

WEEK 5

MAY 14, 2023

Digging Deeper

Words of a Dying Man

The Untold Story of the Hebrew Midwives and the Exodus

Nechama Rubinstein

As any mother who has experienced the birth process can tell you, the transition from labor to delivery is always the most intense. The time of transition is also when many women begin to feel completely out of control, emotional, scared, and stuck.

I remember transitioning during my first birth. I begged the midwife to let me walk the three miles to the local hospital and get an epidural for the pain I thought I would not endure. “You’ll deliver the baby before you get there,” she told me. But I had been in intense and active labor for nearly twelve hours, and I couldn’t fathom that it was almost over. I felt as though I was trapped inside a tunnel. It was the role of my midwife to get me through to the other side.

“Fulfilling its meaning of ‘with woman,’ midwifery has survived through the centuries as birth, the renewal of life, continues through the ages.”¹ If one recognizes birth as being just that, the renewal of life, the importance of the role of midwife becomes perfectly clear. It is not just new lives that midwives bring into the world, but a rebirth, a renewal of a nation.

The redemption of the Jewish nation from the bondage of Egypt, and indeed the bondage of exile throughout time, is a direct result of the actions of the Jewish women of their time. According to the Talmud,² it was in reward for the righteous women of that generation that Israel was redeemed from Egypt. Yocheved (Moses’ mother and later wet-nurse), Miriam, Shifrah and Puah and the other midwives, Serach bat Asher, and Moses’ wife Tziporah. These are all strong forces within the story of Shemot . . . the Book of Names . . . the book of the Exodus. In order to understand the implications of the feminine drama within this book of the Bible, it is necessary to understand what the feminine represents in Jewish thought.

In the natural realm, the woman is generally understood to be the receiver while the role of the man is that of the giver. Women represent the hidden sphere while men walk in the much more public realm. In the story of Exodus, however, the roles seem to be reversed, with the women pushing the men and driving the course of events. Indeed, after a recounting of the sons of Jacob, the book of Shemot/Names opens with a description of an eerily nameless Hebrew nation. “The Children of Israel,” as it calls them, “were fruitful, teemed, increased and became strong . . . and the land became filled with them.”³ The words the Torah uses to describe the growth of the nation are not positive. They are linked to animalistic, reptilian, or even insect-like reproduction.⁴ This, coupled with the fact that the Torah does not name them in the very book of Names, bears witness to the fact that, indeed, their individual identities as well as their cultural ones were within the greater Egyptian culture. The Children of Israel had sunken to the lowest levels and become swallowed up by the abyss. “An existential failure is marked here: the grandchildren of Jacob have . . . lost their distinctness, their names, their sense of purpose.”⁵ All signs of life were gone.

Between the listing of the sons of Jacob in the first five lines of Shemot, and the naming of Moses in chapter 2, verse 10, the only other people to merit a name at all are the midwives Shifrah and Puah.

That leaves 28 lines of anonymity. So, why do the midwives have this honor? What makes them so important that they merited being placed between our forefathers and our redeemer?

While there have been a few medical papyri found that deal with fertility and pregnancy in ancient Egypt, very little is explicitly detailed about the actual birth process. It seems, from the papyri, that physicians had relatively little to do with birth; but, it is interesting to note, there is no hieroglyph or word for “midwife” at all. There are hieroglyphs in tombs that appear to tell the tales of goddesses acting as midwives to women of royal blood, but there is no way to be sure that real-life midwives followed the same practices as depicted on the walls of the tombs.

The Hebrew term for “birthstool” in Exodus 1:16, *ovnayim*, means literally “two stones.” It refers to the primitive form of the birthstool, which was simply two bricks (or stones). Such birthstools are also found depicted in the later forms of the hieroglyphic symbol for “birth.” In ancient Egypt, where child mortality was high, Egyptians called upon the help of their gods through magical objects (like these birth bricks) and special ritual practices during childbirth. The Egyptian birth brick was associated with specific goddesses, and elaborately decorated accordingly.

Because of this evidence of Egyptian birthing we see that there was, indeed, a somewhat developed birth practice. The belief in the involvement of supernatural forces also testifies to the fact that the superstitious Egyptians would surely not have thought the Hebrews capable of birthing on their own as “beasts of the field.”⁶ Furthermore, because of the associations the Egyptians made between the supernatural and the process of birthing, it would follow that midwives were a respected class. This is why Pharaoh himself would speak directly to the midwives.

The beginning of the Book of Exodus plants the reader in a time of paradoxical chaos, an upside-down world. The Jews were plunged into a world of darkness where they were enslaved and afflicted. The Egyptians had forgotten about Joseph and all he had done for their nation, and saw his descendants as thorns in their eyes. It was a time in which everything that had been in the time of Joseph was reversed or obliterated. The Israelites were in their first exile.

The founder of Chassidut, the Baal Shem Tov, gives us an insight into this and all subsequent exiles. He says that the primary idea of the Egyptian exile was that knowledge (*da’at*) was in exile.⁷ Therefore, without knowledge, which contributes to our ability as human beings to speak, it follows that speech was also in exile.

What does this mean that *da’at* was in exile? According to Kabbalistic teachings, there are ten sefirot, or attributes of the soul. The first three sefirot, *chochmah*, *binah*, and *da’at* (the acronym of which forms the name “Chabad”) are associated with the intellectual process. These “give birth” to the other seven characteristics (called *middot*) as their offspring, and they are thus known as “the mothers.” *Chochmah* is the initial flash of insight when an idea first reaches the mind—the conception or impregnation, as it were. *Binah* is when one begins to synthesize and understand this flash of inspiration—this can be likened to a pregnancy. *Da’at* is the understanding and knowledge that comes when one has synthesized and internalized the information—this is the birth process. This was temporarily lost while in Egypt.

