

Shifrah, Puah, and Bambi

By Danny Siegel

My friends and I were raised on the likes of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, The Cisco Kid and Pancho, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Gene Autry and Pat Buttram, Batman and Robin. They were *rodefay Tzedek*, pursuers of justice in the finest sense, the first four dynamic duos gallopers after justice. Not to denigrate their heroic deeds and style, but their devoted work was of a periodic nature; they were problem solvers, in and out of situations that needed their great Mitzvah-talents.

It was only years later that we discovered a different kind of hero*, that of the midwives in Egypt, Shifrah and Puah, Theirs was day in and day out, often night after night, and under the constant threat of death from Pharaoh. According to the seventh verse of the first chapter of the Book of Exodus, the Hebrews were having babies with a vengeance. (One cannot escape the thought of the many marriages in the ghettos and, after the Shoah, in the DP camps.) While the Book of Exodus has only a few verses devoted to them, the rabbis Biblical commentators, and teachers throughout the centuries have made enormous contributions to fleshing out these two individuals and filling in many of the gaps in the story. Something very deep must have struck the scholars and students of Torah to have devoted so much imaginative efforts on these two women. I suspect that the point of departure in their thinking was the fact that we have their names, but we are never told Pharaoh's name. To name, as has been taught by man, is in some sense to possess. The Torah wanted to possess the right values, bring home the message to all who would pay attention, that Shifrah and Puah were much more important to remember and to think about in the Grand Scheme of Things than the dastardly oppressive tyrant.

The Names

It is difficult to organize all the material at hand about Shifrah and Puah, but let me begin with names:

“Shifrah” is the easiest – it means “beautiful”.

“Puah”, despite the several etymological offerings of the Midrash, apparently means “a blossom” and “a girl”. This is according to my eminent late teacher or Bible, Professor Nahum N. Sarna, *Zichrono Livracha*, who no doubt based his translation on solid linguistic research.

Professor Sarna also points out that the “Yo” in “Yocheved” is the first time in the Torah God's name is part of a human's. Scholars like to call that a “theophoric” (making God's name part of a human name), and they apply the term to all to “yo”s, “ya”s, “yahu”s, “yeho”s, and “el”s, (as in Shmuel, Yirmiyahu, Yeshayahu, Yehoshua, and Yechezkel), and the like.

Pharaoh's daughter, unnamed in Exodus, appears as “Bitiah” in the Book of First Chronicles. It means “daughter of God” and was given to her by God as a reward for having saved, cared for, and raised Moses.

“Moshe” is the name Bitiah gave to the baby, and here, again, the Midrash comments, stating that in the household of Amram and Yocheved he was given many names, but the one that “stuck” throughout the generations is the one that *she* gave him. Without her, he probably would have been just one more Hebrew boy who would have died in infancy because of Pharaoh's catastrophic decree, and then where would *we* be today?

Ancient Jewish texts even turn around the names of Moses' siblings because of the wretched times of the Jewish people in slavery. “Miriam”, and oldest, they took from the root “mar”, meaning “bitterness”. And “Aaron”, the Middle child – “Aharon” in Hebrew, they split to “Ah Haron” — “woe for this pregnancy”.

**The issue of proper non-sexist terminology (“hero” or “heroine”), is yet to be thoroughly resolved. “Aviatrix” is no longer acceptable, as is “stewardess” (replaced by “flight attendant”), but “actor” for male or female is commonly accepted in journalistic circles.*

And, finally, we do not know the name of the midwife who actually assisted in the birth of Moses. We do not know if it was a difficult or “tricky” birth, how long the labor was, whether or not he was turned the wrong way in the birth canal, was jaundiced or had trouble breathing when he emerged from Yocheved’s womb. Surely there is also much to be learned from this absence-of-fact.

Shifrah’s and Puah’s Labors

Professor Sarna points out that it would seem impossible to be midwives to the thousands of women giving birth. Perhaps they were supervisors of groups or guilds of midwives. If that is indeed the case, I picture two details:

First, besides all the administrative and supervisory and training work, they still delivered babies. One can easily, call to mind many great classroom teachers who got promoted to heads or chiefs of departments, principals, and heads of school, and yet insisted on teaching some of the time. Their essential calling was *teaching*. So, too, surgeons or cardiologists or allergists who become Chief of their department at a hospital — they all want to *practice* medicine and make a point of being on the wards, making rounds, handling the clamps and sponges inside someone’s body or prescribing just the right amount of medication for asthma.

And, second, As word got around, I picture Shifrah and Puah being such inspiring individuals, young women flocked to them to be trained. Either they were looking around for a career, much like many of our recent college graduates, or were already in a career, but it just wasn’t enough, it did not have any depth to it. We see this nowadays with the many second-and-third-career rabbinical and Jewish education students. Two juicy quotes are relevant: Maurice Sendak’s, “There must be more to life than having everything”, and Churchill’s “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give”. For couch potatoes, we live in a TV world inundated with advertisements for private colleges, which would provide an opportunity for those seekers interested to make something of themselves other than what they presently are. In between the many clever and sometimes strident advertisements for car insurance, drugs for cold sores, depression, and arthritis. Unless you fast forward with your DVR, pay attention to the colleges. Some of the ads are actually very moving, and we can readily understand that, for these women in Egypt, delivering babies, bringing life into Life would most certainly fulfill their wishes — even at the risk of their lives.

