

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Shemot  
December 25, 2021 \*\*\* 21 Tevet, 5782

Shemot in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile. A child is born to Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram, and placed in a basket on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian. The next day he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Tzipporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai, and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Moses' brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe; but Pharaoh refuses to let them go, and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest: "Why have You done evil to this people?" G-d promises that the redemption is close at hand.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: *Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22–23.*

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah parallels the week's Torah reading on many levels. One of the parallels is the message of redemption conveyed by Isaiah—"and you shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel"—that is reminiscent of the message of

redemption that G-d spoke to Moses at the burning bush, a message that Moses then communicated to Pharaoh.

The haftorah vacillates between Isaiah's prophecies concerning the future redemption, and his admonitions concerning the Jews' drunken and G-dless behavior. Isaiah starts on a positive note: "In the coming days, Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom, filling the face of the earth . . ." He mentions G-d's mercy for His nation, and the measure-for-measure punishment He meted out upon the Egyptians who persecuted them. And regarding the future redemption: "You shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel. And it will come to pass on that day that a great shofar will be sounded, and those lost in the land of Assyria and those exiled in the land of Egypt will come, and they will prostrate themselves before the L-rd on the holy mount in Jerusalem."

The prophet then proceeds to berate the drunkenness of the Ten Tribes, warning them of the punishment that awaits them. "With the feet they shall be trampled, the crown of the pride of the drunkards of Ephraim . . ."

The haftorah ends on a positive note: "Now Jacob will no longer be ashamed, and now his face will not pale. For when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, who shall sanctify My name . . . and the G-d of Israel they will revere."

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

#### **On Not Obeying Immoral Orders (Shemot) by the Rabbi Sacks z"l Legacy Trust**

<https://rabbisacks.org/on-not-obeying-immoral-orders-shemot/>

The opening chapters of Exodus plunge us into the midst of epic events. Almost at a stroke the Israelites are transformed from protected minority to slaves. Moses passes from prince of Egypt to Midianite shepherd to leader of the Israelites through a history-changing encounter at the Burning Bush. Yet it is one small, often overlooked episode that deserves to be seen as a turning-point in the history of humanity. Its heroines are two remarkable women, Shifra and Puah.

We do not know who they were. The Torah gives us no further information about them other than that they were midwives, instructed by Pharaoh: 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live' (Ex. 1:16). The Hebrew description of the two women as hameyaldot ha'ivriyot is ambiguous. It could mean

“the Hebrew midwives”; so most translations and commentaries read it. But it could equally mean, “the midwives to the Hebrews,” in which case they may have been Egyptian. That is how Josephus,[1] Abarbanel and Samuel David Luzzatto understand it, arguing that it is simply implausible to suppose that Hebrew women would have been party to an act of genocide against their own people.

What we do know, however, is that they refused to carry out the order:

**“The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the King of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live” (Ex. 1:17).**

This is the first recorded instance in history of civil disobedience: refusing to obey an order, given by the most powerful man in the most powerful empire of the ancient world, simply because it was immoral, unethical, inhuman.

The Torah suggests that they did so without fuss or drama. Summoned by Pharaoh to explain their behaviour, they simply replied: “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive” (Ex. 1:19). To this, Pharaoh had no reply. The matter-of-factness of the entire incident reminds us of one of the most salient findings about the courage of those who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. They had little in common except for the fact that they saw nothing remarkable in what they did.[2] Often the mark of real moral heroes is that they do not see themselves as moral heroes. They do what they do because that is what a human being is supposed to do. That is probably the meaning of the statement that they “feared God.” It is the Torah’s generic description of those who have a moral sense.[3]

It took more than three thousand years for what the midwives did to become enshrined in international law. In 1946, the Nazi war criminals on trial at Nuremberg all offered the defence that they were merely obeying orders, given by a duly constituted and democratically elected government. Under the doctrine of national sovereignty every government has the right to issue its own laws and order its own affairs. It took a new legal concept, namely a ‘crime against humanity’, to establish the guilt of the architects and administrators of genocide.

