



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Shemot

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Hidden Heroes

By Caroline L. Bryk

The book of Exodus opens with an introduction to a new *Pharaoh* who does not know Joseph and who reacts to the growing Hebraic population with hostility. What begins as a tyrannical rule, with the enslavement of Israel at the hands of the Egyptians, quickly escalates to murder as *Pharaoh* decrees to the midwives:

בְּיִלְדָּכֶן אֶת-הָעִבְרִיּוֹת, וְרֵאִיתֶן, עַל-הָאֲבָנִים: אִם-בֵּן הוּא וְהַמָּתָן אֹתוֹ,
וְאִם-בַּת הוּא וְחַיָּה.

When you help the Hebrew women give birth, observe them on the birthstools. If the child is a son, kill him; but if it is a daughter, let her live. (Shemot. 1:16)

At first glance, we likely identify the לְמִיִּלְדֹת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת that *Pharaoh* is addressing as "Hebrew midwives." However, as Rabbi Meir Soloveichik points out in his 2021 commentary, Exodus Weekly, a closer investigation into the identities of these women reveals a poignant message — one that is at the heart of Exodus and one that can serve as a great inspiration to us today.

Isaac Abravanel, a 15th-century Portuguese commentator, makes a striking claim — that the לְמִיִּלְדֹת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת should actually be understood as "midwives to the Hebrews." He argues that it would have been unlikely for *Pharaoh* to order Hebrew women to murder their own and instead insists that the midwives were actually Egyptian women. With this radical interpretation in mind, let us consider the following *pasuk*:

וַתִּירָאֵן הַמִּיִּלְדֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ, מִלֵּךְ מִצְרַיִם; וַתַּחֲיֶינָהוּ
אֶת-הַיְלָדִים. כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵינוּ

But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them but saved the male children alive. (Shemot 1:17)

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Understanding the women in this verse to be Egyptian, we encounter a pivotal moment in ancient history: *Pharaoh*, revered as a god by his subjects, is disobeyed in a stunning act of moral courage. As Rabbi Meir Soloveichik points out, this is a profound moment in the moral and political history of man. In this scene, we see history's first instance of civil disobedience and thereby witness the capacity of man to weigh his actions against a greater moral order.

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In fact, this central theme of Exodus inspired Benjamin Franklin's famous quote that he suggested for the seal of the United States: "Rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God." While this motto was not chosen for the seal, its sentiment captures the spirit of the Exodus story: that human dignity is derived from the Divine. Later, Thomas Jefferson, moved by this phrase, recommended using it for the seal of the state of Virginia and ultimately incorporated it into his personal seal.

This theme was echoed again years later by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., whose legacy we celebrate this weekend, when he famously declared, "One has a moral responsibility to obey just laws, and conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *zt"l*, points out that the story of the midwives belongs to a revolutionary idea implicit throughout *Tanakh* and one that continues to shape modern history: that right is sovereign over might.

What is perhaps most notable is that the midwives, *Shifrah* and *Puah*, regarded as great heroines of *Tanakh*, are remembered not for what they did, but for what they did not do. In this way, they remind us that we, too, can act heroically in our own lives by prioritizing conscience over conformity. In these complicated times, it is ever more critical for us to derive our moral direction from the wisdom of our tradition.

May the heroic actions of these two women serve as great sources of inspiration, strength, and self-confidence for us — not only this *Shabbat Shemot* and MLK weekend, but for many years to come.

Caroline, Jordan, Margaux (age 7, WDS), James (5, WDS), and Nicky Bryk (2, Chabad) moved to Scarsdale in August 2021 and feel blessed to have found a home in such a special community. *Parshat Shemot* is a particularly meaningful *parsha* for Caroline: she celebrated her *Bat Mitzvah* on *Parshat Shemot* in January 2004.

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