

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

Serach Bat Asher The Grande Dame of The Exodus By Danny Siegel

Attention Deficit Disorder Strikes Again

In many ways, my A.D.D is like the Beatles’ song “The Long and Winding Road.

Getting to where I wanted to be in this piece of writing was circuitous, time consuming, heavily-laden with books from the shelf to the table by my easy chair. It usually begins in the middle of the night, 1:00 or 2:00 or 3:00 a.m., when I frequently wake up.

Before these long nights, though, it started in synagogue when, talking to a friend. I was trying to figure out who were Amram's and Yocheved's oldest, middle, and youngest children. After some discussion, we concluded: Miriam, Aaron, and Moshe ("the baby").

Then, back home, my mind wandered, as it all-too-often does, to Serach Bat Asher, whom I had researched a few years ago.

She is very popular with Jewish feminists, has been written about too many times to count — even with a doctoral dissertation about her for a candidate at Hebrew University.

Before I began looking at the sources — having glanced at one which referred me to so many others, my mind was swimming, actually drowning. Since I am not a scholar, and Do not have what is colloquially called *zitzfleish*, the kind of fat on my rear-end to let me sit continuously for hours on end, I conducted the research at different times. Besides, I have always felt — at least for myself — too much study and mental activity often interferes with my creativity.

Some things we ought to know about her are: She is barely mentioned in the Bible — only 4 times — and there only as a daughter of Asher, and sister of many nearly-unpronounceably-named siblings. For centuries our sages were so taken with her she is described as sister, daughter, stepdaughter (raised by Jacob), mother, harp player, beautiful (aren't all the Biblical heroines except for Leah stunning?), with a tradition from who-knows when that she is buried in a village 30 kilometers southeast of the Iranian city of Isfahan.

What clearly struck our teachers was the fact that among all of Jacob's descendants, more than 50 males are mentioned, and she is the only female. It's the Midrashic principle of "this sticks out like a sore thumb", otherwise known as, "this demands free imaginative Midrash, even occasional fantasy (but with a didactic purpose)".

Oh, and Serach was the oldest woman in the Bible. She lived more than 215 years by the least far-fetched stories. *And*, and this is what attracted me to her the most: She was one of nine personages who entered Paradise alive, not having gone through human death and living forever in the Garden of Eden, alongside Pharaoh's daughter, savior of Moses, and no less a Giant than Elijah!

Picturing Serach

Serach came with the original clan of Children of Israel to Egypt. And she left with the Hebrew masses on the night of the Exodus. I picture her as a five or six year old, either travelling with her father Asher, or according to some texts, her adoptive father, grandfather Jacob.

What is difficult to picture is this: by such an early age, with eleven uncles and their wives and who-knows-how-many first and second and third cousins, how busy was her mind, and was it overloaded with experiences of life? (In my own family, I remember trying to recall which Sophie was married to which Uncle Harry or Max, and there was the confusion about my Russian born, Spanish-speaking Uncle Mike, which made sense once I knew that America's doors weren't always open to Jews, (and Cuba was Uncle Mike's escape route.) I know the author Thomas Mann wrote a book *Joseph and His Brother*, which has been on the shelf for at least three decades. But it has more than 1200 pages long, surely a killer of AD-me. I've just never tried.

Among the pictures of Serach that I have in my mind of Serach is this Grand Old Lady sitting around in the evening, any evening, but particularly the night of the Exodus, with a multitude of offspring and offspring's offspring, many great-greats. What tales she had to tell!: The trek from the Land of Israel, how she survived all these years of hard labor, and the assurances that, indeed, the people will leave slavery for freedom imminently! How many were there in that room with Serach? My friend Arnie Draiman once took me to the grave of his uncle or great uncle which stated in engraved letters on the headstone that he left more than 400 living descendants.

