



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Shmot 5773

By Lisa Exler

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Several weeks ago, at a gathering of alumni of AJWS's service trips for Jewish leaders—the Rabbinical Students' Delegation and Young Rabbis' Delegation—I encountered three women whose overlapping narratives exemplified how we are all implicated in the struggle for human rights, and whose courage can inspire us to support this effort.

I encountered the first two women—Shifrah and Puah—in a session about courage, taught by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, Dean of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School. Described in the beginning of *Parashat Shmot*, Shifrah and Puah are the biblical midwives who defy Pharaoh's horrific command to kill the Israelite baby boys at birth.

Who are these courageous women who dare to disobey Pharaoh? A close reading of the text reveals a curious ambiguity. Shifrah and Puah are described as "*ha-meyaldot ha-ivriyot*,"<sup>1</sup> which can either mean "the Israelite midwives" or "the midwives to the Israelites." The first interpretation—that they were Israelites—is supported by Rashi, who identifies them as Yocheved and Miriam, Moses's mother and sister.<sup>2</sup> But Isaac Abravanel, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese scholar, argues in favor of the second interpretation, explaining: "They weren't Israelites because how could Pharaoh trust Israelite women to kill their own children?"<sup>3</sup>

Abravanel's explanation reveals Pharaoh's assumption that people are more likely to defend the lives of those within their own ethnic or national group—i.e. Israelite midwives would never obey a decree to kill Israelite babies, but Egyptian midwives would be less likely to object. According to this view, the defiance of the midwives, while unremarkable if we understand them to be Israelites, becomes extraordinary if they are Egyptians.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, argues that the Torah is intentionally ambiguous about the identity of the midwives, precisely to demonstrate how they challenged this assumption that ethnicity or nationality matters when considering human rights. He writes:

We do not know to which people they 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 "feared 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.<sup>4</sup>

According to Sacks, then, Shifrah and Puah understood that human dignity and human rights are universal and apply equally to all people. Their act of civil disobedience made them, in effect, the first human rights defenders.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 1:15.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi on Exodus 1:15.

<sup>3</sup> Abravanel on Exodus 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sacks, "Civil Disobedience" 06 January 2010. <http://www.jewishpressads.com/printArticle.cfm?contentid=42113>

This understanding of Shifrah and Puah gave me a new perspective on Khin Ohmar, who had addressed the group the previous evening. Ohmar, an award-winning activist who has helped to pave the way for freedom and democracy in Burma, spoke about her activism and the future of Burma. Through the lens of Shifrah and Puah, I had a new appreciation for how Ohmar has come to advocate for the lives of people belonging to an ethnic group not her own.

For many years, the human rights movement in Burma was fragmented, with one camp of activists working to bring democracy to the country and another group fighting for the rights of Burma's persecuted ethnic minorities. Ohmar explained that because she is Burman, part of the majority population, when she first became active in the democracy movement in Burma she barely knew anything about the oppressed ethnic minorities and didn't work to defend them. It was only after she was forced to flee to the Thai-Burma border (where refugees from various ethnic minorities had settled) that Ohmar recognized the atrocities they suffered and took up their cause. Now, as coordinator of AJWS grantee Burma Partnership, she is a passionate advocate for the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the country's new democratic process, and works to ensure that the minorities don't have to fight their cause alone.

Thanks to the work of Ohmar and activists like her, Burma is being celebrated today for its great strides toward freedom and democracy. But, as Ohmar warns, it will fail if the majority doesn't stand up to defend the minority:

[The] suffering and subjugation of the ethnic minorities continues today. Burma will never be able to achieve genuine peace and national reconciliation by continuing to ignore the rights of the ethnic nationalities. At this potential turning point in Burma's political history, the world must push the Burman-majority government to honor the equality of all the people of Burma.<sup>5</sup>

Ohmar's call for the world to pressure the Burman government is all the more poignant in light of a small detail at the end of the narrative about Shifrah and Puah. When Pharaoh realizes that he cannot rely on them to be his agents of the destruction of the Israelites, he tries a different approach, issuing a command "I'chol amo—to his entire people" to throw baby boys into the Nile.<sup>6</sup> From the subsequent story of Moses' mother placing him in a basket in the river, we can only assume that the Egyptian people lacked the moral courage of the midwives and obeyed Pharaoh's decree.

In the biblical narrative and in our contemporary reality, we cannot rely only on the bold defiance of individuals like Shifrah, Puah and Khin Ohmar to protect those who are persecuted. The responsibility is on each of us to follow in their footsteps and to defend the rights not only of the ethnic groups with whom we affiliate, but also of all oppressed minorities—making the lives of the "other" as valuable as those of our own.



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<sup>5</sup> Khin Ohmar, "The Burmans' Big Brother Complex," *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 December 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203833104577071920284419162.html>

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 1:22.

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