The Nuremberg principle gave legal substance to what the midwives instinctively understood: that there are some orders that should not be obeyed, because they are immoral. Moral law transcends and may override the law of the state. As the Talmud puts it:

**“If there is a conflict between the words of the Master [God] and the words of a disciple [a human being], the words of the Master must prevail” (Kiddushin 42b).**

The Nuremberg trials were not the first occasion on which the story of the midwives had a significant impact on history. Throughout the Middle Ages the Church,

knowing that knowledge is power and therefore preferring to keep it exclusively in the hands of the priesthood, had forbidden vernacular translations of the Bible. In the course of the sixteenth century, three developments changed this irrevocably. First was the Reformation, with its maxim *Sola scriptura*, “By Scripture alone,” placing the Bible centre-stage in the religious life.

Second was the invention, in the mid-fifteenth century, of printing. Lutherans were convinced that this was Divine Providence. God had sent the printing press so that the doctrines of the Reformed church could be spread worldwide.

Third was the fact that some people, regardless of the ban, had translated the Bible anyway. John Wycliffe and his followers had done so in the fourteenth century, but the most influential rebel was William Tyndale whose translation of the New Testament, begun in 1525, became the first printed Bible in English. He paid for this with his life.

When Queen Mary I took the Church of England back to Catholicism, many English Protestants fled to Calvin’s Geneva, where they produced a new translation, based on Tyndale, called the Geneva Bible. Produced in a small, affordable edition, it was smuggled into England in large numbers. Able to read the Bible by themselves for the first time, people soon discovered that it was, as far as monarchy is concerned, a highly seditious document.

It tells of how God told Samuel that in seeking to appoint a King, the Israelites were rejecting Him as their only Sovereign. It describes graphically how the Prophets were unafraid to challenge Kings, which they did with the authority of God Himself. And it told the story of the midwives who refused to carry out Pharaoh’s order. On this, in a marginal note, the Geneva Bible endorses their refusal, criticising only the fact that, in explaining their behaviour, they told a lie. The note says, “Their disobedience herein was lawful, but their dissembling evil.”

King James understood clearly the dire implication of that one sentence. It meant that a King could be disobeyed on the authority of God Himself: a clear and categorical refutation of the idea of the Divine right of Kings.[4] Eventually, unable to stop the spread of Bibles in translation, King James decided to commission his own version which appeared in 1611. But by then the damage had been done and the seeds of what became the English revolution had been planted. Throughout the seventeenth century, by far the most influential force in English politics was the Hebrew Bible as understood by the Puritans, and it was the Pilgrim Fathers who took this faith with them on their journey to what would eventually become the United States of America.

A century and a half later, it was the work of another English radical, Thomas Paine, that made a decisive impact on the American revolution. His pamphlet, *Common*

Sense, was published in America in January 1776 and became an instant best seller, selling 100,000 copies almost immediately. Its impact was huge, and because of it he became known as “the father of the American Revolution.” Despite the fact that Paine was an atheist, the opening pages of Common Sense, justifying rebellion against a tyrannical King, are entirely based on citations from the Hebrew Bible. In the same spirit, that summer Benjamin Franklin drew, as his design for the Great Seal of America, a picture of the Egyptians (i.e. the English) drowning in the Red Sea (i.e. the Atlantic), with the caption, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” Thomas Jefferson was so struck by the sentence that he recommended it to be used on the Great Seal of Virginia, and later incorporated it in his personal seal. The story of the midwives belongs to a larger vision implicit throughout the Torah and Tanach as a whole: that right is sovereign over might, and that even God Himself can be called to account in the name of justice, as He expressly mandates Abraham to do. Sovereignty ultimately belongs to God, so any human act or order that transgresses the will of God is by that fact alone ultra vires. These revolutionary ideas are intrinsic to the biblical vision of politics and the use of power. In the end, though, it was the courage of two remarkable women that created the precedent later taken up by the American writer Thoreau[5] in his classic essay Civil Disobedience (1849) that in turn inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in the twentieth century. Their story also ends with a lovely touch. The text says:

**“So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them houses” (Ex. 1:20-21).**

Luzzatto interpreted this last phrase to mean that He gave them families of their own. Often, he wrote, midwives are women who are unable to have children. In this case, God blessed Shifra and Puah by giving them children, as he had done for Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

