

What Kind of Jewish Names Are Shifrah and Puah?

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The story of Pharaoh's heinous first attempt at genocide is well known, at least among Jews who celebrate the exodus from Egyptian bondage at Passover each year. The king seeks to exterminate the Hebrews slowly, by having their midwives kill every baby boy.ⁱ I would venture to guess, though, that the heroism of those midwives—and their names, Shifrah and Puah—are not as familiar. That's too bad.

Pharaoh's plan is thwarted. Torah tells us, “[F]earing God, [the midwives] did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.”ⁱⁱ When Pharaoh confronts them, Shifrah and Puah fib: “...[T]he Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Hebrew word for “vigorous” here is *chayot*, literally, “animals.” Rabbi Amy Eilberg, writing in *The Mussar Torah Commentary* about their bravery, argues that “the midwives brilliantly mock Pharaoh's view that the Israelites are subhuman creatures.”^{iv}

Who are these daring women? The Bible never references them outside of this brief account. Commentators disagree about just about everything concerning them, beginning with: Are Shifrah and Puah Israelite women? Or are they Egyptians, who serve the Israelites as midwives? The question is raised by lack of clarity in Torah itself. The phrase that introduces them as “Hebrew midwives,” *m'yaldot ha-ivriot*, could mean “midwives who are Hebrews” or “midwives of the Hebrews.”

The rabbis of the Talmud insist that they are indeed Hebrews—and not just any Israelites at that. Shifrah and Puah, in the Talmudic imagination, are pseudonyms for Moses's mother, Yocheved; and his sister, Miriam.^v The rabbis making this claim insist that those who would act so courageously must be Israelite royalty.

Some medieval commentators disagree with their Talmudic predecessors. Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto asks, “[H]ow does it make any sense that [Pharaoh] would order Jewish women to destroy all the children of their own people...?”^{vi} After all, Luzzatto points out, Torah tells us that the midwives “feared God,”^{vii} which would be unnecessary if they were Yocheved and Miriam. As Rabbi Eilberg writes, “...[T]hese Egyptian women reached across national and religious divides,

feeling human and moral solidarity with their sisters, the Israelite women, in a bond stronger than their allegiance to their own king.”^{viii}

My own theories lie somewhere between those of the Talmudic sages and Rabbi Luzzato. The Torah’s language may be purposefully ambiguous, inviting us to play with possibilities that these remarkable women are either Israelite or Egyptian. Or both.

If they are Israelite, they need not hail from a famous family. Sometimes, the most remarkable actions are taken by people who consider themselves to be “ordinary.” In 2017, for example, an otherwise “ordinary” 24-year-old man “threw himself at a gunman who had killed an Indian immigrant...intervening in a hate crime in Olathe, Kansas.”^{ix} That same year, an “attack in Manchester [was] Britain’s deadliest terrorist attack in more than a decade, kill[ing] 22 people and injur[ing] dozens of others.” A homeless man came to their aid.^x

Perhaps the sages want to rename Shifrah and Puah because those names aren’t of Hebrew origin. “Shifrah” seems to have an ancient Egyptian source, while “Puah” is a Canaanite name.^{xi}

Plenty of ancient Israelites, and even more contemporary Jews, have names that are not Hebrew in origin. “Pharaoh called Joseph Zaphenath-paneah...,”^{xii} even as Joseph remained a loyal son of Israel—raising the possibility that, like Joseph, the midwives were both Israelite and Egyptian. “Barry” is hardly a “Jewish name.” I’ll let you ask our Temple president how she got her name. Your hint is that she was born on December 24, and her name is “Carol!” While Carol and I were both born to Jewish parents, many members of our Jewish community proudly bear names that come from aspects of their ethnic heritage inherited from relatives who might or might not have been Jewish. In short, there’s no such thing as a “Jewish name,” or at least no such thing as a name that “isn’t Jewish.” And that includes last names. We should all stop imagining that we can identify Jews—or worse, assume that people are not Jewish—because of their names, or worse, their appearance.

Perhaps, though, Shifrah and Puah are not Israelites. If they are Egyptians, standing up to their king, they may be compared to the righteous Christians and others who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Those rescuers’ stories are too rarely told as we recount the horrors of the Holocaust. And yet, at *Yad Vashem*, Israel’s national Holocaust memorial and museum in Jerusalem, The Avenue of the Righteous honors 27,362 rescuers from 51 countries.^{xiii}

Arkansans will have the opportunity to learn more about these rescuers during February and March, when “Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the

Holocaust,” will be on display at Arkansas Tech University. You see, in the late 1980s, my mother, Gay Block, a fine art photographer, traveled the world photographing and interviewing these brave individuals in their old age. The exhibit includes her photographs alongside the stories of rescue. We are arranging an opportunity for members and friends of Congregation B’nai Israel to see the exhibit and hear a talk by the artist on March 29.

The Torah concludes the discussion of these midwives, saying, “And God dealt well with the midwives; ... And [God] established households for the midwives, because they feared God.”^{xiv} We don’t know exactly what “established households” means—perhaps God multiplied their progeny, or maybe God provided homes for them. One can only imagine the midwives’ fear and trembling, no matter how brave, as they risked their lives to save the lives of Israelite babies. One can only imagine their joy, as their righteousness is rewarded, reminding us of the words of the psalmist, “Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.”^{xv}

Admittedly, not all such stories end happily. But remember that “ordinary” man in Kansas who hurled himself in front of a bigot who murdered an Indian immigrant? “India House Houston, a nonprofit organization, later raised money for a reward, which [the man] used to buy a home--”^{xvi} or in biblical language, “established a household for him.”

For the Israelites, countless tears are coming. Thwarted by two midwives, Pharaoh enlists his whole people to carry out genocide against the Israelites, who will continue to suffer in bondage until God frees them with plagues and parting the Sea. Perhaps the Israelites would never have survived to be liberated, if not for the extraordinary courage of those two women, Shifrah and Puah—Israelites or not, it matters not, great heroes of our people and all humanity.

ⁱ Exodus 1:15-16.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 1:17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 1:19.

^{iv} Rabbi Amy Eilberg, “*Ometz Lev—Moral Courage: Women of Moral Courage*,” in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, Edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, (New York: CCAR Press, 2020), p. 84.

^v Sotah 11b.

^{vi} *Shadal* to Exodus 1:15.

^{vii} Exodus 1:17.

^{viii} Eilberg, *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, p. 84.

^{ix} Millie Tran and Daniel Victor, “19 Acts of Heroism in 2017,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2017.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} “Shiphrah,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiphrah>, accessed January 17, 2020.

^{xii} Genesis 41:45.

^{xiii} <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html>, accessed January 17, 2020.

^{xiv} Exodus 1:20-21.

^{xv} Psalms 126:5.

^{xvi} Train and Victor.