

DVAR TORAH. CONGREGATION KOL SASSON. PARSHAT SHMOT, 5781.

None of us will ever forget the past week, of which this shabbat is the conclusion and culmination. A nail-biter election to determine control of the United States Senate. And hours after that election was resolved, the violent invasion of our nation's Capitol building by criminals egged on by our country's president who were waving Confederate flags, banners of the lunatic anti-Semitic conspiracy theory QAnon, and even some symbols of Nazism (including a pro-Auschwitz t-shirt).

The issues brought up by this week's Torah portion and by the weekend celebrating the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., one week from now, resonate with the conflicts and movements and motivations which are currently engulfing America.

At first we find the Israelites living peacefully in Egypt and then suddenly enslaved and oppressed by a paranoid new Pharaoh. And soon after, we encounter the remarkable, defiant resistance of the Midwives, risking death to preserve life in the first recorded example of nonviolent civil disobedience and of moral opposition to tyranny and genocide.

Pharaoh, alarmed at the population explosion among the Hebrews and skeptical of their loyalty, first puts them to hard labor and then orders the midwives, led by Shifra and Puah, whose heroic names are preserved through the millennia as a result of their courageous defiance, to kill all male newborns as soon as they are delivered. The description in the Torah of the identity of those midwives is (intentionally?) ambiguous. "M'yaldot Ha'lvriot", which could mean either the Hebrew midwives OR the midwives TO the Hebrew women.

The commentators in our rabbinic literature are, typically, divided on this issue. Rashbam the literalist writes, "ham'yaldot she'hen ha'lvriot": the midwives who were Israelites. Rashi says that Shifra was Yocheved and Puah was her daughter Miriam. Ibn Ezra and Ramban agree. In the Talmud [Sotah 11b] Rav and Shmuel debate over whether the midwives' ringleaders were Yocheved & Miriam or Yocheved and her daughter-in-law Elisheva.

But there is also an alternative tradition. The Imrei Noam writes that they must have been non-Israelites, because of course Hebrew women would have refused to carry out such a horrific edict, on halachic as well as moral and nationalist grounds, and the subsequent statement that the women "feared God" would be unnecessary. Also, the Torah uses the universal name for God, Elokim, rather than the particularist Hashem.

Abarbanel observes that Pharaoh would not have been able to be confident that Hebrew women would kill children of their own people, so they must have been Egyptian midwives TO the Israelites. He notes that Pharaoh's instructions begin, "b'yeld'chen et ha'lvriot"—when you deliver the Israelite women, suggesting that you and they are distinct. Luzzato (ShaDaL) doubts that Pharaoh would order Hebrew women to murder their fellow countrymen and then expect that they would reliably obey, and that he also could not be confident that that the cruel instruction would not become widely known.

Also, one might ask, how could midwives who were Israelites plausibly offer the excuse that they were unable to interfere in the birth process because the Hebrew women delivered more quickly than did Egyptians? How would they know?

There is still a third tradition, found in the Cairo genizah and conveyed in the medieval midrash Yalkut Shimoni, that Shifra and Puah were Israelites AND Egyptians: righteous converts to the Jewish people, along with Joseph's wife Osenat, Moshe's wife Tziporah, Pharaoh's daughter Batya, Rahav, Ruth, and Yael.

I would argue that the evidence and logic lie with the position that the fearless Midwives were NOT Hebrews. What are the implications if we accept that these defiant women refused to obey "Melech Mitzraim", their all-powerful ruler, and instead endangered themselves to protect the newborns of a foreign people?

The model of these self-sacrificing rebels who acted solely "Ki yir'u hameyal'dot et ha-Elokim" resounds through history to inspire those who fear God rather than petty human tyrants.

Yad Vashem honors Righteous Gentiles who, like Shifra and Puah, stood up to fascism and mass murder to rescue Jews. We harshly criticize those nations and groups who collaborated and even who just remained on the sidelines when our brothers and sisters were being slaughtered, and we remember and glorify those who imperiled themselves to save fellow human beings.

