

In this week's parasha we read of the rise of a new king over Egypt, a king who knew not Joseph, just at the moment when we inaugurate a new president of the United States. I make no analogy between the two. Just a note of congruence. In a matter of a few short verses, the Israelite situation is transformed from one of relative comfort and freedom to slavery and oppression. Five times in two short verses the word avodah, slavery, is used:   
 יד וימררו את-חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבְלִבְנִים וּבְכָל־עֲבֹדָה  
 בַּשָּׂדֶה אֵת כָּל־עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ בְּהֶם בְּפָרֹד׃

In a heartbeat, things change.

And yet in the very next verse we learn of the first example of civil disobedience in history. Shifrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives – are they Hebrew midwives or Egyptian midwives who minister to the Hebrews? Are they heads of the Hebrew Midwives Association or random women? We don't know. In any case, they are ordered by Pharaoh to kill male children on the birthstool while allowing the females to live. The Torah tells us, "The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt told them; they let the boys live." Fearing God more, it seems, than they fear the almighty Pharaoh, they defy him. Pharaoh quickly calls them to task. I don't imagine it is often that the Pharaoh holds audiences with Hebrew midwives, but here we have two such audiences in quick succession. And I don't imagine that Hebrew midwives would generally feel emboldened in Pharaoh's court, yet here they tell him a bald-faced lie. When he interrogates them about their failure to carry out his orders, they answer, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They're like animals. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." Playing on a racist stereotype, the midwives plead innocence – we can't get there in time. Pharaoh is forced to pursue another plan.

What emboldens these midwives? Did the Midwife League meet for a long time, planning action, waiting for the moment to strike? As Shifra and Puah labored in the birthing hut, did Shifra see a spark in her partner's eye, something she did not see the day before? The midwives feared God, we are told. I imagine that like the residents of the small town of Le Chambon in Vichy France, a town of 5,000 residents, half the size of Woodbridge, which gave refuge to between 3 and 5,000 Jews during the war, when asked why they did this thing, why they risked their lives, they would eschew labels of heroism. They would say, simply, we did what people do. We are midwives. We birth life. We don't end it.

These two midwives gave birth to the greatest liberation movement in history. Following in their footsteps, Jochebed, Moses' mother, hid him from Pharaoh's soldiers. When she could no longer hide the baby, she put him in a basket in the river. His sister, Miriam, watched over him, to learn the fate of that basket, and Pharaoh's daughter herself rescued it from the river, allowing Miriam to arrange for her mother to nurse the baby. When the rabbis say that it we left Egypt because of the merit of the righteous women, nashim tzdkaniot, they are not exaggerating.

I do not know what we will be called upon to do in the months and years ahead. I have asked myself many times what is right action and what I will risk. The answers are murky at best, but the example of the midwives leaves me with at least three concrete truths.

One. There is no such thing as being too small to act. Yes, it feels like we live in a large impersonal world where bureaucratic machines move things way beyond our reach, and our voices are small and ineffective. But Pharaoh's machine was equally if not more powerful and the midwives were as lowly as anyone. And yet they acted. And they transformed history. My friend and colleague, Toba Spitzer, writes about her experience with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers: These folks are among the poorest, least powerful people in America - migrant farmworkers, many of them not citizens - who have figured out how to get massive corporations like MacDonal'd's and, most recently, Walmart, to sign onto a Fair Food Program which over the past 10 years has helped eradicate some of the most egregious workplace conditions in the U.S. (including virtual slavery, sexual harassment, and the like) and raised wages for the workers considerably.

One never knows the effects of one's actions. One is never too powerless to act. One is not remiss for failing, only for failing to act.

Two. As I said earlier, the midwives feared God. Our actions must be motivated not by political contention, not by anger, and certainly not by hatred. But by fearing God. The midwives' commitment is to nurture and sustain life. Nothing less. They are motivated by the firm sense that there is a moral order and that they are called to act to defend it, regardless of the law or who makes the law. So too for us. Much around us right now seeks to confuse us – there is fake news, reputable news organizations report with bias, leaders tell you that what you see with your own eyes is not what is happening. We cannot afford to get confused. That is why we pray together, why we return to spiritual practice, why we read our Torah again and again. What is just and right and good is, I believe, deeply implanted in each of us. Our task is to stay true to our spiritual practice and to one another so that we do not lose clarity and that we act when we God calls us to act. We must keep open the place inside where we can hear that call. In the words of Martin Luther King, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” I believe that is true but that it bends because Shifra, Puah, the workers in Immokalee, the righteous gentiles of Le Chambon, and you and I bend it.

Third. As you may know, the midrashic tradition of the righteous women in Egypt is rich and imaginative. In one of my favorite midrashim from midrash tanhuma, Pharaoh decrees that Israelite men will not be permitted to sleep at home nor have relations with their wives. This is part of his zero population growth strategy. What did the Israelite women do, because of course they did something? They caught fish in the Nile, cooking some for their husbands and trading some for wine. With their provisions, they would go to the field and feed their tired husbands. When they had eaten and drunk, the women would take out their mirrors and look into them with their husbands and say, “I am more beautiful than you.” He would retort, “I am more beautiful than you.” And in this way they would accustom themselves to desire. And they were fruitful and multiplied.

The women roused their tired and mudcaked husbands to see their own humanity in the mirror, to flirt, to embody their own sexuality again. Later in the midrash, God tells Moses that the mirrors are beloved to Him – that these mirrors raised up all the hosts in

Egypt! You thought it was plagues. You thought it was blood and frogs and locust. It was all done with mirrors. It was all done to reclaim and give birth to new life in the face of death.

What is important to me about this midrash, beyond its playful sexuality and the boldness of the women, is that, in the end, these are acts of love. The women did not liberate us from Egypt by storming the barricade or rioting in the streets, though those acts may also be necessary. Instead, they did simple things out of love: they restored their husband's sense of themselves; they made love; they saved babies; a trio of women hid, transported, watched over, rescued, nursed, and held Moses, ensuring his survival.. There are more stories, but all of them are knit by threads of love. "Sublimated forms of love – political, social, religious, cultural – reclaim a totality on a historical as well as a personal scale. But in every form of love a past and a future are grasped as if present...What is ahistorical is the need to hope. And the act of hoping is inseparable from the energy of love, from that which "holds," ..."

Love will have to be the motivation for our action right now. Nothing is stronger and nothing is more necessary. Hatred will only be met by hatred; violence by violence.

What does love mean? It means a deep love of this country and everything it stands for. It means love of freedom, of democracy, of liberty, truth and justice. But it also means love for one another – love the stranger as yourself. It means a willingness to listen, to find out who the other is, to investigate without judgment, to believe that the other is one who values what we value and longs for what we long for. When I was in California last week, I took a long walk with a Republican colleague. We talked about many things – our families, our work, but also about politics. We didn't agree about everything, but it was clear to me that we were not two alien beings living in alternate universes. We want the same things. We value the same things. Our strategies may be different but we cannot demonize the other. Only love will be answered by love.

I will close with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King: And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love...Now, we got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

Our tradition is fundamentally about love, ahava raba, God's great love, about hesed, God's grace which fills this world and moves us to be bigger than we might believe we are, to do more than we thought we could, to work for justice because love of God and all His creatures demands nothing less.