

Last week we finished B’reishit. Today we started with the first chapter of the four books about Moshe. In these books his life-story is well described, full of personal details. The story of his upbringing and how it all started is well-known, also by non-religious people. It reads as an exciting novel or as a filmscript.

Not for nothing are there a dozen or so feature films about his life and the story of the exodus, ranging from silent movies made in the 1920’s to complete musicals. From animation films such as the well-known “Prince of Egypt” from DreamWorks to the Hollywood blockbuster "The Ten Commandments," starring Charlton Heston as Moses and Yul Brynner as Pharaoh.

It is interesting that, despite the story in Torah being already thrilling, Hollywood added extra story lines, to make it even more dramatic for the audience, e.g., the intense childhood friendship between Moshe and the oldest son of Pharaoh (in Prince of Egypt). This, of course, makes the effect of the 10th plague a truly personal matter for Moshe as well. Or the addition of an extra love story, namely the sexually rather steamy relation between Moshe and the wife of Pharaoh, named Nefretiri in "The Ten Commandments."

The latter addition is an interesting one. As if there are not yet enough women surrounding Moshe: **Mother – Yochebed** (although we are only introduced formally to his parents - Amram and Yochebed - in next week’s parasha - Ex. 6:20). **Sister – Miriam**: we read about her heroic role today, but her name is only introduced much later (not even in Ex. 6:20, where only Moshe and Aaron are named). Her name first appears in Ex. 15:20 when she starts singing after crossing the Red Sea. **Wife – Zipporah** (already in Ex. 2:21) – remarkably she is named really early in the story, and she is the only non-Jewish woman in this list. And we are introduced to **Elisheva** (my own Jewish name), the wife of Aaron, in Ex. 6:23, remarkably also named before Miriam.

Naming women is not that common in the Tenach. It seems to indicate important women. Naming gives them credit. Therefore, it is even more remarkable how the two midwives are introduced immediately by name, as early as Ex. 1:15: *“The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah.”* Interestingly, it is not clear whether Shiphrah and Puah were Hebrew or Egyptian. Were they “Hebrew midwives” or “midwives to the Hebrews”? Most likely they were Hebrew because their names are Semitic, not Egyptian. Shiphrah comes from a semantic root, related to beauty. Puah means a young girl but also refers to “shining”. Etz Chaim refers to a Midrashic tradition that identified them as Yochebed and Miriam. This is also described in full detail, and quoting different sources, by Nehama Leibowitz.

But either way, one gets the idea that these two midwives attended both Hebrew and Egyptian births. This is because they were able to give the Pharaoh a comparison (Ex. 1:19) and tell him that *“... the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”* Also, the fact that Pharaoh called for them shows that they were held in high respect (as most midwives were) among both the Egyptians and the Hebrews. This respect from both communities is probably a result of their great skill and experience. This is also

reflected in Ex. 1:21, *“And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.”* This is commonly read as meaning that they were blessed with a large family; they had many children. And this is considered a special reward as it is generally believed that midwives are women who cannot conceive themselves and remain childless, and therefore specifically have chosen this profession. Personally, I think this is not so likely and a rather poor explanation. This respect for midwives, by giving them a name and a house, is generally seen as an award because they disobeyed what Pharaoh told them - namely to kill all Hebrew boys.

NOTE: Rashi's comment on: HE MADE THEM HOUSES — houses (dynasties) of the priesthood and the Levites and of royalty which are all termed בתים, “houses”, as it is said, (1 Kings 9:1) “and Solomon built the house of the Lord and the house of the king...”

It might also show a general respect for midwives, as professionals. We know from demographic data that access to “trained birth attendance” plays a crucial role in global health, particularly in maternal health.

Just some key facts from the WHO website:

- Every day, globally, approximately 810 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth – i.e., one every two minutes or almost 300,000 per annum (2017); Covid has probably increased this number.
- No surprise: 94% of all maternal deaths occur in low and lower middle-income countries.
- Between 2000 and 2017 the situation improved - the maternal mortality ratio (MMR, number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) dropped by about 38% worldwide. But, with Covid, probably the situation has got worse again.
- The decrease we saw in the years before Covid was related to skilled care before, during and after childbirth. This saved the lives of women and newborns.

The importance of trained birth attendance is also reflected in the **Sustainable Development Goals**. SDG (3): The objective is to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030. And this is measured by indicator 3.1.2: Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel.

I would like to see the “battim” that God established as houses or “schools” of midwives. A way to establish training opportunities and produce more highly skilled midwives. I see this as a sign of respect for Shiphrah’s and Puah’s professional skills. Due to all these skilled and well-trained midwives, many more children survived. And more importantly, many of the mothers survived and could give birth to even more children. As stated in Ex. 1:20, just before the “battim” are founded: *“And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.”*

Global Health data has shown over-and-over again that investment in women’s education is one of the most cost-beneficial interventions when aiming for a higher life-expectancy at birth. A longer and more healthy life on population level.

So, it is right that Shiphrah and Puah have been given names. This acknowledges them as important professionals. I like to see them as the first female professionals of the Tenach.

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