This too is a not unimportant point. The closest Greek literature comes to the idea of civil disobedience is the story of Antigone who insisted on giving her brother Polynices a burial despite the fact that King Creon had refused to permit it, regarding him as a traitor to Thebes. Sophocles’ Antigone is a tragedy: the heroine must die because of her loyalty to her brother and her disobedience to the King. By contrast, the Hebrew Bible is not a tragedy. In fact biblical Hebrew has no word meaning “tragedy” in the Greek sense. Good is rewarded, not punished, because the universe, God’s work of art, is a world in which moral behaviour is blessed and evil, briefly in the ascendant, is ultimately defeated.

Shifra and Puah are two of the great heroines of world literature, the first to teach humanity the moral limits of power. [1] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, II.9.2.[2] See

James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, New York, Free Press, 1993, pp. 35-39, and the literature cited there. [3] See, for example, Gen. 20:11. [4] See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, London: Allen Lane, 1993. [5] See Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, Boston: David R. Godine, 1969, first published in 1849.

## Seeds of Slavery: Parashat Shemot 5782 by Rabbi Aviva Richman

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-category/weekly-divrei-torah>

Where does our story of slavery begin?

In Parashat Shemot, Pharaoh enslaves the people of Israel, but we can point to earlier critical moments that might set this into motion.<sup>1</sup> These are times when our own ancestors mistreated or enslaved others, perhaps laying the groundwork for the kind of oppression that would end up enslaving us. Noticing these moments is not about telling a story where slavery is the “fault” of the enslaved,<sup>2</sup> but about becoming aware of how our choices about how to exercise power shape the communities and world our descendants will inhabit.

The first foreshadowing of our affliction at the hands of the Egyptians is when Sarah “afflicts” (ותענה) her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar (Genesis 16:6).<sup>3</sup> This mistreatment is not unfounded—it is in response to Hagar disrespecting her (ותקל 16:4, גברתה בעיניה)—but even so some commentaries critique Sarah’s behavior, and see it as the root cause of later mistreatment of the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Radak describes Sarah’s mistreatment of Hagar in terms that foreshadow Israel’s slavery in Egypt:

רד"ק בראשית טז:

ותענה שרי - עשתה עמה יותר מדאי ועבדה בה בפרך... ולא נהגה שרה בזה למדת מוסר ולא למדת חסידות... כי אין ראוייה לאדם לעשות כל יכלתו במה שתחת ידו.

Radak on Genesis 16:6 She was excessive and made her do backbreaking labor (בפרך)... Sarah did not act appropriately or piously... a person should not do all that is in their power to those under them...

In Parashat Shemot, too, we see that the Egyptians enslaved Israel “with backbreaking labor” (בפרך, Exodus 1:13). Although Radak does not say this explicitly, the similarity in language suggests he sees Israel’s slavery in Egypt as parallel to, and perhaps in part due to, Sarah’s treatment of Hagar.<sup>5</sup> Radak goes on to emphasize Avraham’s error as well in not reigning in Sarah’s actions. While Sarah may not have been able to fully control herself because of her own feelings of hurt and disrespect, perhaps Avraham—having not been personally offended—carried the responsibility to intervene.

A second foreshadowing moment is when Yosef's brothers sell him to the caravan of merchants on their way to Egypt. They are the first to create the reality of an Israelite slave in Egypt. Potifar's wife refers to Yosef in these terms, calling him "the Hebrew slave" (Genesis 39:17). Perhaps this act of cruelty is part of what led all of their descendants to become Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

Finally, we might trace back to Yosef enslaving all of the Egyptians as an origin of our slavery at their hands. Since Yosef has a monopoly on all the food in Egypt, the Egyptians come to him and beg him to continue to sustain them as the famine worsens. In their desperation, they ask that they and their land become "slaves of Pharaoh" (עבדים לפרעה) so they won't die of starvation, and Yosef puts this into effect (Genesis 47:19-26).

