Congregation Beth Israel
Of The Berkshires

CONGREGATION
Shir Ami

SoulSpa 3.13 • P. Shemot
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בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יהו״ה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה׃

Barukh Atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, YHVH, our God, eternal sovereign, who sanctified us in God's *mitzvot* and commanded us to busy ourselves in words of Torah.

Exodus 1:8-22

fire the Pharaonic historians!

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ עַל־מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע
אֶת־יוֹסֵף׃ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ׃ הָבָה נִתְחַכְּמָה
לוֹ פֶּן־יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי־תִקְרֶאנָה מִלְחָמָה
וְנוֹסַף גַּם־הוּא עַל־שֹׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם־בָּנוּ
וְעָלָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ׃

8-10. A new king arose over Egypt who knew not Yosef. He said to his people, "Look, the Children of Israel are far more numerous than us. Let us deal shrewdly with them lest they [further] increase and, in the event of war, they join our enemies in fighting against us and ascend from the land."

FEAR
Projection

Population control
Political control
Psychological control

וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עַנֹּתוֹ
בְּסִבְלֹתָם וַיִּבֶן עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפַרְעֹה
אֶת־פִּתֹם וְאֶת־רַעַמְסֵס׃ וְכַאֲשֶׁר יְעַנּוּ אֹתוֹ
כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיָּקֻצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

11-12. They set over them taskmasters in order to afflict them by suffering: they built for Pharaoh garrison cities [at] *Pit'om* and *Raamses*. Yet the more [the Egyptians] afflicted them, the more they increased and spread out, and [the Egyptians] came to dread the Children of Israel.

וַיַּעֲבִדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ׃
וַיְמָרְרוּ אֶת־חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר
וּבִלְבֵנִים וּבְכָל־עֲבֹדָה בַּשָּׂדֶה אֵת
כָּל־עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶךְ׃

13-14. The Egyptians enslaved the Children of Israel with rigor. They embittered their lives by hard labor at mortar and brick, and by all labor of the field, and in all their labors they were [made to] labor with rigor.

"GOD" APPEARS HERE ONLY THROUGH THE MIDWIVES

Midwives had a moral code: from where?!

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמְיַלְּדֹת הָעִבְרִיֹּת
אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאַחַת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה׃
וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלֶּדְכֶן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וּרְאִיתֶן
עַל־הָאָבְנָיִם אִם־בֵּן הוּא וַהֲמִתֶּן אֹתוֹ
וְאִם־בַּת הִוא וָחָיָה׃ וַתִּירֶאןָ הַמְיַלְּדֹת
אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן
מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ אֶת־הַיְלָדִים׃

15-17. The king of Egypt spoke to the midwives of the Hebrews, one of whom was named Shiffrah and the other was named Puah. He said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women and you look at the birthstool – if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, having *yir'ah* of God, did not do as the king of Egypt told them: they let the boys live.

Names = important

awe … fear

BOND BETWEEN WOMEN

Pharaoh deferring to midwives, commands his people

וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לַמְיַלְּדֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן
מַדּוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ אֶת־
הַיְלָדִים׃ וַתֹּאמַרְןָ הַמְיַלְּדֹת אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי
לֹא כַנָּשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיֹּת הָעִבְרִיֹּת כִּי־חָיוֹת
הֵנָּה בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמְיַלֶּדֶת וְיָלָדוּ׃
וַיֵּיטֶב אֱלֹהִים לַמְיַלְּדֹת וַיִּרֶב הָעָם וַיַּעַצְמוּ
מְאֹד׃

alive animal?

it's okay to kill at birth but not after? is it to keep moms from screaming?

18-20. The king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why did you do this thing and let the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are lively! Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." God made things good for the midwives, and the [Israelites] multiplied and increased greatly.

