



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### 13 Shemot — Birthing Resistance

#### Text

#### שמות א

וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחָיו וְכָל-הַדּוֹר הַהוּא. ז וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֵד מֵאֵד וַתִּמְלֵא  
הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם. ח וַיִּקַּם מֶלֶךְ-חֲדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע אֶת-יוֹסֵף. ט וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ. י הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶן-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שׂוֹנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-  
בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ. יא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוּ בְּסַבְלֹתָם וַיִּבְּן עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה אֶת-פִּתּוֹם  
וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס. יב וְכֹאשֶׁר יַעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ פֶן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. יג וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרָךְ. יד וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעֵבֶד דָּהָה קִשָּׁה בַחֲמֹר וּבִלְבָנִים וּבְכָל-עֵבֶד דָּהָה בְּשָׂדֵה אֶת-כָּל-עַבְדֹתָם  
אֲשֶׁר-עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרָךְ. טו וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדֹת הָעִבְרִיֹת אֲשֶׁר שָׂם הָאֱחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשָׂם הַשְּׁנִית  
פּוּעָה. טז וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדֹכֶן אֶת-הָעִבְרִיֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אִם-בֶּן הוּא וְהַמְתַּן אֹתוֹ וְאִם-בַּת הוּא וְחָיָה. יז  
וְתִירָאן הַמִּילֵדֹת אֶת-הָאֵל הַיָּם וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיֶין אֶת-הַיְלָדִים. יח וַיִּקְרָא  
מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מִדּוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיֶין אֶת-הַיְלָדִים. יט וַתֹּאמְרֵן הַמִּילֵדֹת אֶל-  
פָּרְעֹה כִּי לֹא כֹנָשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיֹת הָעִבְרִיֹת כִּי-חַיּוֹת הֵנּוּ בְּטָרָם תִּבּוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילֵדֹת וַיִּלְדוּ. כ וַיִּיטֹב אֶל הַיָּם  
לְמִילֵדֹת וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצְמוּ מֵאֵד. כא וַיְהִי כִּי-יָרְאוּ הַמִּילֵדֹת אֶת-הָאֵל הַיָּם וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים

#### Exodus 1

<sup>6</sup> Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. <sup>7</sup> And the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. <sup>8</sup> A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup> And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup> Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise up from the land." <sup>11</sup> So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. <sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup> The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites <sup>14</sup> the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field. <sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup> saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." <sup>17</sup> The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" <sup>19</sup> The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." <sup>20</sup> And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, He established homes for them.



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#### Context

Seventy descendants of Yakov move to Egypt, sustained there by Yosef's beneficence. However, a Pharaoh-king comes to the throne who views the growing Israelite population as a threat. He decrees cruel edicts to oppress the Israelite nation with bondage. Midwives defy Pharaoh's command to murder Israelite babies, as do Yocheved, Miriam, and Pharaoh's own daughter—they join together to protect Moshe who is then raised in the Egyptian palace. One day, when Moshe witnesses an Egyptian beating an Israelite, he strikes the taskmaster dead, and flees into the desert of Midian. There he meets and marries Zippora, the daughter of a priest, who bears their first child, Gershom. Meanwhile, the conditions of enslavement are worsening for the Israelites.

While he is out shepherding Yitro's –his father-in-law's, flock, he sees the divine appear to him in the form of a burning bush. Moshe resists the role as leader of the Israelite Zionist liberation movement that God assigns to him. With the assurance of divine signs, the partnership of his brother Aharon, and constant divine instructions, Moshe accepts his job, packs up and heads back to Egypt with Zippora and their children. At their resting place on the way, God threatens to kill one of them. Zippora saves the day by circumcising their son. Moshe proceeds to meet Aharon and reveals the plan to leave slavery, seeking that Pharaoh release the Israelite people. Pharaoh responds harshly, and the people complain that Moshe has worsened their trials with his promise of liberation.

#### Explorations

The book of Shemot opens with the conception of the Israelite nation. The Torah uses many verbs to describe the fertility of the people: “[The Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them](#)” (Shemot 1:7). Three of these descriptions derive from the original biblical commandment in Bereishit to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land, [פְּרֹו וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ](#) (Ber. 1:28).