The idea that our slavery in Egypt came as a result of our own earlier acts of mistreatment surfaces explicitly in the brothers' interaction with Yosef after their father dies, at the end of Sefer Bereishit.<sup>6</sup> When the brothers confront Yosef, afraid that he actually hates them and will act on that hatred now that their father has died, they offer themselves as slaves. Some commentaries see this offer as their proposal for fair punishment, an echo of our second foreshadowing moment: "Since we sold you as a slave, enslave us..."<sup>7</sup> The brothers assume it would be entirely reasonable for Yosef to enslave them since they sold him into slavery. They offer themselves as slaves to Yosef specifically, perhaps even so as to avoid a worse punishment, such as him selling them onto some other Egyptian.

How might we have expected Yosef to respond to his brothers' offer? He has dreamed that his brothers would bow down to him (Genesis 37:6-10). On Ya'akov's deathbed, he blessed Yosef with ruling over his brothers (49:26). And, he oversaw the enslavement of all regular Egyptians in return for supporting them in the famine (47:13-26). He might have very reasonably come to the conclusion that his brothers are in fact meant to serve him. Like he responded affirmatively when the Egyptians offered to be slaves, he could have just as easily—and maybe even more justifiably—accepted this offer from his brothers. We certainly haven't seen God step in and explicitly communicate to Yosef that he should do anything else. In this way, the brothers' offer to become Yosef's slaves weaves together the second and third examples of the origins of Israel's slavery: their selling Yosef as a slave, and Yosef's enslavement of the Egyptians.

Given this context, it is striking that Yosef does not enslave his brothers right then and there. In contrast to Sarah's treatment of Hagar,<sup>1</sup> Yosef's behavior here represents restraint, even when he could—and did!—exercise much harsher control over someone in his power.<sup>8</sup> The commentary Ha'amek Davar understands Yosef as outrightly rejecting any dominion over his brothers in principle. Behind Yosef's

response to his brothers, “Am I in place of God?” (50:19, he hears echoes of the verse in Sefer VaYikra, “For Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants” (Leviticus 25:55). As servants of God, they cannot be enslaved to any other person.<sup>9</sup> Instead of getting totally wrapped up in his own power and amplifying his position as much as possible, Yosef shows humility and restraint. Another commentary, Rabbeinu Behaye, makes this point even more strongly. Yosef fears God, and sees himself as subservient to God. He is, in effect, a servant. He therefore cannot imagine placing his brothers as his own subservients:

רבינו בחיי בראשית נ"יט

אל תיראו כי התחת אלהים אני. יאמר: אין לכם לירא מפני כי ירא אלהים אני, משועבד אליו ותחת עבדותו.

Rabbeinu Behaye on Genesis 50:19 He said: “Do not fear because I fear God. I am enslaved to [God] and under [God’s] servitude.”

How do we make sense of Yosef’s humility and restraint on his own power in response to his brothers, in light of his willingness to enslave the entirety of the Egyptian people?<sup>10</sup> There are two ways to approach the glaring differences in his enslavement of the Egyptians and generosity to his brothers. Ramban takes one path, stressing that Yosef was generous with the Egyptians and did not fully enslave them; the Hebrew word עבד has some flexibility between “servant” and “slave.” According to Ramban, Yosef only bought their land, but not their bodies. They would be sharecroppers, rather than slaves. And even as sharecroppers, Yosef was generous (אני אתחסד עמכם) allowing them to keep the majority of the produce that usually belongs to the owner (four-fifths) and giving Pharaoh only one-fifth, a reversal of the usual arrangement where the sharecropper keeps only one-fifth. They were “enslaved” only inasmuch as they were obligated to continue working the land in perpetuity, not that Pharaoh could force them to do whatever he wanted, or afflict them as slaves.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, another commentary, the Bekhor Shor, emphasizes that the Egyptians had become fully enslaved.<sup>12</sup> He sees the origins of Israel’s slavery in parashat Shemot coming from the Egyptian’s complaints about differential treatment:

בכור שור שמות א"יא

ובאו בעלילה על ישראל, לאמר: כל המצריים עובדים את המלך... אבל אתם אין עובדים אותו, לכן כיון שהמצריים נותנים את התבואה, אתם בנו את האוצרות לתתה בהם.

Bekhor Shor to Exodus 1:11 They came with an accusation against Israel: All the Egyptians serve the King... but you don’t serve him! Therefore, since the Egyptians provide the grain, you provide the storehouses to put it in.

