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# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

## EXODUS: THE BOOK OF REDEMPTION

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# Contents

# Shemot
# שמות

With *Shemot*, the defining drama of the Jewish people begins. In exile, in Egypt, they multiply, until they are no longer a family but a nation. Pharaoh, fearing that they pose a threat to Egypt, enslaves them and orders their male children killed. Moses, an Israelite child adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, is chosen by God to confront Pharaoh and lead the people to freedom. Reluctantly, Moses agrees, but his initial intervention only makes things worse, and on this tense note the *parasha* ends.

The four studies that follow focus on the nature of moral courage at a time of crisis. The first is about the midwives, Shifra and Puah, who disobey Pharaoh's decree. The second is about Pharaoh's daughter, who brings Moses up as her own child. The third is about Moses' hesitations in accepting the role of leader. Which of his doubts were legitimate and which not? The fourth offers a radical interpretation of why Moses was "afraid to look at God." On the surface, *Shemot* is about freedom, slavery and the fate of nations, but it is also about the power of individuals, driven by justice or compassion, to defy tyrants and change the course of history.

# *Civil Disobedience*

The opening chapter of Exodus contains an episode that properly deserves a place of honour in the history of morality. Pharaoh has decided on a plan of slow genocide. He tells the midwives, Shifra and Puah, "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live" (Exodus 1:16). We then read the following:

> The midwives feared God and did not do what the Egyptian king had commanded. They allowed the infant boys to live. The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why did you do this? You let the boys live." The midwives replied, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptians. They know how to deliver. They can give birth even before a midwife gets to them." God was good to the midwives, and the people increased and became very numerous. Because the midwives feared God, He made them houses [of their own]. (1:17–21)

Who were Shifra and Puah? Midrashic tradition identifies them as Yocheved and Miriam. However, in describing them the Torah uses

an ambiguous phrase, *hameyaldot ha'ivriyot*, which could mean either "the Hebrew midwives" or "the midwives to the Hebrews." If we follow the second interpretation, they may not have been Hebrews at all, but Egyptians. This is the view taken by Abrabanel and Samuel David Luzzatto. Luzzatto's reasoning is simple: Could Pharaoh realistically have expected Hebrew women to murder their own people's children?

The Torah's ambiguity on this point is deliberate. We do not know to which people Shifra and Puah belonged because their particular form of moral courage transcends nationality and race. In essence, they were being asked to commit a "crime against humanity," and they refused to do so. Theirs is a story that deserves to be set in its full historical perspective.

One of the landmarks of modern international law was the judgement against Nazi war criminals in the Nuremberg trials of 1946. This established that there are certain crimes in relation to which the claim that "I was obeying orders" is no defence. There are moral laws higher than those of the state. "Crimes against humanity" remain crimes, whatever the law of the land or the orders of a government.[1] There are instructions one is morally bound to disobey; times when civil disobedience is the necessary response. This principle, attributed to the American writer Henry David Thoreau in 1848, inspired many of those who fought for the abolition of slavery in the United States, as well as the late Martin Luther King in his struggle for black civil rights in the 1960s.[2] At stake in the principle of civil disobedience is a theory of the moral limits of the state.

Until modern times, rulers had absolute authority, tempered only by the concessions they had to make to other powerful groups. It was not until the seventeenth century that figures like John Locke began to develop theories of liberty, social contract and human rights. Most religious thought until then was dedicated to justifying existing structures of power. That was the function of myth, and later the concept of

1. The principle was set out in advance, in the London Charter of the International Military Tribunal (usually referred to as the Nuremberg Charter) on August 8, 1945.
2. On civil disobedience, see Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Signet Classics, 1980); Hugo Bedau, *Civil Disobedience: Theory and Practice,* (Indianapolis: Pegasus, 1969); Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 206–222.

the "divine right of kings."[3] In such societies, the idea that there might be moral limits to power was unthinkable. To challenge the king was to defy reality itself.

Biblical monotheism was a revolution thousands of years ahead of its time. The exodus was more than the liberation of slaves. It was a redrawing of the moral landscape. If the image of God is to be found, not only in kings but in the human person as such, then all power that dehumanizes is ipso facto an abuse of power. Slavery, seen by almost all ancient thinkers as part of the natural order, is for the first time called into question. To be sure, the Torah permits it – it was not banned in Britain and America until the nineteenth century, and even then not without (in America) a civil war – but, by restricting it in many ways (Shabbat, release after seven years, and so on), it prepared the way for its eventual abolition.[4]

When God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, "My son, My firstborn, Israel" (4:22), He is announcing to the most powerful ruler of the ancient world that these people may be your slaves but they are My children. The story of the exodus is as much political as theological. Theologically, the plagues showed that the Creator of nature is supreme over the forces of nature. Politically it declared that over every human power stands the sovereignty of God, defender and guarantor of the rights of humankind.

