

Eileh Sh'mot: Shifra and Puah (Sh'mot 5780)
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Eleh sh'mot b'nei Yisrael haba'im mitzraima, “These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household.”

Thus begins the book of Exodus. We start with what seems a conventional setting:

Eleh sh'mot, with names, a place, and just enough story to begin orienting us as readers. We've spent weeks following the lives of these sons of Jacob, and it's nice to begin with an orientation to a new land.

But how quickly the story shifts. Names are forgotten. Joseph and his generation dies off.

The Israelites spread out, leaving the safety of the land promised to them from Joseph's Pharaoh. The Hebrew word describing this dispersed Israelite migration is *vayishr'tzu*—the very same word used in our Creation story for the way creatures “swarm” aimlessly across the earth.

Of course, we know where this story is headed. Anytime I ask my students to stand on one foot and tell me what the book of Exodus is about, almost always do I get the same answer: God freeing the Israelites from Egypt, “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

However, as we live alongside the chapters of our Torah, that is not yet who we are: we have not yet earned that Telling. We are nowhere near liberation. We have not even met that certain child named Moses, not until Chapter Two. Rather our story begins here, *Eleh Shemot*, with names.

Exodus begins with a glimpse of self-understanding, which in the blink of an eye dissipates, as the Israelites become dis-oriented.

- Dis-oriented geographically.
- Dis-oriented generationally,
- And dis-oriented politically. *Vayakom melech chadash*, “a new king arose, who didn't know Joseph.”

They are dis-oriented, and we, readers who climb this Tree of Life, are dis-oriented. Even when we do meet Moses, in chapter 2 of this parasha, how much help is he, really, growing up as a child who only knows Egyptian privilege. It is in this context of uncertain identity that we hear, *eleh shemot*, THESE 2 new names: Shifra and Puah.

Vayomer melekh mitzrayim la-m'yaldot ha-ivriyot asher sheim ha-echat Shifra v'sheim ha-sheinit Pu'ah, “the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah” (1:15).

Eleh Sh'mot, these are the names of the first two women in the book of Exodus: the two most powerful characters of Chapter One. Shifra and Puah. These two midwives speak up against a Pharaoh who orders all Israelite male babies killed. Shifra and Puah defy Pharaoh and to his face say,

“the Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women—they are so strong that they give birth before midwives can even get there!”

What an amazing episode, foreshadowing our universal story of redemption. Historically, ancient translators and commentators focused their musings not just on the courage of Shifra and Puah, but on their names; on WHY *Eleh Sh'mot*, why these are their names. These names they found confusing, strange, and foreign. Who are Shifra and Puah? They are *miyaldot*, “midwives,” *ha-ivriyot*, “Hebrew.”

Yet, early translations diverge in their renderings of *miyaldot ha-ivriyot*: is it “Hebrew midwives,” as the Masoretic text contends. Or is to be read in the construct state as “midwives OF the Hebrews,” which is how the Septuagint, the first Greek translation, treats the phrase.

The Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud wrestled with these names, *Shifra* and *Puah*. In Tractate Sotah, Rav argued that these were code-names; that Puah really referred to Moses’ sister Miriam, while Shifra signified Yocheved, Moses’ mother. What’s really going on here?

The whole flow of inquiry revolves around question of identity, of ethnic origin.

These Sages, who retrojected Moses as the very first Rabbi, sought to assimilate the identities of Shifra and Puah. They couldn’t tolerate the otherness, the foreignness, of the names of these heroic, transformative figures. We might understand why—it wasn’t, “they loved bigotry.”

We know enough about Rabbinic context to appreciate how their interpretations routinely addressed their crises or served their needs. And throughout the ages, as the Jewish people have suffered from relentless oppression, we understand why we have in the past read our Torah with an “us vs. them” mentality.

Eleh Sh’mot, Shifra and Puah, these names don’t fit so well in that “us vs. them” binary way of thinking. It’s not uncommon to find ourselves in Torah study and hear folks saying, “Shifra.... Puah... doesn’t sound so Jewish.” I’m reminded of the famous scene in Mel Brooks’ *Spaceballs*—which I’m sure informed the Masoretic translation—in which the protagonist Lone Starr meets the mighty Princess Vespa. She proclaims, “I am Princess Vespa, daughter of Roland, King of the Druids.”

Lone Starr replies, “Oh great, that’s all we need, a Druish Princess”... to which Lone Starr’s sidekick Barfalemew adds: “that’s funny, she’s doesn’t look Druish.”

Eleh sh’mot, these are names that “look different”; that don’t “look Druish”; that look “other.” We have inherited a way of thinking, of reading, and of relating that tells us who we are. And as we know from the enterprise of Reform Judaism: what has served us in the past will not always serve us in the present. Today, we are not who we think we are (perhaps we never were).

Each year we spend this Shabbat, the Sabbath preceding the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Remembrance, focusing on the legacy of Dr. King, in particular on Racial Inequality. It’s very common for the Jewish community to tell its own history of blacks and Jews in the civil rights movement, of Rabbi Heschel and so many others marching alongside African Americans. This history is important and inspiring. Yet this dominant narrative of the past is incomplete, and if we continue reading the past into the present, in such binary ways as Jews and Blacks, we fail to honor the very story that we read this week. Now, we are in a critical moment of racial reckoning-- of identity reckoning-- which is complex and uncomfortable.

Last month at the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial in Chicago, URJ President Rabbi Rick Jacobs gave voice to the complexity of Racial Justice. Speaking to a room of 5,000 people, including about a minyan from our congregation, he said:

Racism isn’t only “out there somewhere”; it lives as well in our Jewish communities, and it lives in each of us. We can’t work to dismantle structures of racism in our society until we acknowledge that...”