This is the backstory for why the Egyptians forced the Israelites to build Pithom and Raamses, the storehouses for Pharaoh (Exodus 1:11). This comment is eye-opening in how we understand the entirety of the Exodus story. The Israelites' enslavement isn't in the context of everyone else being free. They were living in a society where nearly everyone was a slave, and they had only managed to avoid it thus far because of special privilege. This status was entirely unsustainable, to think it is possible to be free while embedded in a culture of oppression. The pressure came from the Egyptians all around them. Why were they all enslaved to Pharaoh but the Israelites free? The people of Israel could no longer live in this fantasy and so they too became enslaved. Yosef's admirable restraint saved his brothers, but in the end this was only temporary. Our ancestors' misdeeds, and the context of the society of slavery Yosef put into effect, doomed the people of Israel to experience slavery themselves.

Understanding the enslavement of Israel through the lens of these key decision points for our own ancestors, we see that slavery doesn't come out of the blue. The structures of power in any given moment can be traced back to the complexity of how power was navigated in earlier generations. We see in our ancestral line a grave error as Sarah showed a lack of discipline in her own exercise of power, even as she harbored legitimate feelings of hurt and disrespect. And we see the error of Avraham's lack of intervention, enabling this oppressive behavior. Yosef's brothers manage to avoid the full repercussions of selling Yosef into slavery as Yosef does not enslave them, but their descendants will not remain in this state of reprieve. On the backdrop of Yosef enslaving the Egyptians, the people of Israel will suffer for their ancestors' misdeeds. Our own slavery comes on the heels of a string of abuses of power, and in the context of a society already steeped in slavery and oppression. At the same time, we have the seeds of redemption, as Yosef does not enslave his brothers, seeing beyond his own ego and power with a sense of humility, empathy, and serving a larger purpose.

When we read our Exodus story, we have to understand that it is the Exodus of only some of many slaves in Egypt. Remembering where the story begins, we can be urged to take note of how our decisions of how to use power will have serious implications for the future. And, hopefully, we can be inspired to live up to Yosef's conviction that people serve only God, not others, even more fully than he himself lived this out.

Shabbat Shalom.

<sup>1</sup> This is notwithstanding the prophecy God gave Avraham in Genesis 15, the *berit bein ha-betarim* (the covenant between the pieces). It's also worth noting that this search for earlier moments that seed the later slavery is also a question that occupies the Haggadah—including