וַיְהִי כִּי־יָרְאוּ הַמְיַלְּדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים׃ וַיְצַו פַּרְעֹה לְכָל־עַמּוֹ
לֵאמֹר כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיִּלּוֹד הַיְאֹרָה תַּשְׁלִיכֻהוּ
וְכָל־הַבַּת תְּחַיּוּן׃

21-22. Because the midwives had *yir'ah* of God, [God] established households for them. Pharaoh [then] commanded all his people, saying, "Every [Hebrew] boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

didn't punish the midwives?!

- Killing the kids = shrewd… less a threat … kill the future … kill the boys = diminish power / culture
- Midwives = forcing the women to have blood on their hands (why not just have the soldiers take them out?)
- Forms of control = direct, indirect, through others, etc.

FROM SOJOURNER TO SLAVE

B.T. Sotah 11a-b = Shemot Rabbah 1:11

וַיַּעֲבִדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ, רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר: בְּפֶה רַךְ. רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָנִי אָמַר: בִּפְרִיכָה.

The Egyptians enslaved the Children of Israel with rigor – R. Elazar said, "*Parekh* [=rigor] is *peh rakh* [=soft mouth]: They enticed Israel into slavery, gradually subjugating them until they lost freedom.]" R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said, "*Frikhah* [=crushing]: [They subjugated Israel instantly]."

וַיְמָרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבֵנִים וגו׳. אָמַר רָבָא: בַּתְּחִילָּה בְּחוֹמֶר וּבִלְבֵנִים, וּלְבַסּוֹף וּבְכָל עֲבוֹדָה בַּשָּׂדֶה

They embittered their lives by hard labor at mortar and brick, etc. – Rava says: At first [only] at mortar and brick, and ultimately [increasing to] ***all labor of the field.***

אֵת כָּל עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶךְ. אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָנִי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן: שֶׁהָיוּ מַחְלִיפִין מְלֶאכֶת אֲנָשִׁים לְנָשִׁים וּמְלֶאכֶת נָשִׁים לַאֲנָשִׁים. וּלְמַאן דְּאָמַר נָמֵי הָתָם בְּפֶה רַךְ, הָכָא וַדַּאי בִּפְרִיכָה

In all their labors they were [made to] labor with rigor. R. Shmuel bar Nahmani says in the name of R. Yonatan: [The rigor was gratuitous in that] Egyptians gave men's work to women and women's work to men. So even to one who says that [Egyptians enslaved them] with a soft mouth, by here for sure it was crushing.

Midrash Tanhuma, Beha'alotekha 13:1

בְּפֶה רַךְ. פַּרְעֹה נָטַל סַל וּמַגְרֵפָה. מִי הָיָה רוֹאֶה אֶת פַּרְעֹה נוֹטֵל סַל וּמַגְרֵפָה וְעוֹשֶׂה בַּלְּבֵנִים וְלֹא הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה מִיָּד הָלְכוּ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּזְרִיזוּת וְעָשׂוּ עִמּוֹ אוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם בְּכָל כֹּחָן, לְפִי שֶׁהָיוּ בַּעֲלֵי כֹּחַ וְגִבּוֹרִים. כֵּיוָן שֶׁהֶחְשִׁיכָה, הֶעֱמִיד עֲלֵיהֶם נוֹגְשִׂים וְאָ״ל מְנוּ אֶת הַלְּבֵנִים. מִיָּד עָמְדוּ וּמָנוּ אוֹתָם, וְאָ״ל כָּזֶה אַתֶּם מַעֲמִידִים לִי בְּכָל יוֹם וָיוֹם.

Soft mouth - Pharaoh took a basket and trowel; [Egyptians] who saw [him do so] joined him to make bricks. All Israel immediately went and enthusiastically worked with him all day, with all their strength, as they were strong and mighty. At dusk, Pharaoh put overseers over them and said to them, "Count the bricks." They counted them. He said to them, "This many you will produce for me each and every day."

