this? Some commentators have believed that Zipporah's father might have prevented it. Or Moses may have postponed it because of the difficult journey back to Egypt. In verse 26, it describes a "Bridegroom of blood." This baffling phrase may reflect an ancient custom (long since abandoned) of circumcision at the time of marriage. Robert Alter describes this as the most ambiguous and dark episode in all of Exodus. It makes us wonder why this haunting and bewildering story should have been introduced at this juncture. God, like an uncanny silent stranger encounters Moses in the dark of night. There is an anthropomorphic and mythic character of the episode, as if the writer was afraid to spell out its real content/meaning. Traditional Jewish commentators seek to naturalize the story by claiming the Moses has

neglected the commandment to circumcise his son and that is why God threatens his life.

In Alter's commentary, he explains that this may infer that the deity here and the rite of circumcision that Zipporah carries out belongs to a premonotheistic Hebrew culture, though both are brought into telling alignment with the story that follows. What seems more plausible is that Zipporah's act reflects an older rationale for circumcision among the West Semitic peoples than the covenantal one enunciated in Genesis 17. Here circumcision serves as a way to ward off the hostility of a dangerous deity by offering him a bloody scrap of the son's flesh, a kind of symbolic synecdoche of human sacrifice. It corresponds to the folktale pattern of a perilous rite of passage that the hero must undergo before embarking on his mission proper. Some commentators see the son as the object of this lethal intention, though, that seems unlikely because the unspecified object of the first verb "encountered" is almost certainly Moses. The nocturnal murky language does not help. Whose feet are touched with the bloody foreskin? Perhaps Moses, but it could be the boy's or even the Lord's. Scholars use "feet" as the euphemism for the genitals, as well. Commentator H.C. Propp correctly recognizes that the plural form for blood used here, *damim*, generally means "bloodshed" or "violence". He proposes that the deity assaults Moses because he still bears the bloodguilt for the act of involuntary

manslaughter he has committed, and it is for this that the circumcision must serve as expiation. This is a dark thicket of bewildering possibilities, yet the story is strikingly apt as it introduces us to the Exodus narrative. With this troubling mythic encounter, we have the swift actions of our last Heroine, Tzipporah, who saves Moses.

This parasha shows us the compassion and wisdom of our heroines. I believe that we can learn an important lesson from this portion as we are celebrating Volunteer Shabbat. Moses himself did not want to become a leader. He was a humble person, and even though he had human weaknesses, like his uncontrollable anger at times, he put his community first, just as our volunteers do in this congregation. Even when it is inconvenient, you all step up and take responsibility for your community in so many ways. Our board of trustees make sure the congregation is running safely and smoothly. Our many congregants lead us in committees, in the school, and in numerous ways when there are needs. To me, you are all like the heroines in this portion and like Moses, who did not say “no” to their conscience. I want to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart for everything you do! Shabbat Shalom!