Rabbi Jacobs thanked those who help him see his implicit biases, and invited our whole Movement to engage in this work. Part of this is realizing who we are, our identity inside out and outside in—individually and collectively.

Individually- and I will speak personally: I'm a white, Jewish, hetero, cisgender male. Spouse, dad, son, friend....

Every one of these identities matters, whether I know it or not. Some of these categories of social identity afford me privileges, opportunities, power that others are denied simply because they are who they are, born and seen how and where they are born and seen, named what they are named—*Eleh Sh'mot*, these are names, their identifiers, and they matter.

Collective, we... today, we are a far more diverse Jewish community, here in the United States, than we have ever been.

We are not just same-faith or same-sex couples,
we are not just couples,
we are not just families,
we are not just hetero,
we are not just “conventionally abled,”
we are not just Jews.
And we are not just white.

Rabbi Jacobs sounded out this truth:

“Between 10 and 20 percent of North American Jews,” he relayed, “are Jews of Color....Right now, there should be between 500 and a thousand Jews of Color here at our Biennial, but if we look around, we'll see that we don't yet reflect our full spiritual, intellectual, and social justice strength – and we must.”

And then he shared stories from Jews of Color who have experienced discrimination inside our synagogues. *ELEH SH'MOT*, these are their names:

We learned about Kelly Whitehead, an HUC rabbinical student, who's worked at my beloved URJ Camp Harlam. Kelly said: “I hate it when people assume that I am a member of a custodial staff or help staff or also when they think I'm another person of color. I hate feeling like I don't have a right to be there.”

Bryant Heinzelman, a Veteran who served in Iraq. Bryant is now a youth director in Boulder CO. He said this:

“The first thing that comes to mind when we're speaking about Jewish matters is having someone ask me, ‘Are you really Jewish?’ It's a moment that can come, I could have just sung beautifully a blessing, or I could have spoken from my heart about how this piece of Torah moved me...they're not always asking because they're curious....it's almost as if they need me to confirm for them because their disbelief won't let them believe the sight of this black man who is a member of this community. So the question I never want to hear again is, ‘Are you really Jewish?’

Our first reaction to these stories might be, “well, we're different here.” That is not true. I've heard the stories here, many of us have—many of us have experienced them. I heard many stories at my last congregation, and the many synagogues I served before becoming a rabbi. I recall listening painfully to a friend, a Jew of Color, who at Pre-School on multiple occasions when picking her kids up find herself asked, “Whose kids are you picking up?” (And by the way, that synagogue is an extraordinarily progressive place—they were even given a national award last month for the tremendous work they're doing around racial justice.)

ELEH SH'MOT, these are our names, these are our stories.

As Ibram Kendi, author of *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, writes, “I know that readers truly committed to racial equality will join me on this journey of interrogating and shedding our racist ideas.” Today we face the weighty obligation of interrogating and shedding our racist ideas. This weighty obligation will likely be even more challenging given the reality of antisemitism. What we know about our past is that when we have faced Jew-hatred, our defense mechanism is to draw inward, to create boundaries, this is a survival mechanism, ingrained in our tradition.

However, doing this now will not only be antithetical to our core values of justice, compassion, and love. It would also be ineffective and ignorant the ideological workings of White Nationalism. In the Spring we’ll have a chance to learn from Eric Ward, Executive Director of the Western States Center, who’s coming to Durham. Ward in his seminal article, “Skin in the Game,” explains this ideology.

“White nationalism is rooted in the anti-Semitic belief that Jews are responsible for the defeat of white supremacy and seek to destroy the ‘white race’ through mass immigration, gay marriage, and a host of inclusionary policies.”

If this feels like “too much” – to wrestle with the external threat against the Jewish people, and the internal threat *within* the Jewish people – if that feels like too much, that is because IT IS. It IS too much.

If this feels uncomfortable, or unbearable, that is because IT IS.

If this feels like we have so much work to do that is because WE DO.

Eleh Sh’mot, these are the names, of the reality of our world.

There are plenty of ways to “make believe” otherwise. With privilege and power especially, many of us can even choose to blend in, or spread out. We even have a model for this, in Chapter One—*vayishr’tzu*—the Israelites spreading out, drifting away from each other, from their heritage, from their sense of identity, and ultimately their connection to the Eternal God.

Or, we can read *Sh’mot*, and hear the names of Shifra and Puah. We don’t need to persevere over whether they were Hebrew or Egyptian, and we certainly don’t need to remake them in the image of Moses. We can let Shifra and Puah be who they are:

They are midwives, experts in labor and delivery;

They are midwives, who devote their hearts and hands to the birthing of the next generation.

They are the ones who deliver the story of Exodus.

They are the ones who stand up and speak truth to power.

They are the ones who teach us that redemption is birthed out of oppression, that hope only grows from the depths of dread;

and that, above all, it is human hands that triumph over hate,

only human hands that can deliver on the Divine Promise of Love.

So why not let those hands be ours?

Eloheinu V’eilohai Avoteinu v’Imoteinu,

Our God and God of our mother and fathers,

God of Shifra and God of Puah,

May we enliven the courage, the resilience, and the fight of our biblical midwives,

May we face ourselves with honesty and face the world with integrity,

and may we with our hands, deliver a story to future generations that brings honor to *Eileh Sh’mot B’nai Yisrael*, the names of the Children of Israel. (Amen.)