Bait and switch
Not leadership but …
Use loyalty against them

Yalkut Shemoni 163:1

קִבֵּץ פַּרְעֹה אֶת כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָ״ל בְּבַקָּשָׁה מִכֶּם עֲשׂוּ עִמִּי הַיּוֹם בְּטוֹבָה ... הָיוּ בָּאִין הַנּוֹגְשִׂים וּמוֹנִים אֶת הַלְּבֵנִים וְנִמְצְאוּ חֲסֵרוֹת הָיוּ הַשּׁוֹטְרִים מַכִּים עַל יֶתֶר הָעָם וְלֹא הָיוּ מוֹסְרִים אוֹתָם בְּיַד הַנּוֹגְשִׂים, וְהָיוּ אוֹמְרִים מוּטָב לָנוּ לִלְקוֹת וְאַל יִכָּשְׁלוּ יֶתֶר הָעָם.

Pharaoh gathered all Israel and said to them, "Please, some of you work with me today for wages." [Then the same story as Midrash Tanhuma.] The overseers would count the bricks, find a number missing, and beat Israel's officers who would not betray the people to the overseers. [Israel's officers] thought: "Better we should be beaten than that the rest of the people be hurt."

Rashbam, Ex. 1:13

בפרך - לשון שברון הוא. בתלמוד מפרכין באגוזים.

With rigor – Meaning to break them. Talmud uses the term to mean [to break the shell of] walnuts.

WHO WERE THESE MIDWIVES?

Rashi, Exodus 1:15

שפרה. יוֹכֶבֶד, עַל שֵׁם שֶׁמְּשַׁפֶּרֶת אֶת הַוָּלָד. פּוּעָה. זוֹ מִרְיָם, שֶׁפּוֹעָה וּמְדַבֶּרֶת וְהוֹגָה לַוָּלָד, כְּדֶרֶךְ הַנָּשִׁים הַמְפַיְּסוֹת תִּינוֹק הַבּוֹכֶה

Shifrah – This was Yoheved [Moshe's mother], for she *m'shaperet* [=beautifies] the newborn. ***Puah*** – This was Miriam [Moshe's sister], for she *pu'ah* [=cries], talks and coos to the newborn as women do who soothe a crying infant.

Sifrei Bamidbar 78

שפרה - שפרו ורבו ישראל בימיה. פועה - שהיתה פועה ובוכה על אחיה, שנאמר "ותתצב אחותו מרחוק לדעה מה יעשה לו".

Shifrah [means Yoheved] because Israel *paru* [=was fruitful and multiplied] in her days. ***Puah*** [means Miriam] *po'ah* [=moaned] and wept over her brother, as in (Ex. 2:4), "[As Moses floated downriver] his sister stood afar to know what would be done with him."

Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (Kli Yakar), Exodus 1:15

יאמר מלך מצרים למילדות העבריות וגו'. יש אומרים שהמילדות היו מצריות וכאילו אמר למילדות את העבריות, דאם לא כן מאי רבותיה דקאמר "ותיראן המילדות את האלקים"?

The King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, etc. – The midwives of the Hebrews: the midwives were Egyptians. If the text really meant to say that the midwives served [but were not themselves] Hebrews, why would the Torah feel the need to tell us "they had *yir'ah* of God"?

Yehudah ben Samuel of Regensburg (Yehudah HaChasid) on Exodus 1:15

שפרה ופועה מצריות היו מתחילה ונתגיירו דאל"כ היאך ציוה אותם להרוג את היהודים.

Shifrah and Puah were Egyptian in the beginning, then converted. If this were not the case, how could it be that Pharaoh commanded them to kill Jews?

Dr.Moshe Lavee, Dr. Shana Strauch-Schick, "The 'Egyptian' Midwives"

A fragment of a midrash from the Cairo genizah dating from around 1000 CE lists righteous gentile women, or at least righteous women of gentile origin, about whom something "was said." The head of the column is missing, so its opening is unknown. The list includes Asenath (Joseph's Egyptian wife), Shifrah and Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, Tziporah (Moses' Midianite wife), Rahab and Ruth. The passage on the midwives reads as follows:

Bat-Par'oh
.
.
.
Bat-Yah

במילדות בפועה ובשפרה המצריות נא׳ כן ויאמר מלך מצרים למילדות [ותיר]אן המילדות את ה׳ ויקרא מלך מצרים למילדות כל ה׳פ

It was said of Puah and Shifrah *the Egyptians* "and the king of Egypt said to the midwives," and "the midwives had *yir'ah* of God," and the king of Egypt called to the midwives, etc."