So the gifted teachers Shifrah and Puah taught them all the necessary techniques, managing breach babies, how to untangle a convoluted umbilical cord calmly and ever-so-swiftly in those few critical seconds, how to get a baby breathing and breathing evenly, perhaps using some ancient form of artificial respiration. And I suppose they even gave a “pep talk” now and again, like a football coach at half time, about how many hard hours they have ahead of them, how tired beyond exhaustion they will be on some days, and how the bone-weariness will never overpower, negate, or sour them on their sacred work.

Bambi

Rachel Bamberger Chalkovsky — universally known as “Bambi” has been the chief midwife at Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem for many years. When I first met her in the 1980’s or 1990’s, I was told that she had delivered 30,000 babies. Having done additional research on the modern cyber-tool/crutch — Google — an entry from 2001 records that the number had reached 40,000! In her presence, I can only describe the feeling as being in awe of this human being.

She had an accent in Hebrew and more clearly in English, and I learned she was born in France during World War II, her father died in Auschwitz, and she, a child, hid with her mother in the forest, eventually coming to Israel.

The Midrash teaches that after Shifrah and Puah helped deliver the babies, when they saw which families were struggling to make ends meet, she would go to more financially stable Hebrews and collect Tzedakah to pass on to them, to make them comfortable and to insure the baby’s good health. Bambi did the same. She established a Tzedakah fund, Matan B’Seter (“giving secretly”), which grew to a vast network in many countries for the same purpose. There

is no overhead — 100% of the money raised by groups in Israel, England, and other communities is used directly for the needs of the families. Raised in a grassroots manner, sometimes there is \$1,000,000 a year at her disposal.

Loose Ends

1. The Hebrew phrase *meyaldot ivriot* describing Shifrah and Puah is ambiguous. It can either mean “Hebrew midwives” or “midwives to the Hebrews”. Different commentators throughout the ages have taken sides. Supporting the latter opinion is the reasoning that Pharaoh wanted to guarantee that his murderous plan would be carried out by employing his own Syptian midwives. But Professor Sarna points out that these are Semitic names, not Egyptian, and that they no doubt were members of the oppressed people. Which makes #2 that more striking.

2. When Pharaoh speaks to them face-to-face and wants to know why his program of destruction is not succeeding and that Shifrah and Puah are letting the male newborns live, they reply that Hebrew women aren’t like Egyptian woman, they are “*Chayot*”. Even face to face with the all-powerful ruler of Egypt, they didn’t flinch,. The text does not show any hesitation on their part. The Jewish Publication Society translation is that they are “vigorous”, and they are met with a *fait accompli* when they arrive. Bur the Midrash somewhat fancifully takes *chayot* in it’s original meaning “animals”. This refers to Genesis Chapter 49 where Jacob gives his parting words to his sons, many compared to animals: “Aryeh=lion” (thus, many Leos, Leons, and Leonards), “Ayala” which is synonymous with “Tzvi-deer” (Yiddish “Hirsch,” “Hersch”, “Herschel”, and “Ze’ev-Wolf” (think Wolf Blitzer). My grandfather, William, was called “Velvel-Little Wolf” (a diminutive and term of endearment) by my grandmother.

3. There are those who give a political twist to Pharaoh’s decree. They contend that he was afraid that if his Canaanite neighbors to the northeast were to attack, the Hebrews would join them and bring about his defeat and the destruction of his kingdom. This calls to mind the Korean War. When the United Nations forces were fighting the North Koreans, there was some hope of victory, but when the Chinese had hundreds of thousands of their troops cross the 38th Parallel, the entire nature of the war changed radically.

4. The Midrash contends that Egyptian men were lascivious. (Perhaps this is reflection of the Rabbinic view of the surrounding Greek culture in their time.) Killing the men would leave all the Hebrew women available for the Egyptian men to have their way with them. How these “mixed marriages” would turn out, I leave to the socio-historians and Hebreo-Egypto-statisticians who periodically issue their thought-provoking findings.

5. I would think that Shifrah and Puah were perhaps the only Hebrews (besides Moses) who were not astonished or awed by the splitting of the sea, the manna and the quail, even the revelation at Sinai, They were, as the Talmudic phrase has it, *Melumadot BeNissim*, used to extraordinary, even miraculous happenings. They witnessed God’s awesome handiwork every day, every time they helped a newborn emerge into this world.

How Jewish Tradition Lives On Into the 21st Century

Jewish midwife associations nowadays are called “Shifrah and Puah Societies” or some variation thereof. While there are yet Pharaohs with all-too-familiar names in our world (it often appears that there are new ones in every generation), the message is that as long as there are the likes of students of these two extraordinary heroic women, there is ultimate hope for the future