

The Holy One Blessed Be He exists in a place that is impenetrable. How can we get even remotely close to the place where He is? Let us look at the example of Shifra and Puah.

One of the striking features of the beginning of Exodus is the namelessness of the characters:

- Pharaoh
- A certain man of the house of Levi and a Levite woman
- His sister
- The daughter of Pharaoh

In the midst of this namelessness, two of the most seemingly inconsequential characters, the Hebrew midwives, are named.

Shifra and Puah are their names.

To have a name connotes a higher order of being than just existing. When he is in the Garden of Eden, Adam gave names to all the living creatures (2:19) as if to give them a larger reality.

What is it that these two women did to merit their names being recorded in the Torah?

To arrive at our answer, we have to inquire more deeply into who these women were. They are referred to as Hebrew midwives, but the Hebrew מְיַלְדוֹת הָעִבְרִיִּים could be understood to mean “midwives to the Hebrews.” In other words, are they Hebrew or are they Egyptian? By all appearances, much of our understanding of this story rests on the nationality of the midwives.

Do they belong to the Egyptian empire, a civilization renowned in antiquity for its advanced state? Or are they members of a budding nation that is exiled from its home, the Jewish people?

The commentators differ on this point. For Rashi, these are Jewish women. He explains that “Shifra” and “Puah” are alternate names for Moses’ mother Yoheved or Moses’ sister Miriam. Other commentators claim that the two are Egyptian

I side with those that say the women are Egyptian because their heroism makes more sense in that context. One might expect the midwives to save Jewish infants if they are Jewish, but if they are Egyptian, that demands a crossing over a national boundary. Identifying with your own people does not demand special merit. Crossing over from your group to demonstrate empathy – nay to save! – someone from another group is a different matter altogether.

What sets apart the Torah from other texts in world literature is the emphasis on loving the stranger. Loving someone from your in-group, your family is part of the animal nature of human beings. Animals, too, protect members of their herd. To go beyond the boundaries of one’s group is the key move that makes morality real and a classically human endeavor.

How did the Egyptian women do it? The Torah tells us that they feared God. The fear of God is what inoculates a person from the fear of man. In short, Shifra and Puah could protect life because they rightly feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. That’s not easy to do. Human power is often arbitrary, and authorities that exercise power can truly damage a person’s life. Shifra and Puah risked their welfare by saving the Jewish male babies.

We also have the example of Moses, and in many ways, the first adult moment in Moses' life serves as a counterpoint to the behavior of Shifra and Puah that I just lauded. Moses strikes the Egyptian because he is "beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen" (2:11). What I am about to argue directly counters what I just argued about how stepping outside one's group is the precursor to moral action. That is because the situation of the Jews is always peculiar.

Today a phenomenon that is over one hundred years ago still plagues the Jewish community. It derives from the very inference that I just lauded. Some Jews conclude that all of our morality consists of loving the stranger, ignoring that we also have real responsibilities to each other as members of the Jewish people.

I say one hundred years because the template for this outlook is a Jewish Marxist named Rosa Luxembourg. Luxembourg wrote, "What do you want with these special Jewish pains? I feel as close to the wretched victims of the rubber plantations in Putamayo and the blacks of Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play ball... I have no special corner in my heart for the ghetto: I am at home in the entire world, where there are clouds and birds and human tears." This statement is one of the most challenging statements in modern Jewish history. It's not challenging because of its depth and seriousness but because it speaks to a condition that Jews are vulnerable to. It ignores the example of Moses before us who is moved to protect someone because he is from the same group. The teaching of the Torah was not conceived so we would be moved to help only those who are outside our group. This is a distortion of the Torah's teaching, but a distortion that enjoys enormous popularity among Jews to this day.

To be the complete person, we have to hold the examples of Shifra and Puah and the example of Moses. We must be attentive to the cry of the other, and we must also not ignore the pain of one among our people. This is a tension that can never be cleanly resolved. We will always feel the draw of universalism. The difficulty today is to feel the draw of particularism. Do rockets fired from Gaza into Southern Israel trouble you? Do you empathize with the hardship of your own people, or are you strictly a universalist, like Rosa Luxembourg?

Morality demands the total package. It means loving your own people *and* demonstrating kindness and compassion to the other. To be human can never mean that we must suppress our Jewish sentiments. To be human must always demand a particular attention to the well-being of our fellow Jews. In short, fear God and love your fellow Jew, and you will embody the ways of Shifra, Puah, and Moses all at once.