the berit bein ha-betarim, Lavan swindling Ya'akov, and Avraham coming from a family of idol worshippers. <sup>2</sup> There is a dangerous history, up to the present moment, of “blaming” enslaved peoples for their own slavery. These tropes emerge around Black slavery in America, and have also been a part of the discourse of holocaust denial. I do not mean to legitimate this kind of thinking in any way. <sup>3</sup> The story of Sarah being abducted and mistreated by Pharaoh (Genesis 12), who then suffers from plagues, and ultimately Avraham and Sarah escape with great wealth, is also a foreshadow of Israel's mistreatment in Egypt and the Exodus story. But my focus in this essay is on earlier moments where we were responsible for afflicting others—which one might ascribe to Avraham in his treatment of Sarah in that story, but this is not the story's focus. <sup>4</sup> Ramban goes so far as to connect Sarah's mistreatment of Hagar, mother of Yishmael, with his contemporary “Yishmaelites” (i.e. Muslims) afflicting Jews in his own time. Ramban on Bereishit 16:6: “ ותענה שרי ותברח מפניה - חטאה אמנו בענוי הזה, וגם אברהם בהניחו לעשות ” <sup>5</sup> My teacher and colleague Rabbi Shai Held points to other linguistic and thematic connections between Hagar and Israelite slavery in a profound essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, “Are Jews Always the Victims?” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/are-jews-always-victims>. He also sees these two stories as mirror images, although he is not concerned with the causal relationship. <sup>6</sup> For more analysis of this scene, see my essay on Parashat VaYehi, “Unfinished Reconciliation: The Indirect Apology,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/unfinished-reconciliation>. <sup>7</sup> R. Avraham ben Ha-Rambam on Genesis 50:18: “ הנה ” אחר (עונש) לא עונשנו זה עונשנו לא (עונש) אחר ויאמרו הננו לך לעבדים. בחשבם כי ישטמם יוסף וימכרם לעבדים, על כן אמרו אין לך לחשוב ”: מחשבות היאך להשיב נקם, כי הננו מתרצים להיות לך לעבדים והרי הנקם <sup>8</sup> See my teacher and colleague R. Shai Held's discussion of how Yosef learns from Sarah's mistakes in his essay on Parashat VaYehi, “The Majesty of Restraint, Or: Joseph's Shining Moment,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/majesty-restraint>. He also charts the contrast between Yosef's initial torturing of his brothers when they come to Egypt for food and don't know who he is to his restraint in this moment. <sup>9</sup> Ha'amek Davar to Genesis 50:19: “ כי התחת אלהים אני. הלא אתם עבדי אלהים, וכאשר תהיו עבדים לי ” הלא אני מקפח כבוד שמים ומקבל את עבדיו לי לעבדים, והיאך אפשר לעשות כן, הבמקום אלהים אני שאקבל את עבדיו לי לעבדים. ובדרך שאמרה תורה בס' ויקרא כ"ה נ"ה כי לי בני ישראל עבדים עבדי הם, ואין רצון הקדוש לזולתו.” This is based on the Rabbinic interpretation of Leviticus 25:55—“My slaves, and not the slaves of slaves”—as found, for example, on Kiddushin 22b. <sup>10</sup> Minus the Egyptian priests. Obviously, on a peshat level, this is because he treats family differently. But that answer is not totally satisfying, especially as we have seen that he had reason to believe his brothers would actually be subservient to him. <sup>11</sup> Ramban on Genesis 47:19. <sup>12</sup> Thank you to Jamie Weisbach, member of Hadar's Advanced Kollel, who brought this comment of the Bekhor Shor to my attention.

## Who Is “Us” by Jessica Dell'era

<http://www.jtsa.edu/torah/who-is-us/>

At first, Pharaoh feels sure he's harming only them. These Hebrews that he'd inherited, who came with a story about some Joseph prince—but who cares about ancient history? In Pharaoh's view, the Hebrews are merely a tool for building out new garrison towns. What is a Hebrew slave to mighty Pharaoh, a living god among his people? They are an expendable workforce whose suffering is unimportant. Faster and harder they work at Pharaoh's command.

Yet something deep inside Pharaoh cannot fully turn away from the humanity of his foreign slaves. The hard labor seems only to make the Hebrews stronger, more numerous, and alarmingly widespread through the land of Egypt. Pharaoh cannot disregard them forever. His mind turns to frightening thoughts: What if they become mightier than us? What if they band their splintered factions together to take up arms—or simply open the doors to Egypt's enemies, joining forces with the very foes the garrisons are meant to keep out?

These thoughts—are they paranoid imaginings or a shrewd strategic vision?—drive Pharaoh to preemptive countermeasures. If he instructs the midwives to kill every newborn boy of the Hebrews, it will stamp out their spirit now and prevent a homegrown rebel army in the future. They will suffer, Pharaoh thinks, while we go on in peace.

Of course, as readers of the Torah know, Pharaoh's plan must fail. The line between “us” and “them” that feels so clear to him becomes less so in the minds of others. The midwives, Shifra and Puah, refuse to comply with this cruel order and secretly allow all the Hebrew babies to live, lying to Pharaoh's face about it. Whose side are they on, anyway? The Torah describes Shifra and Puah with a tantalizing ambiguity: their title is **הַמִּילְדוֹת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת** hameyaldot haivriyot (Exod. 1:15), and commentators have debated for millennia whether this phrase means “the midwives who were Hebrews” or “the [Egyptian] midwives to the Hebrews.” Their stated motivation can be interpreted in line with either reading: they disobey even at great personal risk because: **וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים** (Exod. 1:17).

Translation: “For the midwives feared...” Whom? How must we understand the object of their awe? Perhaps the midwives revere the Hebrew God because they are B'nei Yisrael themselves. Or it could mean they fear the wrath of their own Egyptian gods, at least more than Pharaoh's. It could even be that Shifra and Puah are Egyptian but have come to venerate the Hebrew God. Did they lose their faith in Pharaoh's divinity upon receiving this paranoid and inhumane order?

