

***Shemot*: “Why Shifrah and Puah were not included as matriarchs”**

Dedicated to our family’s matriarch, Gloria

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The sidrah *Shemot* provides the clearest insight into the nature of the Israelite women, and the courage and strength of mind they were able to muster in the face of adversity and personal danger. Emblematic of this is the description of the two midwives, Shifra and Puah, and the unbelievable heroism they displayed in defying the command of King Pharaoh that they do away with every newborn male child (see Ex.1:15-22). In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh was regarded as a god whose edicts were not to be countermanded. For a woman to do so – and a member of the slave community to boot! – it was not just folly, but a suicidal act. Yet that was precisely what Shifra and Puah did.

If we accept the Midrashic identification of Shifra and Puah with Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses,¹ we gain some insight into the strength of character and fearless determination that defined not just the mother and daughter, but every family member. This would explain, *inter alia*, God’s choice of Moses as the leader, given the formidable tasks he would be called upon to perform, not least the crushing burden of fearlessly having to confront, threaten, and exert punitive pressure on Pharaoh to persuade him to release the Israelites, as well as having to lead, teach, and judge the rebellious and ungracious nation for some forty years ahead.

But Miriam and Moses also inherited this strength and determination from their father, Levi, whose uncompromising moral zeal was demonstrated in the violent manner with which he (and brother Shimon) responded to the rape of their sister Dinah, eliciting the sharp criticism of father, Jacob (see. Gen.34:31), as well as the tribe of Levi’s ready response to Moses’ call for volunteers to avenge, in God’s name, the apostasy of the worshippers of the Golden Calf (see Ex.32:26-28). It might be instructive then, to compare Shifra and Puah’s acts of heroism with the way Abraham and Isaac reacted – in the identical situation that confronted them, when, at different times, they happened to sojourn in the Philistine city of Gerar. Both were gripped by the fear that King

Avimelech would have designs on their beautiful wives, Sarah and Rebecca (see Gen. chs.20 and 26), and would kill them to escape his subjects' condemnation for seizing their wives.

There is a difference of opinion among our commentators as to whether both Abraham and, later, Isaac confronted the same King Avimelech mentioned in both contexts. Moses Nachmanides (1194-1270) contended that each Philistine king took the name Avimelech ('my father was king'), to reinforce his royal lineage. In support of his view, he quotes with approbation the view of *Targum Onkelos* that the Avimelech of the Isaac episode was the son of his namesake of the Abraham episode. *Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher* (1255–1340), on the other hand, saw no chronological difficulty in viewing Isaac's Avimelech as the same one who detained his mother, Sarah.

The present writer inclines rather to the view of Nachmanides. First, on account of the recurrence of the name Avimelech as king of the Philistines in the time of David (see Ps. 34:1), and, secondly, when we take into account the threat of death issued by God to Abraham's Avimelech if he didn't return Sarah immediately (20:3,7). Also, the sincerity of the contrition evinced by the king, as confirmed by God (vv. 4-6,8), which prompted Abraham to pray for him (v.17), as well as the gesture he made of a sizeable token of compensation (vv.14-16). It is highly improbable, therefore, that the same king who had been humbled in that way and suffered such divine retribution would have had the temerity to inflict the identical fear and humiliation on the son of the one who had once been the subject of such heavenly concern and protection.

Furthermore, given Abraham's traumatic experience in Philistia, it is inconceivable that he would not have warned his son of the dangers of bringing a wife to sojourn there. We may assume therefore that, at the same time, Abraham would have commended to Isaac the ruse that he had employed of posing as his wife's brother to save his life. This would also explain the apparent duplication of the biblical episodes, which, though latched upon by Bible Critics to challenge its authenticity, may purely have reflected the more than useful, life-saving lesson passed down from father to son.

So, the narrative calls for a comparison to be made between the faith and stoic actions of Shifrah, Puah, and Moses, on the one hand, and, by contrast, the weakness of character displayed by Abraham and Isaac who were prepared to compromise the honour of their wives by denying their marital relationships rather than putting their faith in God's hands to deliver them from danger. The expected attitude in those circumstances should surely have been the one enunciated by King David when he sang, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me."