The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., operates an entire program dedicated to noticing and preventing potential cases of genocide all over the world, believing that the slogan "Never Again" applies not only to Jews but to everyone.

In our times, the most stirring and profound instance of civil disobedience to repression and lynching has been the Civil Rights movement, whose most prominent apostle was Dr. King, whose memory and legacy we will again recognize a week from now.

Dr. King was aided and supported by many Jews, and he was a stalwart friend of the Jews and of Israel. One of his very last public appearances was before the convention of Conservative Rabbis meeting in Florida days before his death, at which he strongly attacked anti-Semitism among some Blacks, and at which the assembled rabbis sang to him "We Shall Overcome" in its Hebrew translation, while he beamed.

Dr. King's great friend and ally in advancing Civil Rights and in opposing the Vietnam War was of course Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. My father z"l was a student of Heschel's in rabbinical school and also served as his personal secretary, and Dad led members of his congregation to march with Dr. King and with John Lewis in Selma and DC. Dr. Heschel famously declared that marching with Dr. King on many occasions was "praying with my feet".

My own interracial activism has included serving as Jewish Community liaison to another leader of nonviolent dissent, Cesar Chavez, and his United Farmworkers. I traveled to Selma last March to join in the anniversary procession over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and many marchers of all ethnicities greeted me and my large white kippah festooned with a Star of David warmly and encouragingly.

But of course the history of the Black-Jewish alliance, which dates back before the founding of the NAACP over a century ago, is not unclouded. After Selma I spent a week in a pilgrimage to the memorials, museums, and monuments to Civil Rights in Birmingham and Montgomery. They were moving and uplifting, but I saw very little evidence of the involvement of Jews. They did naturally recollect Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, assassinated along with James Chaney during the Mississippi Freedom Summer. But I nowhere saw Dr. Heschel's photo or name, whereas in listing modern continuators of Dr. King and Rev. Shuttlesworth, one of the museums listed Louis Farrakhan, the notorious racist, misogynist, gay basher, and anti Semite. The only other Jewish names I saw were among the lists of major financial donors.

We surely face challenges of hatred and antagonism among activists today, as in Dr. King's era, when he fought the Black Power movement and the anti-Semitism and opposition to Israel among many of its adherents. Today we face BDS, rappers and actors muttering about the Rothschilds and how Jews control the world economy, AOC succumbing to pressure not to participate in Americans for Peace Now's memorial event for Yitzhak Rabin, some leaders of the Women's March such as Linda Sarsour and Tamika Mallory expelling and slandering Jews while lionizing Farrakhan, and other troubling developments. We need to remind these erstwhile partners that Dr. King proclaimed, "anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism".

But this week the Jewish son of immigrants and the current pastor of the church once led by both Martin Luther Kings, senior and junior, tipped the entire U.S. Senate by becoming the first Black and Jewish senators from Georgia.

This shabbat's parasha also examines the early life and growth of Moshe Rabbeinu. We see him, like the civil rights heroes of our day, intervening (not always nonviolently) to defend a Hebrew being assaulted by an Egyptian taskmaster, to support a Hebrew from a fellow Israelite (the "rasha"), and to advocate for his future wife and the other daughters of Midian when they are hassled at the watering place by Midianite men. Moshe demonstrates his conscience and leadership in these instances of holy interference.

The only other permutation which we do not observe is Moshe defending non-Hebrews from violence inflicted by Hebrews, something that was impossible on a large scale for the past 2000 years until the recent century, when we now have a State and an Army and are able to, and in fact do, sometimes engage in harsh treatment and unjustified killing of Non-Jews.

The model of Moshe the rescuer and of Shifra and Puah the self-endangering lifesavers, of Dr. King and his companion Dr. Heschel, of Senators-elect Rev. Warnock and Ossoff, should

awaken our commitments to justice and righteousness. May we march in their paths and live lives of conviction and noble risk.

Shabbat shalom and a fruitful upcoming month of Shvat.