

## Passover Torah Teaching

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During the Passover season, we revisit the story of how the people of Israel, in a reversal of humans searching for the Divine, are pursued and rescued by God. During the process, what has been a family and a tribal story becomes a national story. It is in our leaving Egypt that Israel becomes the Jewish people.

One of the key points to our national identity though, happens before we leave Egypt. In the very first chapter of Shemot, Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill all the male children. Who are these women? The Hebrew is ambiguous – like the English, it could mean either “Hebrew women who are midwives” or “Midwives to the Hebrews.”

The rabbis also are divided on this. Rashi declares them the former, but Abrabanel and Samuel David Luzzatto are firmly in the camp of the latter. Luzzatto reasons that this is because it would have been unreasonable for Pharaoh to think that Hebrew women would have murdered their own people. Chief Rabbi of England Jonathan Sacks comments, “The Torah's ambiguity on this point is deliberate. We do not know to which people they belonged because their particular form of moral courage transcends nationality and race. In essence, they were being asked to commit a 'crime against humanity,' and they refused to do so.”

Nevertheless, it is probable that Shifrah and Puah were Egyptian women. This meaning actually fits better with the sense of the narrative, since it is unlikely that the exchange between Pharaoh and the midwives would make much sense if the midwives were Hebrew women – they would not have been able to feign ignorance and surprise at the way that Hebrew women bore children. It also makes more sense that after the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh, he then charges all his people to destroy all the male children.

What is fascinating about this small glimpse is how commonplace it actually must have been. Although it is the first instance of civil disobedience that we know of historically, it seems that the Egyptian women were not terribly different than other Egyptians were. After all, Pharaoh may have ordered all the Egyptians to ensure the killing of the Hebrew sons, but his own daughter – and all her maidservants who were with her that morning when she saw Moshe floating around in the box – disobeyed him.

Shifra and Puah were indeed extraordinary women – it is of course, difficult to disobey your ruler, especially if your ruler was considered to be a God- thus God rewarded Shifrah and Puah by making them houses – in other words, for saving all those Hebrew boys, their own families were increased and made numerous. It was they who laid the groundwork for the Jewish people to be a people who “feared God and did not do as the king commanded them.”

I wonder if perhaps there is one more ambiguity to resolve. Where exactly were the

houses that God made for Shifra and Puah? When Israel finally succeeded in leaving Egypt, they went out as 600,000, but the Torah adds (Shemot 12:38) that a “mixed multitude went with them.”

Israel has never been a racial category. Although we began with Abraham as one family, right away, that was undermined as Abraham and Sarah took all the souls they had made from Haran (Beresheit 12:5)- which the midrash understands as converts from the local tribes. Then, at the moment of our becoming a nation – our release from Egypt, again, we did not go alone, but went together with those who chose to take our journey with us, and so became part of us, and stood with us at Sinai, and became Israel.

Even the very existence of what we (wrongly) think of as a “regular” Jewish face - Ashkenazim - are actually evidence of the reverse. Semites, who came up from the middle east, assuredly did not then look like what we think of Ashkenazi Jews looking like any more than they do today! The very fact that we think of Ashkenazim as “Jewish-looking” at all is actually funny – and proof that we have always welcomed in people of all colors, every tribe – anyone who seeks to join us on our mission of serving God. I like to think that even though Shifrah and Puah weren’t Hebrew women, that ambiguity was purposeful because when the time came for the Israelites to leave Egypt, they came with us to stand at Sinai, that they stood there, living examples of what it means to fear God, that among us, their descendants, their houses, still stand.