Commentators elaborate and associate special meanings to each word by which the Children of Israel come into being. Often they describe the special productivity of the women. About “prolific,” Rashi comments, “they bore six children at each birth.” Rashi's grandson, [Rashbam](#), claims that tiny babies grew up to be strong, defying the normal infant mortality rate. He goes on to interpret the filling of the land as a verb, a process akin to prophetic statements about the divine Presence filling the divine House (Ezekiel 10:4).

Another medieval Spanish commentator, [Ibn Ezra](#) claims that the use of the word *yishretzu*-were prolific- alludes to the creatures who swarmed in the waters of Bereishit 1:20. [Chizkuni](#), a thirteenth century French commentator, associates the filling of the earth with the divine exhortation to Yakov not to fear going down to Egypt for S/He promises to make of Israel a great nation (Bereishit 46:3). All of these suggest the tremendous significance of the pregnancies and births, the nurturing of the Israelites. Starting as it does in the first verses of the book of Exodus, this narrative parallels the Creation in Bereishit--on a



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national scale. As God brings forth the universe, the Israelites give birth to the People of Israel.

The first one to pay attention to the birth of the Israelite nation is Pharaoh. The positive expressions of birth contrast starkly with the negativity of Pharaoh's reaction. Based on his fear and insecurity, he focuses on enemies increasing. He imposes oppressive slavery, decrees violence, and ultimately, calls upon his nation to drown male newborn Israelite babies.

Counteracting Pharaoh's obsession with fear and death, many bold acts challenge the power of the enslaving Pharaoh. Courageous midwives, Shifra and Puah, perhaps the leaders of a nation-wide association of midwives, initiate the rebellion. Schooled in the competencies and activities of life-giving and nurture, midwives are the prime candidates for social activism to counter a decree of death. A midwife's prime motive and obligation is to facilitate a mortal passage from water to air—the opposite process from Pharaoh's deadly decree to drown newborn babies. Midwifery functions to enable life and health, and to support caring relationships. With the conviction of their professional integrity, having participated actively and repeatedly in the labors of love, they refuse to follow Pharaoh's command to kill newborn babies.

Some of the commentators believe that the midwives are Israelites; Rashi thinks that they are Yocheved and Miriam, Moshe's mother and sister (on Sh. 1:15). An archeologist and bible scholar, William Foxwell Albright, found the name Shifra in a list of Egyptian names (“Northwest-Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves from the Eighteenth Century BC,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 74(1954), 229). This evidence does not determine that the midwives were Egyptian—for often immigrant people adopt the names of their hosts. Yet, the suggestion that Shifra and Puah were Egyptian points to the possibility of an even more vital activism. Midwives collaborate across the ethnic divide of oppressor-oppressed to save life and defy their own king who, according to their culture, is a god.

Subsequently, Yocheved hides her son, violating the decree to throw all newborn males into the river, the Nile. When he grows too old to be hidden, she places him in a protective basket at the edge of the river, and his sister Miriam watches over him. Pharaoh's daughter finds him, has compassion on him, and rescues him, defying her father's decree. Pharaoh's daughter and Miriam agree that Miriam's mother will nurse the baby until he is old enough to move into the palace. Whereas Pharaoh had intended to invert the Nile from a life-sustaining irrigation source to a river of drowning death, his own daughter draws Moshe out into life. Bitya, as she is named in the midrash, enacts a second birth for Moshe from water to dry air and land, and restores him to his mother's breast.

In all of these examples of activism, women respond to the destructive, oppressive decrees with acts of life-giving, nurture, and kindness, substituting murderousness with sanctification. Moreover, none of these activists suffers at the hands of Pharaoh for disobeying his decrees. God rewards the midwives with *batim*-houses. Usually, commentators interpret the *houses* to be fruitful relationships that bring forth lines of



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descendants--priests, levites and sovereigns, Rashi offers. Perhaps God made for the midwives tefillin-*batim*-phylacteries, a tangible sign of the bond of love and commitment that the midwives demonstrate to the Creator and Creation.

When Moses steps out of Pharaoh's palace and perceives the oppression of his people, he models a different form of activism. Witnessing an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite, Moses smites the Egyptian, killing him. When Pharaoh learns of Moses' deed, he seeks to kill Moses, prompting Moses to flee to Midian. In contrast with the previous examples, Moses' act is mortal, and achieves little benefit or protection for the enslaved Israelites. Moses also arouses an angry response from the oppressive ruler resulting in his flight from Egypt.