How old? I recently was taken to the grave of my mother's father's father's mother and father. Avraham Silberblatt died in 1918, at age 70. Which takes me back to 1848. Ruchel, his wife died in 1922, age 70 — 1852. Avraham's father's name is Eliezer about whom we know nothing, other than he must have been born in the 1820's — not quite 200 years ago. We found a picture of Avraham years ago, with Ruchel, his son, daughter-in-law, and five grandchildren. (Grandpa Sam appears to about 17 or 18 in the picture. What is strange is that for a deaf-mute tailor, Avraham is dressed formally, as are all of them for the portrait — even wearing a top hat!) But we have no picture of *his* father, Eliezer, and to compare to Serach, I would need not only a photograph or drawing, but also to have known him personally and to have heard his stories of poverty and pogroms and the lousy life of the Jews in Russia. What a marvelous scene it must have been with Serach, all the descendants gathered around this matriarch with tales upon wondrous stories from what, by all accounts, was a woman with a prodigious memory, in complete control of her faculties.

Let us return to the harp playing for a moment. When the brothers return from Egypt to tell Jacob that Joseph is alive, they were afraid that Jacob's anger would be overwhelming. *So* they chose Serach to play for him, and to sing to him gently, Soothingly, which she did, interweaving the news about Joseph in the song. It worked, Jacob was accepting, calmly, ready to join Joseph in Egypt. He offered a blessing for Serach that, since hers was a message of life, that she should be blessed to live forever. And that is how it came to be that she was one of the nine mortals who made it to Paradise without dying a human death.

The Night of the Exodus

Now, to the reason I wrote this article — going 1-2-3 in no order of importance will make it easier:

1. The Children of Israel could not leave Egypt unless they found Joseph's bones. They had promised him that when they were to go free they would take his bones with them to the Promised Land.

2. Who could have possibly known where they were? Many sources record that they sunk his body in an iron coffin into the Nile. The reason: either they didn't want Egyptians to worship him, or because by contact with his (even-lifeless) presence, the waters of the Nile would be blessed since he was such a righteous person.

3. There were actually three people still alive who came with the original class from the Land of Israel, but the other two were disqualified for serious infractions of God's word. That left only one: Serach!

Now here is my final picture: Did Serach go to Moses or Moses come the Old Woman, just one of hundreds of thousands of Jews? Is this about The Great Humble One seeking out the nobody-body-so-special, just an Old Woman>

There are two versions:

1. Moses, knowing that the Exodus is imminent, runs around frantically for three days and nights looking for the body of Joseph. Finally he gets the insight to ask Serach who would have seen the funeral and burial, a grand affair to be sure.

2. Serach was informed that the Exodus was imminent, so she went to Moses to tell him where to find Joseph's bones.

A few curious questions arise:

1. Why did it take so long for Moses to decide to go to Serach?
2. Was he so preoccupied with the logistics of the entire operation of taking them out of slavery to freedom that he could not think clearly?

3. Did Serach live at the far end of the homes of the Hebrews, and he, 80 years old, found it too burdensome to go there? (This is the least likely one since the closing verses of the Chumash tell us that when he died at 120, he was still in full vigor.)

4. Did Serach hesitate at first, thinking, "Who am I, just some Old Woman, to play such a part in the history of the Jewish people? Who am I to go to the Great Moses to tell him that I know what he doesn't know? Is that not a kind of arrogance?"

I personally like both pictures: Moses, desperately wanting to fulfill God's instructions, and humble enough to seek out this old woman? Perhaps his delay was that he didn't really know about her and her longevity until, like on an episode of *Law and Order*, someone gives him the right tip. I really rather doubt that he did now who she was and where she lived. *Everyone* must have known about Serach. Moses, I think, just had to focus. (I am *not* implying he had A.D.D., which is why he was running hither and yon, up and down for three days and three nights.) He was just too intensely wrapped up in God's Word and the task at hand.

And as for Serach. Well, longevity in and of itself is something nice, but not especially sublime. It is clear to me that she somehow knew that *this* is why she lived to be 215 or 216, not just to buy Channukah and birthday presents for her great-to-the 12th-power grandchildren nor to take her place of honor at their Bnai and Bnot Mitzvah and brisses and weddings and baby namings, Pidyon HaBens. This hero of ours, without whom we wouldn't be here today as Jews, grasped the full cosmic meaning of her place in this incredible moment, no less than Moses. I think she strode rather vigorously – without cane or walker – to Moses' home and with great self-assurance said to him, "Follow me. I know where Joseph is buried. Come, and then we can all be free."