One can think of no more inspirational models, especially for our young women, than those two midwives who were prepared to ignore the edict of the tyrannical Pharaoh, and whose faith and determination guaranteed the survival of our nation in its earliest stage of national development. Given the validity of the Midrashic identification of Shifra and Puah with Yocheved and Miriam, it is to be wondered why those same sages did not invest the latter with the status of matriarchs of the Jewish nation! After all, although the latter gave birth to some of the tribes of Israel, had it not been for the midwives in Egypt, the Israelites would never have evolved from a group of nomadic tribes into a nation. In the case of Miriam, her exclusion may be justified since the Torah already bestowed the accolade of prophetess on her (see Ex. 15:20), but her mother, Yocheved, received no titular recognition. Given that the Talmudic sages enumerate seven biblical prophetesses² – only three of whom are referred to by that title,³ however - they certainly had the opportunity to include Yocheved in that same illustrious company, but chose not to do so!

The rationale might have been that to endow them with either accolade would have been no more than a token of rabbinic recognition whereas their reward is spelt out in the Torah itself: 'The midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt instructed, but they kept the children alive' (Ex 1:17).

But the Torah went much further than including that honourable mention and refers to a tangible reward bestowed on them: 'Because the midwives feared God, He created houses (*battim*) for them' (v.21).

The term ‘houses’ is enigmatic in this context. It is certainly not to be interpreted literally. After all, physical houses were not much use to the women given that they certainly had their own which would also have doubled up as their maternity surgeries. If the implausible suggestion is made that these houses were, literally, ‘divine,’ in the sense of palatial or well-appointed, they would in truth have constituted an unacceptable embarrassment to them, given that their fellow Israelites were living in the most modest of slave dwellings.

So, how do we understand the word *battim*? Well, my biblical lexicon tells me that the word *bayit* occurs 59 times in the *TaNaCh* in the sense of ‘household,’ ‘family,’ and ‘descendants’. Hence the terms *Bet av*, ‘father’s house,’ in the sense of ‘a family’ or ‘clan’; *Bet ha-Levi*, ‘the tribe of Levi’; and *Bet Yisrael*, ‘the [entire] house of Israel.’

So, *bayit*, literally, ‘a house’ ‘building’ or ‘structure,’ is a synonym for ‘an ancestral line’ in biblical Hebrew. This is reinforced by a Talmudic homily on the phrase, *v’rav sh’lom banayich*, ‘great shall be the peace of your offspring’ (Is. 54:13). The Talmud states, ‘Do not read *banayich*, “your offspring,” but, rather, *bonayich*, [great shall be the peace of] “your builders.”’⁴ The implication is that children are the building blocks and backbone of the nation.

This was the symbolic gift of ‘houses’ that God gave to the midwives: The acknowledgement that, through the success of their endeavours, they would be eternally credited with having been ‘the builders’ of the Israelite nation, ensuring that the Jewish national ‘home’ would become a reality. The title ‘matriarch’ credits merely the foundation of the enterprise. The influence of the ‘prophet,’ like the age of prophecy itself, was transient and limited to a specific period of our history. The accolade, ‘builder,’ on the other hand, was an expression of gratitude that would last for eternity.

NOTES

1. See Mid. *Shemot Rabb.* 1:13; Tal. *Sota* 11a.
2. The Talmudic sages identify seven biblical prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Huldah, Abigail, and Esther. See Tal. *Megillah* 14a.
3. The three women, out of the five described in the *TaNaCh* as prophetesses, are Miriam, Deborah and Huldah.
4. Tal. *Ber.* 64a.

תיבנה ותקומם מדינתנו לבניין עדי עד

May our State be rebuilt in perpetuity and peace,
speedily in our day. Amen

שבת שלום

Rabbi Jeffrey
