

Shavuot:
Finding Meaning in Empty Spaces
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Class of 2017

Chag Shavuot is a day dedicated to celebrating and embracing the Torah through text study, *shiurim* and *divrei Torah*. There are many lenses we use such as: *p'shat*¹, *midrash*, *halachic* derivation and more. In addition, the Torah beautifully leaves open for us empty spaces for פרשנות - commentary and insights. One such space appears in Parshat Shmot.

When Pharaoh issues the horrific edict to kill all the Israelite baby boys, he turns to the midwives of the Israelite women and enlists their help. He orders them to kill the baby boys as soon as they are born - **secretly**. These Biblical midwives show astounding courage in defying Pharaoh to his face and allowing the baby boys to live.

Who are these courageous midwives? The Torah is curiously ambiguous about it.

Shmot: Ch. 1:15

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדֵי הָעִבְרִית אֲשֶׁר
שֵׁם הָאַחַת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּחַהּ
And the king of Egypt spoke to the Israelite midwives, the
name of one was Shiphrah, and the name of the other
Puah.

The phrase המילדת העברית “the Israelite midwives” can be interpreted in different ways: “Israelite midwives” OR “midwives to the Israelites”

Rashi goes along with the first interpretation and explains that these midwives were actually Yocheved and her daughter Miriam. He picks up on the names of the midwives: **Shifra & Puah** who are not mentioned elsewhere in the Torah and connects them to Hebrew words describing the actions of the midwives taking care of the babies as well as standing up defiantly to Pharaoh.

On the other hand, Don Isaac Abarbanel - the famous 15th century commentator from Portugal - takes the opposite approach. He says that it would not make any sense for Pharaoh to command Israelite midwives to kill the babies. Rather he instructed the **Egyptian** midwives who tended to the Israelite **women**.

Abarbanel is telling us: Pharaoh understands that people are more likely to defend the lives of those within their own ethnic or national or cultural group. He could not trust Israelite midwives to kill an Israelite baby. But an Egyptian midwife? It is almost inconceivable to think of an Egyptian woman caring at all about an Israelite baby and so the midwives' defiance against Pharaoh becomes extraordinary.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that the Torah is being intentionally ambiguous about the identity of the midwives to demonstrate how their particular form of moral courage transcends nationality and race. In his words:

They were being asked to commit a "crime against humanity" and they refused to do so.

Shifra and Puah understood that the value of human life is universal and applies to all people, regardless of race or ethnicity. Amazingly - they stood up for their values in the face of enormous odds with both courage and wisdom.

¹ Simple or plain meaning of the text

Pharaoh saw that the midwives were not helping him; so he immediately went public and appealed to the whole Egyptian nation. In *Shmot* 1:22

וַיֹּצֵא פַרְעֹה לְכָל-עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל-יֶלֶד הַיְלֹד
 הַיָּאֵרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ וְכָל-הַבֵּת תַחְיִין
 And Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: "Every son
 that is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter
 you shall let live."

The people - as a nation - could not find the moral fortitude to defy Pharaoh. We know this because Moshe's mother Yocheved needed to hide him for 3 months so that he would not be killed.

If only each individual Egyptian had acted just as Shifra & Pua did! Perhaps Pharaoh had convinced them that BY posed a true threat. Or perhaps it is really difficult to go against the crowd - to go against public opinion.

What gives an individual the moral fortitude and courage to do so? The Torah tells us the reason when it came to the midwives - in fact, it is repeated twice in case you missed it the first time. **Because they feared Gd.**

זֶז וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילְדֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים יָם וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַאֲשֶׁר
 דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחְיִין אֶת-הַיְלָדִים.
17 But the midwives feared Gd, and did not as the
 king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the
 men-children alive.

כֹּא וַיְהִי כִי-יָרְאוּ הַמִּילְדֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים יָם וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם
 בָּתִּים.
21 And it came to pass, because the midwives
 feared Gd, that He made them houses.

Fearing Gd!!! What does that mean? There are different ways to fear Gd. For example, this Pasuk in Vayikra 19:14 puts it this way:

יָד לֹא-תִקְלַל חֵרֵשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֵר לֹא תִתֵּן
 מִקְשַׁל וַיִּרְאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה.
14 You shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block
 before the blind, so you shall fear your Gd: I am the LORD.

Here we see that the phrase 'to fear Gd' can mean 'obey Gd's ethical imperatives'. The midwives showed us the way, as Hebrews or as Egyptians.

In Rabbi Sacks' words:

"They teach us the primacy of conscience over conformity, the law of justice over the law of the land."

Our world is filled with strife; between people, communities, nations, countries. As Hebrews, the midwives showed tremendous moral courage standing up to a tyrannical leader; as Egyptians they showed us how compassion and a sense of justice can transcend prejudice and hatred.

The story of the Hebrew midwives leaves empty spaces to fill with multiple messages. Let us each and every one of us do our part to live up to the message that we learn from Shifra & Pua's courageous actions.



Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe served, for many years, as Community Educator and Director of Mercaz Center for Adult Education in Beth Tfiloh synagogue in Baltimore, MD. Her love of tefilla and ritual led her to be an experienced gaba'it and organizer of women's tefilla groups. She has taught many women and girls to leyn and is the voice of the JOFA Megillat Esther App. Rabbanit Bracha interned at United Orthodox Synagogue in Houston, Texas and at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. She participated in chaplaincy programs at New York Presbyterian Hospital and at a maximum security women's prison. Rabbanit Bracha is a 2017 graduate of Yeshivat Maharat, following a long career in hi-tech in Israel. She feels blessed to be following this path which nourishes and fills her soul.