

Obedience to Authority – Parashat Shemot

As an undergraduate psychology major, one of the most memorable experiments I ever studied was that of Stanley Milgram, the Yale (and later CUNY) professor best known for his research on obedience to authority. Some of us will remember the construct – a subject walks into a laboratory believing that he is participating in a study on memory and learning. After being assigned to the role of instructor, the subject is asked to teach a group of word associations to a fellow participant (who is actually a confederate of the experimenter) using a most unconventional method – he is to administer an increasingly painful series of electric shocks to the learner. As the experiment continues the purported shock level at some point reaches a sufficiently high threshold that the subject is thrown into conflict – the (supposed) learner seems to be suffering, demands to be released, and even – in some versions of the experiment - appears to lose consciousness. All the while, the supervisor insists that the test is not as dangerous as it appears to be and that the experiment must continue. What does the average person do? In sharp contrast to expectations, some 65% of all studied continued to administer shocks up to the most severe levels displaying a very high degree of obedience to authority, even in a situation of clear moral ambiguity. Milgram understood this phenomenon by explaining that once “a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes...he therefore no longer sees himself as responsible for his actions.”¹ All of this may be very interesting in the laboratory, of course, but it is absolutely terrifying when it comes to the real world. In fact, that is one of the lessons of this morning’s Torah portion, *Parashat Shemot*.

¹ Milgram, Stanley (1974). *Obedience to Authority*. New York: Harper & Row. pp. xii, xiii.

Parashat Shemot is the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the beginning of our grand narrative as a nation, our people becoming enslaved in the land of Egypt by a new king who knows not Joseph. Simply consigning the Israelites to servitude, however, is hardly enough for this wicked Pharaoh who, threatened by our ancestors' rapidly growing numbers, also fears they will eventually rise up and overthrow him. As a result, Pharaoh speaks to the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, and orders them to kill all Israelite baby boys. The midwives, fearing God, do not listen to the king's command. When confronted they make up a brazen excuse, claiming that Israelite women deliver too quickly for them to be able to effectively commit the proscribed infanticide.

Who were these women Shifra and Puah? And what led them to contravene the king, knowing that this would surely put their own lives at risk? Commentators throughout the ages have pointed out that the Hebrew phrase *m'yaldot haivriot* is ambiguous, plausibly translated either as Hebrew midwives (that is, women of the very same ethnic background as their patients) or midwives *to* the Hebrews (that is, Egyptian women who simply served this particular community). The Polish commentator Rabbi Meir Horowitz takes the second position, arguing that surely even Pharaoh himself would never have asked such an unreasonable thing as for the midwives to kill their very own. The Babylonian Talmud and great midrashic collection *Exodus Rabbah* take the opposite view, suggesting that Shifra and Puah were indeed Israelite, in fact they were none other than Yocheved and Miriam, Moses' own mother and sister, called here by nick-names that reflected the activities in which they were currently engaged: Puah defying (*hophia*) Pharaoh's orders and Shifra allowing Israel to be fruitful (*para*) under her watchful eye. Whatever their identity, we notice that these two courageous women are responsible for nothing less than making possible Jewish history as we know it. They are the world's first – and one of its finest – examples of civil disobedience.

It is interesting to note that Stanley Milgram was Jewish, born in the Bronx in 1933, to parents who had emigrated from Romania and Hungary during World War I. While his immediate family remained safe from the atrocities of Nazi Europe, ensconced as they were in the United States, his extended family was much affected by the Holocaust, and after the war relatives who had survived the concentration camps stayed with his parents in New York for some time. During his bar mitzvah speech Milgram wrote, “As I ... find happiness in joining the ranks of Israel, the knowledge of the tragic suffering of my fellow Jews ... makes this ... an occasion to reflect upon the heritage of my people—which now becomes mine. ... I shall try to understand my people and do my best to share the responsibilities which history has placed upon all of us.”² Surely, a desire to understand how human beings can come to do most terrible things was at the heart of his academic interests.

Biblical scholar Nechama Leibowitz sees a strong moral message in our *parasha* this morning and especially in the fact that the defiant acts of courage here were carried out by women, individuals who typically lacked agency in ancient times, and perhaps by Egyptian women at that, people who should have no particular reason to seek to protect Israelite baby boys other than mere conscience. She writes, “The Torah indicates how the individual can resist evil. He need not shirk his moral responsibility under cover of ‘superior orders.’ The text contrasts the brutal decrees of enslavement and massacre initiated by Pharaoh and supported by the government and people with the god-fearing ‘civil disobedience’ of the midwives. Neither moral courage nor sheer wickedness are ethnically or nationally determined.”³ Put another way, Milgram may have demonstrated that the average human being will blindly obey authority without question, but it need not be so. Shifra and Puah remind us that regardless of our station in life we have the responsibility to question and thwart evil wherever we see it.

² Thomas Blass. *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram*.

³ Nechama Leibowitz, *Shemot* 3.

There is another striking detail in our *parasha* this morning, another nod to the fact of the midwives' bravery and right. For we notice that great Pharaoh, ostensibly the most powerful figure in all of Egypt if not the entire ancient world, remains unnamed in *Parashat Shemot* whereas the two lowly female midwives are identified personally for all to see. The way that we ultimately make a name for ourselves is not through wealth or dominance or celebrity or might; the way that we make a name for ourselves is through character and courage and championing those who are vulnerable, it is through using whatever power and privilege we have at our disposal to fight for justice and peace. While of relatively low status, Shifra and Puah just happened to find themselves in the right place at the right time – their particular situation allowed them to defy Pharaoh and save the Israelite baby boys – and they were both daring and visionary enough to seize this opportunity rather than hiding behind reasonable excuses of fear for themselves and their families. We would all like to believe that had we been the subjects in Milgram's experiment or an average German citizen back at the time of Nazi Europe, surely we would not have caved to authority but rather mustered internal strength to do what was right. *Parashat Shemot* gives us the opportunity to reflect upon whether or not that is really so.

To be sure, there are many times when obedience has its place – it allows for rules of law and clear chains of command and well-functioning civil society; it is the foundation, in many ways, of Judaism itself which so much emphasizes ritual and tradition and adherence to something far greater than ourselves. The problem, however, is when obedience becomes blind – when we feel free to lay aside our moral compasses and consider critically what it is that an authority figure is asking of us, when we no longer see ourselves as responsible for our actions as with Milgram's subjects. Even the Divine, Godself, seems to value scrutiny and critique which comes from a concern for justice (as opposed to simply a desire to topple the authority of the leader) as evidenced by the famous episode of Abraham

arguing for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah back in Genesis. “Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly,” cries Abraham in a moment of moxie and courage (Genesis 18:25). No one, including God, is automatically above the rule of moral law.

In our day, the Nuremberg trials of 1946 established that there are certain crimes for which saying “I was just following orders” is no defense; or in the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “There are moral laws higher than the state...There are instructions one is morally bound to disobey; times when civil disobedience is the necessary response.”⁴ Milgram may have established that minding authority at all costs is, unfortunately, a natural human response but that does not make it an acceptable one. We are called upon to obey the laws of conscience even above the laws of state.

On this Shabbat of *Parashat Shemot* may we follow the example of two daring women whose firm stand against tyranny and genocide altered the very course of human history. Who knows who might be the next Pharaoh to fall!

Shabbat Shalom.

⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus*. pp. 22.

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