The fact that they are being identified as non-Jews is clear from the context; all of the other women included in this list are non-Israelite women who acted virtuously towards Israel or God.

THEOLOGY AND CULTURE: WHERE DID THEIR ETHICS COME FROM?!
WHO IS RIGHTEOUS, AND HOW DO WE KNOW?

"The Other" — this story, and the story about the stories, are about Othering

Samuel David Luzzato (Shadal), Exodus 1:15

למילדות העבריות: דעת רז"ל ואנקלוס ורשב"ם ורמבמ"ן וראז' שהיו המילדות האלה מזרע ישראל, ודעת המתרגם האלכסנדרי והיירונימוס ויוסף פלאויוס ודון יצחק שהיו מצריות מילדות העבריות, וכן נראה, כי איך יתכן שיצוה לבנות ישראל להכרית את כל בני עמם, ויאמין שלא תגלינה הדבר?... ומה שטענו ממה שכתוב ותיראן המילדת את האלהים איננה טענה כלל, כי את ה' אין כתוב כאן אלא את האלהים, וכל מי שיש לו אלוה (יהיה אלהי אמת או אלהי שקר) הלא ייראו מהכרית עוללים שלא חטאו, יהיו מאיזה עם שיהיו ... ותלמידי חביבי החכם ר' יעקב חי פארדו זצ"ל מוסיף שאם היו מעם אחר יצדק לומר שעשו זה מיראת האל ולא מאהבה אך אם היו עבריות אין צורך להזכיר יראת האל כי כל אדם אוהב בני עמו.

Relevance? Narcissism?

Midwives of the Hebrews. The understanding of our sages of blessed memory, Onkelos, Rashbam, Ramban and Ra"z is that those midwives were from the seed of Israel. By contrast, the understanding of the Alexandrian translator, and Hieronymos, and Yosef Flavius, and Don Itzchak [Abravanel] is that they were Egyptian midwives *of* the Hebrews. The latter view is correct, since how does it make any sense that [Pharaoh] would order Jewish women to destroy the children of their own people and believe that they wouldn't reveal such a thing? … And what we find in the phrase 'the midwives had *yir'ah* of God' is no proof at all. The divine name here is not YHVH but *Elohim*, and all having a god (a God of truth or a god of falsehood) would fear killing sinless babies, whatever people they are from. … My dear student R. Yaakov Hai Pardo, of blessed memory, adds that if [the midwives] were from another people it would have been more correct to say they [saved the babies] out of *yir'ah* of God and not of love, since if they were Hebrews there would be no need to remind us that they had *yir'ah* of God, since all humans love the children of their own people.

judgment

fear

Yitzhak bar Yehudah HaLevi, Pa'aneah Raza, Shemot 1:15

בשם ריי"ח מצאתי שמצריות היו מתחלה ונתגיירו, דאל"כ איך בטח בהם לב פרעה לצוותם להרוג הילדים, או הם היאך שתקו בדבר כאלו ניאותו לדבריו הלא בכזה יהרג ואל יעבור, וגם מה רבותייהו דקאמר ותיראן המילדות וגו' אלא שמצריות היו ועתה בהוה ותיראן וגו' שנתגיירו, אבל כבר לא היו בהם יראת אלהים:

I found in the name of R. Yehudah HaHasid that they were Egyptians at first and then converted. Otherwise, how could Pharaoh trust them to kill the children and how could they be quiet about this thing, as if his words were fine with them? Is not this something for which one should die rather than do? How are they exceptional that Torah states, "They had *yir'ah*," etc.? Rather, they were Egyptians, but now in the present, they have *yir'ah* of [God]" - since they converted. But before, they did not have *yir'ah* of God.

