The Unsung Heroes of the Exodus

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Our Sages codified most of the holiday Haftarot (the prophetic passages read after Torah reading in synagogue), but left it to individual communities to decide which prophetic readings to select for regular Shabbatot. Communities often chose similar passages, but they occasionally focused on different themes in the Torah reading that required different readings.

Parashat Shemot is one such example. Ashkenazim read from Isaiah chapters 27-28, a prophecy of redemption. They highlight how the people of Israel become enslaved and now required divine redemption. In contrast, Sephardic communities selected Jeremiah chapter 1. This passage features God's choosing Jeremiah, the prophet's reluctance, and God's compelling him to go on his mission. This Haftarah parallels Moses's selection, as he also expressed unwillingness until God forced him to accept his mission.

While worthy and central themes in their own right, they do not account for another vital element in Parashat Shemot, namely, a series of brief narratives pertaining to five heroic women: Shiphrah, Puah, Yocheved, Moses's sister (likely Miriam), and Pharaoh's daughter.

Shiphrah and Puah

> The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. (Exodus 1:15-21)

The Hebrew *meyalledot ha-Ivriyyot*, Hebrew midwives, could mean that they themselves were Israelites (Sotah 11b; Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban), or that they were midwives who served the Israelite population (Josephus, Philo, Abarbanel, Malbim). We cannot determine their ethnicity from the text.

What we can see is that they fear God, namely, they have a powerful moral sense and defy the decrees of the wicked Pharaoh (see, for example, Genesis 20:11; 42:18; Deuteronomy 25:17-19, for illustrations of fear of God=moral).

We do not know what gave these two midwives such moral courage in an evil society that threatened to destroy them if they were caught. We do not even know if they were Israelites! Yet, they are immortalized by the Torah. Strikingly, this narrative is longer than the Torah's description of Israelite slavery! The Torah celebrates the moral heroism and defiance of a wicked society of two otherwise unknown figures.

Yocheved and Moses's Sister

> A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him. (Exodus 2:1-4)

Despite Pharaoh's subsequent decree of drowning boys, Israelites still chose to have children. Ramban observes the heroism of Moses's parents to bring a child into the world in the face of Pharaoh's decree. Midrashic traditions also praise Miriam's inspiring Moses's parents to bear more children (e.g., Sotah 12a).

Pharaoh's Daughter

> The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:5-10)

Pharaoh's daughter recognized that Moses was an Israelite, perhaps because he was abandoned (Shadal, Hakham), or circumcised (Exodus Rabbah 1:24; Rashbam). This is the only place in Tanakh where a baby is said to be crying (since compassion is relevant to the plot). The Torah highlights Pharaoh's daughter's compassion with a crying baby, even though she knew of her father's decree to drown Israelite baby boys!

The Torah jumps from Moses's infancy to his emerging from the palace as a grown man, filled with a deep moral sense of protest against Pharaoh and his wicked nation. Even though slavery was the law of the land, Moses was scandalized at the state-sponsored abuses.

Shiphrah-Puah, Yocheved-Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter form the background of how Moses emerged as a paragon of morality. Moses *came* from them.

People often quietly impact on others. The Torah's emphasis on these brave individuals teaches that this sort of quiet impact can transform individuals and change the world.