The Talmud states that the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt as a reward for the merit of righteous Israelite women. Not only did they actively resist the oppression, but, displaying optimism and confidence they seduced their depressed, downtrodden spouses in the fields, and produced offspring worthy of redemption and priesthood (TB Sotah 11b).

#### Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss why you think that the midwives are Israelite, or Egyptian.
2. Under what conditions is violence against oppression justified? How can we better respond to an act of violation by nurturing kindness and offering protection, and embracing and uplifting the humanity of people who perpetrate curses, aggression, racism, sexism, or other meanness. How is it possible to engage the perpetrator/s more productively?
3. Opting to affirm the sanctity of life rather than desecrate, the midwives found a non-violent method to rebel against their oppressor. Is it always possible to find a sacred and peaceful way to end oppression? Would it be possible for the Israelites to find their way out of slavery in Egypt without plagues? Consider strategies to apply to oppressions that you experience in your life. How can we focus our own choices and our leaders' choices on sanctifying life when possible rather than "fighting" violence with more violence?
4. Exposure to violence often breeds violent action. Pay closer attention to the prevalence of violent images and scenes in media and entertainment. Evaluate the desirability of exposing yourself and others to violent ads, games, websites, performances, music, movies, and television shows. Inform the writers, producers, performers, manufacturers, or industry representatives about your concerns. When you see violent images, discuss them and their effects on you, young people, and relationships in your community.



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5. A midrash elaborates about the circumstances of Moshe's act.

[During their enslavement] the taskmasters were Egyptians and the police were Israelites. One taskmaster was in charge of ten police and one policeperson was in charge of ten workers. Thus a taskmaster had charge of a hundred people. On one occasion a taskmaster paid an early visit to a policeperson and said to him: 'Go and assemble me your group.' When he came in the policeperson's spouse smiled at him. He thought: 'She is mine!' So he went out and hid behind the stairs. As soon as her spouse [the policeperson] had left, he [the taskmaster] entered and misconducted himself with her. The other turned around and saw him coming out of the house. When the taskmaster realized that he had seen him, he went to him and kept beating him all that day, saying to him: 'Work hard, work hard!' with the intention of killing him. At that moment the Divine Inspiration stirred in Moshe, as it is written, 'And he looked this way and that' (Shmot 2:12). What is the significance of the expression 'this way and that'?-[Moshe] saw what the taskmaster had done to the policeperson in the house and in the field. He thought, Not enough that he has misconducted himself with his spouse, but he also seeks to kill him! Instantly, 'When he saw that there was no man, he struck the Egyptian' (Shemot 2:12). Midrash Vayikra Rabba 32:4

This midrash adds complex detail to the sparse biblical description of the incident between Moshe and the Egyptian. According to the midrash, the slavery was not limited to physical labor, but also sexual conquest, trickery, and territorial claims in relation to women. How does the rape of the Israelite woman affect the power dynamics among male and female Israelites and Egyptians? When re-reading the midrash, do you think the midrash is critical of the woman's smile? Why? Are you critical of her smile?

In what ways are the power dynamics between men still played out on the territory of women's bodies? Do the complexities that this midrash supplies justify Moshe's action?

#### Study Links

Yael Levine published “Midreshei Bitya bat Par'oh; Vayehi behatzi halaylah Midrashim of Bitya, the Daughter of Pharaoh: A Study Companion for the Seder Night; "In the Middle of the Night": Additional Stanzas on Women” (Hebrew) in Jerusalem, 2004. Her work proposes a text for Passover seder night that expresses connection with the women of the first chapter of Shemot. [Here](#) is a synopsis.

Shulamith Firestone famously argues that the biology of human reproduction is the original cause and ground for the oppression of women. Whereas I propose that birth offers an alternative world-view to the violence of oppression, Shulamith Firestone suggests that freeing women from the cycle of menstruation, gestation, birth and lactation is the road to liberation. [Here](#) is her first chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*.



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Read [this critical analysis](#) of the ethnic power dynamics of rape as an instrument of oppression between whites and blacks.

#### **Summary of Issues**

Experience with and responsibility for assisting birth tools people with the capability to resist edicts of oppression and death. This world view contrasts with the fear and violence expressed against life-giving when the Israelite People is born.

#### **Methods & Observations**

Interpreting the body in the text is an important method for connecting to less explicit meanings, and making the Torah more relevant to our lives and experience.

#### **Contact**

Please address queries and comments to  
Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - [bonnadevora@gmail.com](mailto:bonnadevora@gmail.com)