Centuries Later

Mordechai Tells Esther that the Jews are in grave danger and that it is up to her to approach Achashuerosh to intercede and save them. He says to her (Esther 4:14), "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." *This* is your moment of meaning, just as with Serach the Old Woman of Old. I have no doubts that Serach did all kinds of Mitzvahs all her life, but this was The One.

And later still, the Rabbis of the Talmud taught in a beautifully-articulated line (Avodah Zarah 10b), "There are those who gain eternity in a single moment."

The meaning for us, we everyday Jews? I believe that perhaps it is time to review our past lives and at the same time look into the future to see if there might not have been or might yet be such cosmic moments.

One Final Scene

Most of us are fixated on Cecil B. DeMille's melodrama of *The Ten Commandments*. Who doesn't call to mind the wildly enthusiastic chattering human masses, the bleating goats and lowing cattle included, the noise, the imagined smells of us leaving Egypt? There isn't a person I know that doesn't know that Edward G. Robinson played one of the Bad Guys. And yet, and yet, something I think is missing from the scene: In the front of the line should be Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, of course. But right there, in Row #1 should be a white-haired woman with wondrously dignified bearing – one might imagine looking quite elegant – leading them, no less than Moses, to freedom. And long, long into the future, to her Life Eternal.

Pharaoh's Daughter

By Danny Siegel

Imagine: After a few verses in the Book of Exodus and Pharaoh's daughter – nameless in the narrative – disappears from the Biblical story. Just compare it to the 14 chapters devoted to Joseph, more than one-fourth of the entire Book of Genesis.

And yet, by the time Jewish tradition has finished (and is still finishing) her story, she has a name, a Hebrew one (Bityah, daughter of God (alternatively: Beloved One of God), was the only firstborn to survive the 10th plague, and one of the fortunate nine mortals to have entered Paradise alive, in such glorious company as the likes of Elijah. The Midrash even adds that Moses had many names, but the one he is forever known as is the one given him by his rescuer – Pharaoh's daughter.

So much is missing in Exodus, so many gaps, unexplained details. Naturally, the Midrash of hundreds of years' duration, will add, embellish, create "facts" as well as miracles to teach us how this brave young woman saved Baby Moses, and as a result, here we are today, three thousand or more years later, Jews in Seattle, Jacksonville, Mississippi, London, even Katmandu, Bangkok, and Singapore.

The very first thing we have to establish is that we would never be here if this were the story of Pharaoh's son. Though most certainly we may assume that Pharaoh's wife or wives gave birth to many children, I picture her as the only daughter. Not that Pharaoh didn't want sons; he had to have a male successor. But it may very well be that after two, several, many sons, he finally was given a daughter.

I see her as sitting on this all-powerful ruler's knees as a young child, playing, making childish prattle, making this one-of-many-gods of all Egypt smile, laugh, do silly things. Fine her a pet co snuggle with at night, possibly getting down on the floor of the palace to play card kid card games or jacks with her.

I see her as the dear one, the favored one, an early model of Daddy's Little Girl who wrapped him around her little finger. How else explain him tolerating having a Hebrew child grow up in his palace (some say for 20 years, others for 40). And to tolerate for the two or three years he was breastfed, a wet nurse who spoke Egyptian with a Hebrew accent and who most definitely *looked* like a Hebrew. It may be that Yocheved was kept on as a kind of governess. How else to explain that the Prince of Egypt knew that the slaves were his brothers and sisters. But even if her terms of employment were only those two or three years, how much could she have taught him about what it is to be a Hebrew whose single and singular God revered Life and rejected the worship of death and the dead? There was no Shema yet to recite with the infant before he went to sleep. What possibly could his birth mother transmit to him in that brief span of his life to so intimately identify with the Hebrews, despite being immersed in the grandeur and trappings of Egyptian royalty. When he was 19, did he remember something from infancy much as 50 years later some people can still recite all the words to the Rock and Roll songs "Wake Up Little Susie", "Heartbreak Hotel", and "It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To". Recalling the TV show "Name That Tune", the contestants had to give the name of the song after hearing only the first one or two notes. Yocheved must have dug deep down into the Hebrew consciousness to make such powerful memories. There are still so many unknowns about the human mind, as is discovered in our day, for example, how people with Alzheimer's disease who cannot remember their own name still connect to reality through music, through the presence and contact dogs and cats and baby dolls.

