

## Goodness in Hell

The first *perek* of Sefer Shemot, as Nechama Leibowitz once pointed out, does not have a “hero” or main character. This is a switch from Sefer Bereshit. It amplifies the dark picture of slavery and infanticide which colors that period of our people’s sojourn in Egypt. The only characters mentioned are in 1:15:

“And the King of Egypt said to the *meyaldot ha-ivriyot* (midwives), one named Shifra and one named Puah....”

Who were these midwives? If you were like most folks who studied this in Day School/Yeshiva/Hebrew School, you probably knew that they were identified with Yocheved and Miriam, Moses’ mother and sister. This is a famous Rabbinic drash-based teaching found in numerous places, and is brought down by Rashi and many other commentators. It understands the term *meyaldot ha-ivriyot* as “Hebrew Midwives.” And it follows something that we often jokingly refer to as the “Law of Conservation of Biblical Characters”. Biblical figures are often found in multiple places.

But there is a problem with following this approach. A few verses later we are told (v 20-21) that “God dealt well with the Midwives”... that they “feared God” and “God made for them houses”. Why do we need to be told this if Shifra and Puah are Yocheved and Miriam? Surely we will know from the rest of the Torah that Yocheved and Miriam feared God, that God dealt well with them and they built homes.

Thus, there is a second school of thought that suggests Shifra and Puah were Egyptian Midwives who took care of the Jewish mothers. This approach would render *meyaldot ha-ivriyot* as “Midwives of the Hebrews”. Ibn Ezra suggests this and the Kli Yakar notes this opinion as well.

Far be it from me to critique our Holy Sages. But the second explanation resonates with me more, and not because it is more *Pshat* than *Drash*. It offers a profound moral teaching which the first explanation does not. Allow me to explain.

My father, *alav hashalom*, told me that after five years of suffering in the Lodz Ghetto, he did not know how things could get worse. They did. When he arrived in Auschwitz in August 1944, he saw his mother herded into the gas chambers and crematoria. He wanted to live but did not know how he would. Shortly after, when he was in a holding barracks in Birkenau, the SS came in asking for skilled engineers. He knew nothing about engineering as he was a skilled tailor, both before the war and in the ghetto. He decided to take a chance, hoping he could find a way to leave Auschwitz, which he thought he would never survive. He raised his hand. He was told, “If you are lying, you will be shot on the spot!” He persisted and was then taken to another slave labor camp for the work. When confronted with the task, he realized his ignorance would get him killed. He needed to find a way to learn this work. He told the German Meister (civilian overseer) the truth. As my father told the story, the Meister had *rachmunes*, taught him the work (which was not that difficult) and even got him some extra food at that moment

and also from time to time. This was how my father survived that particular camp. As he often told us, “Even in hell there were a few good people.”

This is why the *Pshat*-based approach suggesting that Shifra and Puah were Egyptian midwives is so powerful. It reminds us that even amidst slavery and infanticide, there were still moral people, kindly midwives who saved Jewish babies. There was still goodness in hell.

Shabbat Shalom!

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