

טועמיה - חיים

לחיות עם הזמן בשבת קודש

A Taste of Shabbat – Parshat Shemot 5777

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Feminine bravery

Our Parsha starts with a description of planned holocaust of the Hebrew people after Yosef and his generation's death. The second parsha describes the bravery of our nation, especially the women. Our rabbis teach us that we left Egypt because of the merit of our righteous women, surprisingly enough, not just Jewish ones, but Egyptians too.

The Egyptian midwives

The Torah tells us about the Hebrew midwives at the end of the first parsha.¹

Rashi tells us that they are Yocheved, Moshe's mother, and Miriam, his sister.

Shifrah: This was Yocheved, [called Shifrah] because she beautified [מְשַׁפֶּרֶת] the newborn infant. [From Sotah 11b]

Puah: This was Miriam, [called Puah] because she cried (פִּוּקָה) and talked and cooed to the newborn infant in the manner of women who soothe a crying infant.²

According to certain commentators, the Sforno, Ibn Ezra and others, the term "Hebrew midwives" may mean the midwives who helped birth the Hebrew babies, meaning that they themselves were perhaps not Jewish. There is an opposition against Pharaoh's decision to enslave our people— the midwives. According to this explanation, they were Egyptian, not Hebrew. This is logical as Pharaoh would have wanted loyal women carrying out his wishes. In addition, it is illogical to assume that the millions of Hebrew babies born in Egypt were aided in birth by only two women! We can assume that Shifrah and Puah were the head of the "midwives' union", and the Egyptian midwives refused to carry out their orders.

Eugenics³

It was a cruel decree, for both sides. We all know the first half

בִּלְדָּכֶן אֶת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וְרָאִיתִן עַל הָאֲבָנִים אִם בֶּן הוּא וְהַמִּתֵּן אֹתוֹ...⁴

And he said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall put him to death,

But there is a continuation, a second part

וְאִם בֵּת הִוא וְחָיָה.

but if it is a daughter, she may live.

Pharaoh hears from his midwives

לֹא כַנְשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיּוֹת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת כִּי חַיּוֹת הֵנָּה...⁵

And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are like animals.

He understands that the Hebrew women are able to interfere with the programme of destruction of the Hebrew males. They pose a threat to Pharaoh because they are God-fearing, in other words, they are not intimidated by him, don't accept the reality he has created, and have a deep conviction that they will prevail. He decides to interfere with their life-force (in Hebrew *כי חיות הנה* - "they are like animals", also means "they have a life-force" – *S*), he decrees to change their education, because he wants to destroy their faith, but not their physical selves. He wants to employ social engineering and eugenics, and have the Egyptians marry Hebrew women. In our generation, we can understand this distorted logic. We grew up with grandparents who experienced these terrible ideas and the mad experiments of the evil doctors.

This is what happened with the midwives. Rashi explains the verse

וַיִּהְיֶה כִּי יֵרְאוּ הַמִּיּוֹלֶדֶת אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים.⁶

Now it took place when the midwives feared God, that He made houses for them.

That He, God, built them houses, dynasties of Kohanim, Leviim and kings as a reward for what they had done

בְּתֵי כְהוֹנָה וְלוֹיָהּ וּמַלְכוּת שִׁקְרוּיִין בְּתֵים, וַיִּבֶן אֶת בֵּית ה' וְאֵת בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ, כְּהוֹנָה וְלוֹיָהּ מִיּוֹכֶבֶד, וּמַלְכוּת מִמְּרִים.⁷

¹ שמות א', ט"ו.

² רש"י שמות, א', ט"ו.

³ eugenics. : a science that deals with the improvement (as by control of human mating) of hereditary qualities of a race or breed

⁴ שמות, א', י"ד-ט"ז.

⁵ שם, י"ט.

⁶ שם, כ"א.

⁷ רש"י, שם.



The houses of the priesthood, the Levitic family, and the royal family, which are called houses, as it is written: And he built the house of the Lord and the house of the king, (I Kings 9:1) the priesthood and the Levitic family from Yochebed and the royal family from Miriam

But, according to Rashbam, "He" in the verse is Pharaoh, who built the houses

לשמרם פן ילכו לעבריות היולדות.⁸

To guard them and stop them going to the Hebrew women who were giving birth

In other words, Pharaoh built prisons, and imprisoned the midwives, to put down the opposition to his plans

Your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's

Later in the story the female bravery continues

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת בֵּת לֵוִי.⁹

A man of the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi

From this marriage was born a small baby, who will be put in a basket and be guarded by his sister on the bank of the Nile. As he is the third child of Yocheved and Amram, our commentators ask why his parents' marriage is mentioned here, as they married long before, and he has a six year old sister and a three year old brother.

Our rabbis tell us about Amram, Moshe's father

And there went a man of the house of Levi. Where did he go? R. Judah b. Zebina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed 'Every son that is born you shall cast into the river', he said: In vain do we labour. He arose and divorced his wife. All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him, 'Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's; because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas you have decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas you have decreed concerning this world and the World to Come. In the case of the wicked Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in thy case, though you are righteous, it is certain that your decree will be fulfilled, as it is said: You shall also decree a thing, and it shall be established! He arose and took his wife back; and they all arose and took their wives back.¹⁰

Amram despaired because of the reality of a world in which all children are born doomed to death, so he divorced his wife as there was no point in bringing more children into the world, and the rest of Israel

followed his example. But Miriam rebukes her father. She did not accept this despair. She has "chutzpah of holiness" – "your male philosophy!", she says to her father, "you think you run the world so if Pharaoh decrees to kill the children - then you in response degree stop to give birth, because there is no other choice. But, for us women, in the world of motherhood, it doesn't work that way. We continue to have children, even if it involves hiding the babies in the reeds, and we continue to pray and believe that the decree will be canceled. We know that in truth – there is no Pharaoh, no Egypt, there's nothing, - there is only God אין עוד מלבדו.

In a few decades, when we leave Egypt, Miriam and all the other women will dance with tambourines. We wonder where they suddenly have millions of tambourines in the middle of the desert? The only possible answer is as our old grandmothers would have said 'do not forget when you pack your suitcase, put in an emergency bag, with a tambourine!' Because we will be redeemed right away and obviously we will want to dance and play drums! So every child took a tambourine. This is what they had on their minds after they saw that eighty percent of their people had died in the physical and spiritual Holocaust of Egypt – to pack a bag with a tambourine!

Who pulled out (משה in Hebrew) whom?

When Pharaoh's daughter goes to wash in the Nile with her maids and comes across the basket in the reeds, it was Miriam who ran after her and knew how to reveal the internal spark of femininity of the daughter of the evil Pharaoh. She pulls Moshe out of the water and calls him Moshe – "he who draws out", not Mashoi – "he who was drawn out" because she understood that she had pulled him out of the Nile, but he was able to pull her out of Pharaoh's house. With this faith and bravery, he will be able to pull Israel and the world from Egypt (and the spiritual concept of "restraints" מִצְרִים in Hebrew – S).

The women's bravery is the opening to the book of Shemot- names. The names in the first parsha are of males, the tribes, but the true heroes are the women who are able to defeat Pharaoh. Holy pure women bring the victory of the Exodus of that will lead to building the Mishkan in which God is called "the husband" and we, the Jewish people, "his wife"¹¹

⁸ רשב"ם, שם.

⁹ שמות ב', א'.

¹⁰ בבלי, סוטה, י"ב. Soncino translation

¹¹ רבינו בחיי שמות א:א