Especially if we accept the theory that she was kept on as an *au pair* and did not totally give up Moshe to Pharaoh's daughter when he was only two years old, she had innumerable opportunities to implant in his Hebrew soul that that's who he *really* was, a Hebrew. The text itself says that when the child grew up, Yocheved brought him to pharaoh's daughter, apparently implying that for several years he actually lived at home with his natural parents. But what did "grew up" mean in that ancient society? Age 12? 10? Think of young children the sweatshops of England not so long ago. And think of our beloved bar and bat mitzvah drop-outs, then living as Jewish adults living with a religious school education. Engulfed in the enormous pull of the world of the Egyptian palace, how well could he hold on to her teachings?

But then, even if after that Yocheved was kept on as a nanny, there were few intimate moments comparable to that of when she nursed him. Egyptians were everywhere, listening, watching. And if we accept the Midrash's statement that he was breathtakingly gorgeous and everyone wanted to be around him, it would still be difficult for Yocheved.

These are just some of the scenarios, and after reviewing them, a Torah student wonders why there is virtually nothing in the text about these crucial years of his life.

There are more unexplained details, most of which the commentators and geniuses of Midrash "solve";

Why did Pharaoh's daughter go down to the Nile to bathe? Were there not the most elaborate places to bathe in the palace? (Think of mansions of the Rich and Famous with their 14 marble and gold bathrooms.) Furthermore, can there be any doubt that the Nile swarmed with

crocodiles and various other deadly-to-humans creatures? (Commentators: It was really a small lagoon off the Nile, clear and placid.)

Two reasons are given for her bathing in this lagoon: (1) She had been sorely afflicted with a wretched disease (some say leprosy), and she believed that washing in the waters would cure her, and (2) she was so revolted by the pagan ways of her father and his murderous campaign against the Hebrews, she wanted to cleanse herself of these detestable things. How she kept the second reason from her father is also missing from the text. Sketchiness seems to be the rule in this heroic tale.

And how was it that Moses' family knew where Pharaoh's daughter would be bathing? Did they live so near to the palace (it seems unlikely) that they observed her comings and goings, and, even if they did, how did they know that on this specific day she would appear at this particular spot. This one remains beyond me.

And while there, she sees a basket with a baby among the reedgrass. Actually, she *heard* the baby before she saw him, because he was crying. My teacher, the distinguished late Professor Nahum N. Sarna pointed out in his commentary to *Exodus* that this is the only situation in the entire Bible when a baby cries. All other references are to adults. This must have been noticed by the Rabbis who knew the entire Bible thoroughly, and they necessarily expanded on this curious fact.

Moshe was three months old, too young to sense that his sister was hidden at a distance to see what would become of him. Up to this point in the text, Pharaoh's daughter had no idea what was his ethnic background, since the basket was first spotted at a distance. In fact, by a slight change of the vowels in the text, the Midrash states that it was 60 cubits (about 90 feet) away, but when she stretched out her to arm to bring it closed, her arm miraculously extended! Foremost in her mind should have been first to search for the baby's family. It could as well have been a child of poor Egyptians who could not afford to sustain her, and once having found the family, she could have used her royal resources to support the family.

