

Parashat Shmot 5768
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As we read through the cycle of the Joseph narrative over the past few weeks, I was struck again and again by the Torah's presentation of the fate of the nation as bound up with, as being equivalent to, the fate of an individual family. If Joseph's mission does not conclude successfully, the Jewish narrative comes to an end before it begins. But it is more than that: the family of Jacob and his children represent the unfolding of our people's story in all of its complexity. Think of the themes involved – personalities, jealousies, operating in multiple and complex environments, maintaining the core of one's identity no matter which way the winds blow, juggling trust in God with aggressive action to bring about a desired result, and going through incredibly difficult challenges in order to pass through them toward a better future. The Torah isn't simply telling the story of one family – it is telling the story of all of our families.

The book of Exodus leaves the dock of the single family and takes up the narrative of the whole people. While the rest of the Torah will deal with the life and times of Moses, and while it does account for some of the drama of his immediate family circle, the foundational work of our people is now concerned with the fate of the nation as a nation. Early on, just fifteen verses into the book of Exodus, we get a sense of just how high the stakes are. In Egypt, we are introduced to a kind of cruelty which if we were to picture it in our minds would be a virtually unfathomable level of depravity, the ordering up of a genocide through the mechanism of the state-sponsored killing of all Israelite male newborns. I mean, this is the kind of utter ferociousness that might even get the U.N. to step in. O.K., maybe not – but even so, the future of the whole people clearly lies in the balance with this edict issued from Pharaoh's throne.

In one response to this murderous call, we learn something which will be applied to every generation from that moment forward. It will take the brave actions not just of governments or known statesmen or the physically powerful or the wealthy to ensure the Jewish future – it will take the stepping up of the ordinary Israelite into a difficult situation to move the entire people's history forward. Perhaps this is one reason the Torah's cast of characters includes those who appear and just as suddenly disappear. They remind us, as a modern-day prophet who we will get to in a moment re-affirmed, that the calling card of Jewish consciousness is always being ready to live faithfully, hopefully, and thankfully no matter how high the obstacles that are strewn in our path.

The aggressive pursuit of more details of the lives of the women of the Bible is not only a modern phenomenon. The male-dominated public religious structure of our rabbinic tradition spent a good amount of time and text fleshing out the stories of the Torah's female personalities – midrashim on the lives of our matriarchs are just one example. As we open the book of Exodus, we find two heroes in the extreme: they selflessly rise to meet a terrible need, risking their lives to at least attempt to ensure the survival of the whole people. You may know I'm talking about Shifra and Puah, the midwives who defy Pharaoh's call to decimate our ancestors by doing away with all the first born males. Did

you know that the maternity hospital in Tel Aviv is located at the intersection of Shifra and Puah street – just one more reason to love Israel.

The rabbis, looking at this narrative, delve deeply into the heroism of the previously unheard names of Shifra and Puah. For some rabbis, it was impossible that they were ordinary Israelites - surely Shifra was Yocheved, mother of Moses, and Puah was Miriam, Moses' sister. Another rabbinic tradition cites proof that they were basically ordinary Egyptian midwives except that they feared God – and this did not mean that they were scared of God's wrath. They were God-fearers because in every society there are people who understand that certain things are just wrong, who aren't willing to simply accept that while before it was not o.k. to commit murder, now it was o.k. because it was ordered on royal authority. I prefer a mixture of the two explanations – that Shifra and Puah were Israelites, and that they were, before they rose to meet these unforeseen circumstances, quite ordinary. Ordinary, but ready, ready to put their fear of God on the line in a constructive way.

So – if we were to define extraordinary ordinariness by the acts of Shifra and Puah, how would we define that kind of bravery? What is an example of this have we seen in the not-too distant past – and what examples might we note from the year of 2007 about to end?

The bravery of Shifra and Puah is defined by the following three things: first, the recognition that there are certain truths about our existence, and one of them is that no human, no matter how powerful, has the right to order the extermination of the utterly innocent. With his edict, even Pharaoh sensed he was treading on thin ice – if they even had thin ice in Egypt –which is why he sought the pretext that the Israelites were a demographic threat to the kingdom itself. Nachmanides explains Pharaoh's reluctance to simply do away with all the Israelites in this way: ... 'the people of the land would not have allowed the king to commit this violence since he had to consult them.'

The second component of the bravery of Shifra and Puah: they had to mount a constructive attempt to get through a difficult moment. Some commentators ask why Shifra and Puah did not go right to Pharaoh and refuse his orders, instead of stealthily acting to save the male babies. Bravery sometimes amounts to standing up to the face of power without regard to the consequences. A prime example from this week's headlines: history will judge if Benazir Bhutto's flagrant disregard for her own safety in the interests of her country's future was just such a demonstration of selfless, radical, and aggressive heroism. Just two days after her violent and disturbing end we can certainly recognize that her return to the country of her birth to face head on whatever might come was at a minimum a brave and patriotic act. While such heroism has its place, that is not the brand demonstrated by Shifra and Puah. At times bravery asks us to devise a more subtle approach to dealing effectively with a challenge. Sometimes confrontation isn't the clearest-cut route through to the other side of a dilemma. Creativity counts.

The third and last element of the bravery of Shifra and Puah is that a brave act can be done act in a way that will inspire others to follow your example. If the act of bravery is

a feat of super human strength or ability then the only ones who will be able to replicate it are people of super human strength or ability – in this beautiful weather even I’ve been exercising a little but feats of strength will not be my forte no matter how much I sweat. But if an act of bravery can be emulated, it contains the possibility of others saying you know, I can do this too. My assumption is that Shifra and Puah started a movement within Egypt to save the Israelite children – after all, how many babies could just two midwives save? It seems to be reasonable to suggest that they were role models, and that others followed their example.