In such a worldview, the idea of civil disobedience is not unthinkable but self-evident. The very notion of authority is defined by the transcendence of right over might, morality over power. In one of the world-changing moments of history, social criticism was born in Israel simultaneously with institutionalization of power. No sooner were there kings in Israel, than there were prophets mandated by God to criticize them when they abused their power. As the Talmud puts it: "If there

3. A political and religious doctrine developed in the Middle Ages that asserted that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority, deriving his right to rule directly from the will of God. The king was thus not subject to the will of his people, the aristocracy, or any other estate of the realm, including the church. The doctrine implies that any attempt to depose the king or to restrict his powers runs contrary to the will of God and may constitute heresy.
4. See essay "Time and Social Transformation," p. 97, for an examination of why slavery was not banned totally by the Torah.

is a conflict between the words of the master and the words of the disciple, whose words should one obey?"[5] No human order overrides the commands of God.

How moving it is, therefore, that the first recorded instance of civil disobedience – predating Thoreau by more than three millennia – is the story of Shifra and Puah, two ordinary women defying Pharaoh in the name of simple humanity. All we know about them is that they "feared God and did not do what the Egyptian king had commanded." In those words, a precedent was set that eventually became the basis of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Shifra and Puah, by refusing to obey an immoral order, redefined the moral imagination of the world.

A final note is in place. Though Greek literature does not know of the concept of civil disobedience, it does contain one famous case where an individual defies the king – Sophocles' Antigone, who buries her brother in defiance of King Creon's order that he stay unburied as a traitor. The contrast between Sophocles and the Bible is fascinating. *Antigone* is a tragedy: the eponymous heroine pays for her defiance with her life. The story of Shifra and Puah is not a tragedy. It ends with a curious phrase: God "made them houses."

What does this mean? The Italian commentator Samuel David Luzzatto offered an insightful interpretation. Sometimes women become midwives when they are unable to have children of their own. That, he suggests, was the case with Shifra and Puah. Because they saved children's lives, God rewarded them – measure for measure – with children of their own ("houses" = families). In Judaism the moral life is not inescapably tragic, because neither the universe nor fate is blind. "In reward for the righteous women of that generation, our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt." Shifra and Puah were two of those women, heroines of the spirit, giants in the story of humankind.

5. *Kiddushin* 42b.

# *The Light at the Heart of Darkness*

She is one of the most unexpected heroes of the Hebrew Bible. Without her, Moses might not have lived. The whole story of the exodus would have been different. Yet she was not an Israelite. She had nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by her courage. Yet she seems to have had no doubt, experienced no misgivings, made no hesitation. If it was Pharaoh who afflicted the children of Israel, it was another member of his own family who saved the decisive vestige of hope: Pharaoh's daughter.

Recall the context. Pharaoh had decreed death for every male Israelite child. Yocheved, Amram's wife, had a baby boy. For three months she was able to conceal his existence, but no longer. Fearing his certain death if she kept him, she set him afloat on the Nile in a basket, hoping against hope that someone might see him and take pity on him. This is what follows:

Pharaoh's daughter went to bathe in the Nile, while her maids walked along the Nile's edge. She saw the box in the reeds and sent her slave-girl to fetch it. Opening it, she saw the boy. The child began to cry, and she had pity on it. "This is one of the Hebrew boys," she said (2:6).

Note the sequence. First she sees that it is a child and has pity on it. A natural, human, compassionate reaction. Only then does it dawn

on her who the child must be. Who else would abandon a child? She remembers her father's decree against the Hebrews. Instantly the situation has changed. To save the baby would mean disobeying the royal command. That would be serious enough for an ordinary Egyptian; doubly so for a member of the royal family.[1]

Nor is she alone when the event happens. Her maids are with her; her slave-girl is standing beside her. She must face the risk that one of them, in a fit of pique, or even mere gossip, will tell someone about it. Rumours flourish in royal courts. Yet she does not shift her ground. She does not tell one of her servants to take the baby and hide it with a family far away. She has the courage of her compassion. She does not flinch. Now something extraordinary happens:

> The [child's] sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?" "Go," replied Pharaoh's daughter. The young girl went and got the child's own mother. "Take this child and nurse it," said Pharaoh's daughter. "I will pay you a fee." The woman took the child and nursed it. (2:7–9)

The simplicity with which this is narrated conceals the astonishing nature of this encounter. First, how does a child – not just a child, but a member of a persecuted people – have the audacity to address a princess? There is no elaborate preamble, no "Your royal highness" or any other formality of the kind we are familiar with elsewhere in biblical narrative. They seem to speak as equals.