But when the basket was near enough for her to *see* the child, she recognized that it was a Hebrew baby. The Midrash says he was surrounded by a certain aura, so she knew there was something very special about the child. But the fact that he was circumcised meant he was a Hebrew. My teacher and friend, Professor Jeffrey Tigay, sent me material that indicates according to Egyptologists, Egyptians were also circumcised, but probably only between the ages of six and 12.

And yet, and yet, knowing she was defying her father at the risk of her own and the baby's lives — there are numerous examples of tyrants throughout history murdering their own family members — she takes him in, along with Yocheved, the Hebrew nurse, because she had compassion for him. This seems to be the meaning of Exodus and is reinforced in the Midrash. For God's sake, *it was an abandoned baby!* She couldn't just leave him there to die of exposure.

Returning to a point mentioned above, Was she herself married? Did she have children of her own? I picture her age 17 or 18, though I have no sense if she was married by then and barren, or for some reason still single, and simple human compassion overwhelmed her. There is a Midrash that says she was Pharaoh's only child and was at that point in her life, childless, and even later on, when she converted an married (some say to Caleb, one of the 12 scouts Moses sent into the land), she had three natural children of her own. On the other hand, those who favor the idea that she was not married is also understandable. I think nowadays of some man who might happen to be attracted to the daughter of a *Mafioso*. Who needs the Sunday dinners with the *don* and his thugs, thieves, enforcers, the chit-chat at parties with kneecap breakers, extortionists, and murderers? Better to just sigh and drop it. This princess was not like Disney's Belle or Aurora; she comes with psychological and existential baggage too weighty and massive to comprehend.

She did it, even though the Midrash tells us, that many of her servants had warned of her of the extreme danger of what she was about to do. Still, she did it, and where this courage comes from in the human soul is something thought about, written about, played out on the stage and in movies, and still remains ultimately a mystery. One explanation of her personal courage is mentioned in the *Etz Chaim* commentary, namely, that up until this time her father's

oppressive decrees were an abstraction in her mind, but when she saw this one very real baby, she grasped the full horrible enormity of what her father was doing.

And still another question, why did Amram and Yocheved keep him in their home for three months when clearly any moment of discovery surely meant death to the baby and the family? As mentioned above, the Midrash goes into wild lyricism about how the baby was so gorgeous. Perhaps Moshe's parents were so powerfully emotionally attached to him (I suspect whether or not he was beautiful), they held on to him as long as they could before taking the drastic step of leaving him in a basket in the Nile for someone, somehow to rescue him. They simply could not part with him. We know from the media about abandoned babies. Los Angeles even has a no penalty law. Leaving a baby at a hospital, and I think at a police station or house of worship, incurs no legal punishment for the parent(s).

From the moment I began to be taken with thinking about Pharaoh's daughter two things were on my mind: The first, obviously, is the voice of Elie Wiesel. And the other is all the Righteous among the Nations, that Yad Vashem has recognized and honored over the years. There are the famous ones, Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Schindler, the lesser-knowns such as Princess Alice, mother-in-law of Queen Elizabeth, the good people of Le Chambon, France, who saved their Jews, and the hundreds whose names we wouldn't know unless we devoted our efforts to do research about them. In 1948, at the time of Israel's founding, there were approximately 130 of them who came to live there. Today there are only 14 remaining and an additional five widowers.

Such is the ancient story of Pharaoh's daughter, and her (eternal) life's story is worthy of telling and re-telling down to the very greatest imaginative detail we can discover. Translating the Yiddish phrase, "It's good for the Jews", and, indeed, for all humanity.

Pikuach Nefesh – Saving Lives BIG TIME
(As Told Humbly to Danny Siegel
by Elisheva, The Hero of Our Story)

Let me tell you about my family. There's my Abba, Aminadav, who must be somebody important because we keep getting invited to come over to Miriam's and Aaron's. My Eema is Ruthie, a very gentle and kind woman, though most people don't know it because she does her good things so quietly. And then there are the four kids: Nachshon, who's six years old than I, and in between, Yirmiyahu ("Yir" for short), Batsheva ("Shev"), and then me, Elisheva (or just plain "Eli").