In a certain light, it hardly matters whether these midwives were Egyptian or Hebrew. Drawing upon a more fanciful folk etymology, we might say that either way

Shifra and Puah are truly ivriyot, “those who cross over/transgress.” When they look at Hebrew parents and babies, they don’t see a terrifying “them” like Pharaoh. They see a human “us” worthy of compassion and protection.

Pharaoh, however, still in the grips of terror and self-preservation, must resort to even more extreme measures after the failure of this initial plan:

**וַיֹּצֵא פַרְעֹה לְכָל-עַמּוֹ לְאמֹר כָּל-הַבְּנֵי הַיְלִיד הַיְאָרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ וְכָל-הַבָּת תְּחַיֶּי:**

*“Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: ‘Every boy that is born you shall cast into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live.’”*

[Exodus 1:22](#)

So much for the stability of us versus them. This ambiguous verse does not specify whose baby boys are to be killed—now Pharaoh perhaps threatens the whole populace, Egyptian and Hebrew alike. He has indulged his doubts and fears of “them” to the point of suspecting everyone beyond himself and his household as a potential source of overthrow.

But wait. Is Pharaoh even safe at home? Pharaoh’s daughter, Batya, draws a baby from the Nile and takes him as her own. This child, Moshe, grows to adulthood within Pharaoh’s household, with tremendous power and privilege. And yet Moshe, despite his rarified upbringing, does not draw the lines of “us” and “them” quite as his grandfather Pharaoh does. When he walks through the city, he sees not an expendable-yet-dangerous underclass, but rather, his kinsfolk:

**וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אָחִיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלֵתָם**

*“He [Moshe] went out to his siblings and saw their suffering labors.”*

[Exodus 2:11](#)

Moshe seems to have expanded his sense of who is “us.” As Rashi puts it, “He sets his eyes and mind to share in their distress,” even though he certainly doesn’t need to take any notice of these lowly slaves. Does Moshe know at this moment in the Torah story that he is of Hebrew blood? Ibn Ezra feels confident that no, Moshe believes himself Egyptian; while Ramban claims that yes, Moshe has just learned his true identity and sees the Hebrews’ suffering with new compassion.

Yet, as with Shifra and Puah, does it ultimately matter whether Moshe thought of himself as a Hebrew? Whatever his motivation, he feels compelled, like the midwives, to notice and resist the injustice he has witnessed in his world. Once he brings a wider swath of humanity into his “we,” he is ready to begin his journey as God’s prophet who will help bring about the redemption of B’nei Yisrael.

How do we cultivate this trait in our own lives, expanding our sense of who counts as “us?” It can seem daunting or even impossible to feel kinship with everyone we encounter in a day, especially when there are so many ills to worry about in our world and so many people who feel quite unlike us. Social science has amply

shown that we human beings tend to gravitate toward our ingroup, those most like us, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty. It is challenging, and perhaps impossible, to overcome this entirely. Universalism may never fully win out over particularism, at least not until Moshiah comes, but that doesn't mean we cannot push back on the impulse for the sake of cultivating our compassion and motivating righteous actions.

One habit I find useful—some may call it a mind game, others a meditation—is to carry a connective label on the tip of my tongue: “friend” or “comrade,” or “my fellow human.” My preferred us-expanding label is “neighbor,” which I apply to whomever I see as I walk around the familiar streets of Morningside Heights, bringing everyone closer into my perceived ingroup. I challenge myself to think, “There is my neighbor. This person walking their dog is my neighbor. That cab driver who plowed through the crosswalk is my neighbor. The unhoused folks sheltering in this doorway are my neighbors.” It is a small step, of course, but it invites more connection and less fear, inclining me toward positive and compassionate action when the opportunity arises. Perhaps, if Pharaoh could have learned to see the Hebrews as his kinfolk, his neighbors, the whole story of the Exodus might have been different.