Equally pointed are the words left unsaid. "You know and I know," Moses' sister implies, "who this child is; it is my baby brother." She proposes a plan brilliant in its simplicity. If the real mother is able to keep the child in her home to nurse him, we both minimise the danger. You will not have to explain to the court how this child has suddenly appeared.

1. "Seeing that she [Pharaoh's daughter] wanted to save Moses, they [her handmaids] said to her, 'Mistress, it is customary that when a king of flesh and blood issues a decree, even if the whole world does not fulfil it, at least his children and the members of his household fulfil it. Yet you transgress your father's decree!'" (*Sota* 12b).

We will be spared the risk of bringing him up: we can say the child is not a Hebrew, and that the mother is not the mother but only a nurse. Miriam's ingenuity is matched by Pharaoh's daughter's instant agreement. She knows; she understands; she gives her consent.

Then comes the final surprise:

> When the child matured, [his mother] brought him to Pharaoh's daughter. She adopted him as her own son, and named him Moses. "I bore him from the water," she said. (2:10)

Pharaoh's daughter did not simply have a moment's compassion. She has not forgotten the child. Nor has the passage of time diminished her sense of responsibility. Not only does she remain committed to his welfare; she adopts the riskiest of strategies. She will adopt him and bring him up as her own son.[2] This is courage of a high order.

Yet the single most surprising detail comes in the last sentence. In the Torah, it is parents who give a child its name, and in the case of a special individual, God himself. It is God who gives the name Isaac to the first Jewish child; God's angel who gives Jacob the name Israel; God who changes the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. We have already encountered one adoptive name – Tzafenat Pa'neaḥ – the name by which Joseph was known in Egypt; yet Joseph remains Joseph. How surpassingly strange that the hero of the exodus, greatest of all the prophets, should bear not the name Amram and Yocheved have undoubtedly used thus far, but the one given to him by his adoptive mother, an Egyptian princess. A midrash draws our attention to the fact:

> This is the reward for those who do kindness. Although Moses had many names, the only one by which he is known in the whole Torah is the one given to him by the daughter of Pharaoh. Even the Holy One, blessed be He, did not call him by any other name.[3]

2. On the adoption of a foundling in the ancient world, see Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 31–32.
3. *Shemot Raba* 1:26.

Indeed Moshe – Meses – is an Egyptian name, meaning "child," as in Ramses (which means child of Ra; Ra was the greatest of the Egyptian gods).

Who then was Pharaoh's daughter? Nowhere is she explicitly named. However the First Book of Chronicles (4:18) mentions a daughter of Pharaoh, named Bitya, and it was she the sages identified as the woman who saved Moses. The name Bitya (sometimes rendered as Batya) means "the daughter of God." From this, the sages drew one of their most striking lessons: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: 'Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.'"[4] They added that she was one of the few people (tradition enumerates nine) who were so righteous that they entered paradise in their lifetime.[5]

Instead of "Pharaoh's daughter" read "Hitler's daughter" or "Stalin's daughter" and we see what is at stake. Tyranny cannot destroy humanity. Moral courage can sometimes be found in the heart of darkness. That the Torah itself tells the story the way it does has enormous implications. It means that when it comes to people, we must never generalize, never stereotype. The Egyptians were not all evil: even from Pharaoh himself a heroine was born. Nothing could signal more powerfully that the Torah is not an ethnocentric text; that we must recognise virtue wherever we find it, even among our enemies; and that the basic core of human values – humanity, compassion, courage – is truly universal. Holiness may not be; goodness is.

Outside Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, is an avenue dedicated to righteous gentiles. Pharaoh's daughter is a supreme symbol of what they did and what they were. I, for one, am profoundly moved by that encounter on the banks of the Nile between an Egyptian princess and a young Israelite child, Moses' sister Miriam. The contrast between them – in terms of age, culture, status and power – could not be greater. Yet their deep humanity bridges all the differences, all the distance. Two heroines. May they inspire us.

4. *Vayikra Raba* 1:3.
5. *Derekh Eretz Zuta* 1.