

POETRY

Poem of Shifra, The Midwife

Contributed by [Haggadot](#)

Source: Dane Kuttler: <https://www.danepoetry.com/>

SHIFRA, THE MIDWIFE, SPEAKS TO THE PROTESTERS OUTSIDE PLANNED PARENTHOOD

Exodus 1:17

"The midwives feared G-d, so they the disobeyed king of Egypt, and allowed the boys to live."

These days, my primary business
is smuggling. Any baby boys born
must find safe hiding before dawn, the new mothers
allowed little more than a glance, a soft kiss,
before heading back to their huts. In the morning,
I will tell Pharaoh how the Israelite women
breed like spiders, giving birth too quickly
to be caught.

The name for the slave camp is mitzrayim, narrow place –
trapped between an impassible desert
and uncrossable sea,
in the shadow of the half-built pyramids.

But some of my women are also trapped.
I hear their desperate footsteps first.
They don't meet my gaze when I bid them welcome.
I know why they come.

When I ask about the conception,
their hands flutter over their still-flat bellies.
They say, "my husband, on a night I did not invite him."
They say, "an Egyptian who always smiles at me like a hungry dog."
They say, "Pharaoh himself – called me pretty, for a slave."
They say, "I thought if he took me, he wouldn't want my sister."
Some cannot imagine birthing the next generation
of tally marks in Pharaoh's book of property.

One said, "This is the closest I will ever come to suicide."

But they are not hopeless.

They know my hands belong to two professions:
Shifra the midwife / Shifra the witch.
Beneath this tunic I carry
seven bottles strapped to my thigh, seven hours
of bleeding, seven promises of an empty womb.

I am not a monster. You have hospitals
with separate wings for birth and death,
but I have just this tent.
These walls hold countless newborn cries,
and just as many deathbed whispers.
The executioner is my conjoined twin.
I shed a hangman's tears
for each mottled fist of growth
I have scoured from these hands.

Perhaps you have noticed I wear no rings,
that my legs, hardened from hours of squatting,
belong to a different animal
than my overripe belly.
Work shapes my body
like a god's hand.

My herbs, my songs, my prayers, my fingers –

they are just tools. I can use them
to deliver children,
or to deliver their mothers from an unholy union.
Were you only to see my hands,
would you know which I'd been doing?

You, outside the clinic,
with your signs and your fury –
you can call yourselves pro-life,
but make room in your march for me.

Just ask my women how it feels to be
delivered.

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