*(Jessica Dell'era is a student at JTS Class of 2022)*

### The God of Exodus, The God of Life by Rabby Hilly Haber

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/god-exodus-god-life>

*Make me a grave where'er you will,*

*In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill,*

*Make it among earth's humblest graves,*

*But not in a land where men are slaves.*

*-Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (Bury Me in a Free Land)*

Over the course of 40 chapters, the Book of Exodus tells a story of the path from enslavement to freedom, from liberation to revelation. It is a song of hope that reverberates across the generations, the promise of freedom and of transformation whispered into the ears of those who live under the weight of oppression. In Parashat Sh'mot, we meet the God of Exodus: a God who champions life, brings about liberation, and infuses new hope and possibility into the world. As Theologian James Cone writes, "In the Exodus-Sinai tradition יהוה is disclosed as the God of history, whose revelation is identical with God's power to liberate the oppressed. There is no knowledge of יהוה except through God's political activity on behalf of the weak and helpless of the land" (God of the Oppressed). There is a greater force at work in the world than the decree of any Pharaoh, the Book of Exodus tells us,

and God's message is clear: Those who are born into slavery need not die in slavery.

Parashat Sh'mot opens with an account of life under oppressive and violent rule. We learn that the Israelites were gradually stripped of their freedoms and forced to perform bone-crushing labor (BT Sotah 11b). We learn that Pharaoh wished to stamp out new life, and with it, the possibility of a future for the Israelites outside of Egypt. Jewish tradition imagines that Egyptian astrologers predicted for Pharaoh that the Israelites' deliverer was born on the day of Moses' birth. To prevent Israelite redemption, then, Pharaoh ordered the drowning of all male children (Exodus Rabbah 1:18, Sotah 12a).

In the very first chapter of Exodus, we learn that Egypt is a place of bondage and despair, a life without hope in the shadow of death. This is the backdrop against which God enters into the story.

God hears the Israelites crying out in pain and instructs Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand their freedom (Exodus 3:9-10). When Moses asks who he should say sent him to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, God reveals a new name: Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14). Derived from the verb "to be," God's name translates into a statement of eternal being and self-determination: "I Am that I Am" or "I Will Be What I Will Be" (Nahum M Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary). Sixteenth-century Italian rabbi and philosopher Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno reads theological import into God's name: If God is named for life, then God must love life and, therefore, abhor anything or anyone which threatens life (Sforno on Exodus 3:14). The God of Life, of self-determination, has come to protect and save life. When Moses returns to Egypt and announces God's name to Pharaoh, Jewish tradition imagines Pharaoh racing to his archives, searching in vain for a record of Moses' God. The rabbis liken Pharaoh's search to that of someone going to a cemetery to find a person who is not yet dead. They ask, "Do you expect to find the living among the dead?" (Midrash Sh'mot Rabbah 5:18).

When Moses announces God's presence in Egypt, he speaks into being a new world order, one which threatens to upend the hierarchy on top of which Pharaoh sits. In Egypt, some lives are worth more than others. In Exodus, Dr. Cone points out, we learn: "Liberation is not a theoretical proposition to be debated in a philosophy or theology seminar. It is a historical reality, born in the struggle for freedom in which an oppressed people recognize that they were not created to be seized, bartered, deeded, or auctioned." Inherent in God's name, in God's world order, is a statement about human life, a theological anthropology rooted in the sacred dignity of every human being.

This ethic of liberation and of life is woven into the fabric of our tradition and texts,

appearing and reappearing as a source of theological and ethical knowledge born of lived experience and historical memory. It is, in the words of theologian Howard Thurman, "the word [of religion] to those who stand with their backs against the wall" (Jesus and the Disinherited). For those who find themselves on the underside of power, God offers a vision and hope for a life beyond Egypt, one in which all people can thrive, flourish, and die free. (*Rabbi Hilly Haber serves as the Director of Social Justice Organizing and Education at Central Synagogue in New York City.*)

### Yahrtzeits

Treasure Cohen, Rachel Rose-Siwoff, and Rebecca Lubetkin remember their father Abraham I. Levin (Avraham ben Tzvi Mordechai haCohen v'Rivkah) on Saturday December 25th (Tevet 21).

Rebecca Greene remembers her father David Schwartz on Wednesday December 29th (Tevet 25)