Shemot Rabbah 1:15

עֲלֵיהֶן נֶאֱמַר: אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת ה' הִיא תִּתְהַלָּל... וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ אֶת הַיְלָדִים, וְכִי מֵאַחַר שֶׁלֹּא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן אֵין אָנוּ יוֹדְעִין שֶׁקִּימוּ אֶת הַיְלָדִים לָמָּה הֲצָרַךְ הַכָּתוּב לוֹמַר: וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ אֶת הַיְלָדִים. יֵשׁ קִלּוּס בְּתוֹךְ קִלּוּס לֹא דַיָּן שֶׁלֹּא קִיְּמוּ אֶת דְּבָרָיו, אֶלָּא עוֹד הוֹסִיפוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּהֶם טוֹבוֹת, יֵשׁ מֵהֶם שֶׁהָיוּ עֲנִיּוֹת, וְהוֹלְכוֹת הַמְיַלְּדוֹת וּמַגְבּוֹת מַיִם וּמָזוֹן מִבָּתֵּיהֶם שֶׁל עֲשִׁירוֹת וּבָאוֹת וְנוֹתְנוֹת לָעֲנִיּוֹת, וְהֵן מְחַיּוֹת אֶת בְּנֵיהֶן, הוּא שֶׁכָּתוּב: וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ, אֶת הַיְלָדִים.

About them it is said (Prov. 31:30): "A God-fearing woman, she will be praised" ... "They kept the boys alive." Since they "did not do as the king of Egypt told them," do we not know that they kept the boys alive? Why did the verse need to state: "They kept the boys alive"? This is praise within praise. Not only did they not fulfill his command, but they went beyond and performed good deeds for [the boys'] benefit. Some were poor women, and the midwives would go and collect water and food from the homes of wealthy women and would come and give it to the poor women, thereby sustaining their sons. That is what is written: "They kept the boys alive."

R. Jonathan Sacks

We do not know to which people [the midwives] 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.

All we know about them is that they "[had *yir'ah* of] G-d 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.

* "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world…. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Ellen Frankel, The Five Books of Miriam

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: When Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill all newborn Israelite boys but to let the girls live, the women fail to follow his orders, claiming that the Hebrew women are simply too vigorous. As it is written, *Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth*. (1:19) Who are these two brave women who dare to stand up to the King of Egypt?

THE RABBIS ANSWER: These two heroic women were none other than Yokheved and Miriam, Moses' mother and sister. Although Pharaoh threatened to burn them alive if they continued to disobey him, they nonetheless stood firm and were miraculously spared from punishment.

HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN COUNTERS: No, you have it all wrong. Shifra and Puah were not *Hebrew* midwives, but non-Israelite midwives to the Hebrew. Yet even though they were not Israelites, they still *feared God*, that is the Hebrews' God (1:21)and so refused to follow Pharaoh's orders to kill the male Hebrew babies. They, like Pharaoh's own daughter, were even willing to give comfort to the oppressed stranger in their midst. How much more do they deserve to be praised!

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Radio Broadcast, KPFA, 1968

Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles. Cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creativity; Cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it. Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But, conscience asks the question, is it right?

Elizabeth Topper, "Shemot: the Midwife"

Shifrah and I were called
to an audience with the omnipotent Pharaoh.

He spoke brutally,
thin lips twisted, hooded eyes glittering.

"When you deliver Hebrew babies,
the girls may live: eliminate the boys."

I felt my face flush, and
my heart thump with latent fury.

I glanced at Shifrah:
her head was bent, her eyes demure.

At midnight I was called
to attend the birth of a Hebrew child.

The mother writhed,
and groaning, turned her head aside.

"One more push," I urged her softly,
catching her son as he entered the world.

My hands swaddled the baby
as my mind flashed back to the mighty monarch.

I laid the child at his mother's breast,
not knowing, yet trusting the shadowed future.

The rays of early dawn trickled in
gently playing on the infant's pristine face.

One day, I mused, as I tidied up,
this child may shine light on Pharaoh's darkness.