A modern, if not contemporary, example of an extraordinary figure who exhibited great bravery in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges was someone who may have been back in the news for a moment this week, but who is also someone who is on the roster of every adult education program in every modern synagogue in the country at one point or another. The second volume of the authoritative biography of Abraham Joshua Heschel, by his student Edward Kaplan, was published recently, and it was quoted in a recent New York Times article by Edward Rothstein, who himself happens to be an identified Conservative Jew who sent his kids to Camp Ramah – my wife was his daughter’s counselor at one point – the Jewish world is indeed very small.

In an example of Heschel’s humor, though perhaps not his bravery, Rothstein quotes this passage from the biography: After marching with Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery, Heschel was at the Montgomery, Ala., airport, trying to find something to eat. A surly woman behind the snack-bar counter glared at Heschel — his yarmulke and white beard making him look like an ancient Hebrew prophet — and mockingly proclaimed: “Well, I’ll be damned. My mother always told me there was a Santa Claus, and I didn’t believe her, until now.” She told Heschel that there was no food to be had.

In response...Heschel simply smiled. He gently asked, “Is it possible that in the kitchen there might be some water?” Yes, she acknowledged. “Is it possible that in the refrigerator you might find a couple of eggs?” Perhaps, she admitted. Well, then, Heschel said, if you boiled the eggs in the water, “that would be just fine.”

She shot back, “And why should I?” “Why should you?” Heschel said. “Well, after all, I did you a favor.” “What favor did you ever do me?” “I proved,” he said, “there was a Santa Claus.” And after the woman’s burst of laughter, food was quickly served.

Rothstein probes Heschel’s ability to lift up the quality and outcome of a conversation, but this is of course not what Heschel was best known for. He lifted up the quality of the dialogue exploring, connecting to, and seeking God. And as if that were not enough for one lifetime, he presented his cogent and lofty theology even as he challenged the community to act ethically, to work toward equality for all races, to seek a just peace in the world, and to affirm faith as a powerful motivating factor for good.

When someone comes into my office they invariably note the overflowing bookshelves and the question ‘have you read all of those’ soon follows. My answer is ‘no, but I’m in the middle of most of them.’ One such book is the first volume of Heschel’s biography,

and I happened to be reading the section about the challenges that Heschel faced in completing his doctorate in Berlin. If you know of Heschel's book *The Prophets*, that was his dissertation. Now imagine that it is 1935, turning into 1936. The Nazi party is concentrating its power and anti-Jewish laws are in effect. You are a Jewish academic with a finished tome on the ancient prophets. Your academic submission has been accepted by the university but to obtain your degree you have to deliver two hundred bound copies of the dissertation. You have to supply an abstract summary of your work in Polish and your Polish isn't that good, you have no steady job and virtually no money, and university officials are impatient.

These were Heschel's challenges, and his way through these obstacles can be summed up in two words: extreme perseverance. As his biographer notes, 'Heschel's letters to the authorities in Berlin and Krakow are forthright, dignified, devoid of self-pity. He simultaneously worked on finishing his book and promoting his biography of Maimonides, while beginning another major scholarly project on Ibn Gabirol and medieval Jewish philosophy.' He promoted the new book with energy and sophistication. He arranged for separate covers and title pages for the Polish and German versions of the book. And after three years and two months, the first copies of the book arrived for distribution. Heschel's note to his publisher was found: "The mere words 'thank you' do injustice to my true feelings. Therefore, I can only say that I think about you with great respect and that I always read your words with gratitude and reverence.'

Compared to getting a dissertation published in Nazi Germany, getting eggs made at the Montgomery airport was nothing. More than this, Heschel's bravery in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds at that difficult moment of his life, combined with his constructive way of approaching it toward a positive resolution, reminds me of that part of the bravery of Shifra and Puah, the midwives who risked it all to save our people long ago.

In a few days we ring in 2008 and so the airwaves and whatever kind of wiring the internet flows through are replete with top 10 lists of this and that. One is a selection inspirational vignettes list and I was struck by how a few of them fit into one category or another of the bravery of the midwives. Ishmael Beah was forced into Sierra Leone's bloody civil war at the age of 12. He escaped and wrote a memoir called 'A Long Way Gone' which remains on the bestseller lists. Why did he do that? Recall the inspirational bravery of the midwives, the first ingredient of which is the recognition of certain absolute rights which, when threatened, have to be reclaimed even by so-called ordinary people. As Beah said, "For the sake of these children, it is essential to prove that another life is possible."

Or Nola Ochs, who at the age of 95 became the oldest person in the world to earn a college degree, from Fort Hays State University in Kansas, graduating alongside her 21-year old granddaughter. Recall the second ingredient of Shifra and Puah's bravery – finding a creative way to meet a challenge rather than turning away from it or marching straight into the line of fire. This great grandmother began her march toward her degree 35 years ago in the aftermath of the loss of her husband.

But the exceptional act of bravery which sticks in my head is recalled by this particular top-ten list. It reminds us that while bravery is sometimes defined by perseverance, or by creative planning, or by standing up for what's right, other times we can hope for even a smidgen of the courage shown by construction worker and Navy veteran whose name is Wesley Autrey. On January 2nd 2007 a 19-year old student suffered a seizure and fell onto the tracks of a New York City subway platform in upper Manhattan. Leaving his two young daughters with other witnesses, Mr. Autrey dove on top of him and held him down in a shallow drainage ditch as the train passed over both of them, missing them both by mere inches. Mr. Autrey's response: "I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right."

I imagine the midwives would have said the same thing.