Since I am supposed to tell you The Story of Myself, you should know this is really about me and my big brother Nachshon. Ever since I can remember he always took care of me and watched out for me. These were hard times in Egypt for us Jews, but even though we had so hard a life, kids would still be kids, and sometimes others would make fun of me...for no real reason that I can think of. I don't think I am particularly cute – and certainly not adorable – but I'm not so funny looking that other kids should be calling me names like "geek" or "nerd" or "doofus". Still, whenever they would do this, and if Big Brother Nachshon was around, he would always step in and get the others to back off.

And even though Abba and Eema were supposed to tell me stories of sing to me at night to help me go to sleep, as long as I can remember, Nachshon took over and would tell me the most fantastic, wonderful tales and sometimes sing (even though his voice was a little raspy, and sometimes he was off key) fun songs and funny songs and lullaby kinds of songs which helped me drop off into *very* sweet dreams.

He's 14 now, and I am eight. For a year now, he has had to go out like all the adults and slave away because of Pharaoh's horrible laws. And still, even with all that and coming home

exhausted, he would come home and play with me. Since he spent the day making bricks from the clay and straw, lately he has made little ones for me so I could build anything I wanted.* He would play with me for hours, no matter how exhausted he was. Who could wish for a better big brother than Nachshon? Now, you should know that you wouldn't particularly pick Nachshon out of a crowd. He's growing tall, and even though he has gorgeous blue eyes and thick dark black hair, he's not so special to look at. But he is *so* special to me. Even so young, he's really a Mensch.

As I said, life was difficult because of the horrible Pharaoh. That's how my early childhood was lived, until things began to suddenly change. Miriam's and Aaron's brother showed up all of a sudden one day after running away for a few years. (He had a price on his head. The Egyptians were after him and wanted to throw him in prison, or, worse, kill him.) But here he was now, out of the blue, telling Pharaoh that God wanted him to let us go and be free of his slavery. All kinds of crazy things happened once he started to give God's message to Pharaoh: the Nile turned blood-red, frogs by the millions began running around everywhere the Egyptians were (but not in our homes), storms, hail, darkness for days (though not in our homes), scary things, 10 of them in all.

Finally, Pharaoh had had enough and Moses told us to get ready – that we were going to finally leave Egypt.

We could hardly believe it. After so many years as slaves, we were going to be free, and one night, after a strange meal of lamb and some *very* sharp vegetable that stung your mouth, we got up and left.

Just like that.

Thousands and thousands of us.

Out into the desert.

We walked and walked (at first we ran because we didn't really believe the Egyptians were going to let us go "just like that", but when we got a long way over the border, we slowed down. Still, I got very tired, and, you guessed it! Nachshon picked me up and carried me for miles and miles...until we got to this *big* body of water with no bridges or ferries or nothing like that. And worse: Pharaoh and his Egyptians finally woke up to the fact that we were gone, and they were sorry he let us go. So right behind us and gaining on us was this huge army of screaming soldiers and neighing and snorting horses and incredibly noisy chariots. It was terrifying.

They were behind us, and in front of us was this water – I mean it was *right* in front of us, because Nachshon had carried me to the very front of all those crowds of people, only putting me down when he got to the water's edge.

It was scary, *very* scary.

I figured that, maybe if somebody went into the water, it really would open up a nice dry pathway for us all to escape, just like God told Moses would happen. So I did the only thing *I* knew how to do. I just looked up to Nachshon and said, "You can do it." And not five seconds later, he jumped in, and, miracle of miracles! the water parted and everyone got through safely to the other side, but the Egyptians were trapped when the sea went back to normal and covered them up.

And, since you wanted to know about me, years later, when I grew up, I married Aaron. As I said, because my Abba was such an important man, we continued to visit with Miriam and Aaron, and later with Moses, and I guess Aaron began to notice me more because he had heard about what I said to Nachshon.

That's me, little Elisheva, wife of Aaron, daughter of Aminadav and Ruthie, and most of all, kid sister of Nachshon.

*A historical note: This is the true origin of Legos.