



Finding Courage and Strength: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Shemot*

Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

“May the Source of Strength who blessed the ones before us help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing.” (D. Friedman)

In the Book of Exodus, which is read in synagogues beginning the week of December 29th, we follow the narrative of the Israelites’ enslavement in Egypt, and the early chapters of Moses’ struggle for their liberation.

Sometimes, our lives as individuals may parallel the collective experience of the People Israel. For instance, in Exodus’ introductory verses, we read the household names of the 70-strong family of Jacob, who came to live in Egypt; we read of the death of Joseph and his generation; we read how the descendants of Jacob—the Children of Israel—“were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and grew exceedingly mighty” (Exodus 1:7). Our life stories may similarly include relocation, the death of elders and loved ones, and our own growth, adaptation, and achievement. And then a new force arises in our lives—an unwelcome development which leaves us feeling enslaved where once we had been flourishing: “Then a new king arose over Egypt...” (Exodus 1:8). It may be an oppressive pharaoh, an invasive disease, an unhealthy dynamic at work or home—and suddenly, or perhaps slowly over time, we find our lives pressured and squeezed and redefined in troubling, painful ways.

Within the broader context of increasing darkness and oppression, we are introduced to Shifra and Puah: “The Egyptian king spoke to the Hebrew midwives—the first whose name was Shifra, and the second whose name was Puah—saying, ‘When you support the Hebrew women in giving birth, look upon the birthstones; if it is a son, you shall put it to death....’ But the midwives revered God, and they did not do as the king of Egypt told them; rather, they let the children live” (Exodus 1:16-17).

Shifra and Puah were but two apparently powerless individuals facing a grim and seemingly hopeless situation. Yet, in their own way, they resisted the tyranny of Pharaoh’s decree; and in so doing restored a measure of hope and strength to the rest of the Israelite community.

Indeed Moses was born out of these most trying times, and rescued by such life-affirming acts of bravery, love, and faith. In defiance of Pharaoh’s decree, a fragile infant, Moses, is nurtured and placed in a tiny ark along the banks of the Nile River. In an otherwise bleak moment of peril, loss, and near-final destruction, that life-sheltering act holds out hope for the future, for liberation, and for redemption.

So too, in our own lives: the parts of ourselves which are like Shifra and Puah sometimes shine in the face of adversity; the helping hands and the determined hearts

of fellow human beings sometimes restore our sense of optimism and our very life energy. When we call on our sources of strength, and find—perhaps anew—expressions of inner courage, those are indeed times of blessing and redemption that have the power to sustain us as they sustained the People Israel in earlier times.

Questions for further study, meditation or discussion:

What are some of the ways we may experience oppression, constriction, and enslavement in our lives right now?

Where, confronting our own “pharaohs” and in the midst of such darkness, do we find points of light, hope, or inspiration akin to Shifra and Puah?

What are my sources of strength; and in what ways can I express courage? How do I resist hopelessness? In the face of seemingly overpowering forces, how might my spirit prevail; how can I hope to overcome? In what ways can I remain resolute and maintain my own integrity?

What are some of the ways I have been moved by others’ redemptive moments—or experienced my own movement toward greater wholeness?

May the Source of Life—the Power that makes for Healing and Redemption—bless all who are mired in a dark time of illness or loss, or in the narrow straits of oppression or disease, with the blessings of strength and courage, hope and inspiration, integrity, comfort, and peace—shalom.

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