According to Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, one who does not internalize the Torah, even if he is knowledgeable in the information, “will not produce in his soul true fear and love, but only vain fancies. Thus, *da’at* provides the substance and vitality of the *middot*.”⁸ This is what leads to action. We live in a physical world in which our actions are of the greatest importance. Our thoughts, our knowledge, our ideas, can only take us so far in our devotion. We must “bring it down” from the highest heavens, allow the knowledge of G-d to penetrate through our minds, and then, finally, permeate our bodies and be reflected in our deeds.

This is where the Jews in Egypt got stuck. They knew they were a people descended from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. This is why the book of Shemot (Names) begins with a list of these holy ancestors but leaves out the names of the current generation. The current generation, likened in the Torah to insects, were not complete human beings. They never brought their knowledge down into their lives.

“When a person actively fulfills all the precepts which require physical action . . . and with his power of thought . . . then all of his soul’s 613 ‘organs’ are clothed in the 613 commandments of the Torah.”

9

“It must be emphasized that although the author states that ‘the middot are the offspring of CHaBaD,’ this is not to say the that mind ‘begets’ them from within itself . . . The relationship between the mind and middot might be thus more accurately described as the mind being the ‘midwife’ that facilitates the birth of the middot.”¹⁰

The midwives in Egypt were the conduits for the Exodus. It is Shifrah and Puah alone whom are named in those first verses of the book of Exodus which link the patriarchs to Moses. They were the chochmah, the binah, and the da’at. They stood up to Pharaoh, defied his decree, and honored the Almighty by safely delivering the Jewish boys and girls.

Rashi discusses the word the Torah uses for “midwife,” stating that the word used is the “intensive form” versus the passive. One form is used for a normal childbirth, while the other indicates a difficult birth requiring assistance from the midwife.¹¹ So Shifrah and Puah did not simply assist in the birth of the redemption. Indeed, they hastened its coming.

Mitzrayim, the Hebrew word for Egypt, means “limitations” or “confines.” The Midrash¹² likens the Exodus from Egypt to removing a baby animal from its mother’s womb. It is said that the Egyptian experience is a foreshadowing of what the Jewish people will endure before the final redemption. The Israelites had become like animals, “teeming and increasing,” and enslaved in Egypt. But without this arduous birth story, they could not have been born into a new life of freedom. When the world found itself turned on its head—with goodness enslaved and knowledge silenced—the connection between the mind and the body was severed. The Israelites had the knowledge (the chochmah and binah), but they had not internalized it (with da’at) and mirrored it in their lives. They had conceived, become swollen and pregnant, but were stuck and waiting to deliver. The womb that had been Egypt was now a place of confinement. It was the midwives who corrected this disconnection and brought the redemption into the world. And who better than midwives to deliver us?

FOOTNOTES

1.Helen Varney et al., *Varney’s Midwifery* (Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett, 2004), p. 3.

2.Sotah 11b.

3.Exodus 1:7.

4.Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 19. Based on Sforno’s commentary to this verse.

5.Zornberg, p. 20.

6.Rashi’s commentary to Exodus 1:19.

7.Heichal Haberachah, Parshat Ki Tavo.

8.Tanya, part 1, ch. 3.

9.Tanya, part 1, ch. 4.

10.Adin Steinsaltz, *Opening the Tanya* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pp. 103–104.

11.Be’er Rechovot supercommentary on Rashi to Exodus 1:15.

12.Mechilta to Exodus 14:31.



Questions to ask when reading the Bible

Sometimes when we read a passage in the Bible it can be confusing or we may not know how to best figure out what it is saying. Below are some good questions to ask when reading the Bible to help make the Bible make sense.

1. What stands out to me?

Note that this does not say “What does this passage mean?” Consider what stood out to you? What did you notice? What did the Holy Spirit highlight for you as you read it?

2. What does the text say about the character/nature of God?

The Scriptures are primarily about God so ask first what the text says about Him before moving to what it says about us, about His plan, or about anything else.

3. What does the text say?

Look at what the text literally says first (this may not be the intent of the text but it is important to look at it as read... at least initially).

4. How is it saying it?

What is the genre of the text and how should we read text in that genre?

5. Why does it say it that way?

Speculate about why the author chose this method of saying what they've said.

6. What is it trying to say?

Getting behind the Scripture, looking at its context, its original audience, its author, etc., what is the text trying to get across to the reader (both the original audience and us today?)

7. How does this fit into the whole of the book and the whole of Scripture?

Looking at the whole book, does what is being said jive with the whole book, with the whole of Scripture?

8. What questions do I have?

Do you have questions about the text? If they aren't answered in the text, are they good questions or are we asking questions that the text isn't meant to answer?

9. How do I feel about this teaching/text? Why do I feel that way?

What does your gut say? Are you frustrated with it? Are you trying to make it say something else than what it says? Does it make you uncomfortable? Where are these feelings coming from? Is there sin in my life I need to repent of?

10. What is the universal application of this text/teaching?

What are we to do with this text? Consider the original audience as well as us today.

11. What is my personal application?

What is God calling you to apply with what you've learned with this text?

12. How will I apply what it calls me to?

Make a plan to apply what God has taught you. Seek to be faithful and obedient to His leading, wherever it may go.