

SHIFRAH AND PUAH / MIRIAM AND JOCHEBED PART I

by Leah Kohn

(The following essay has been adapted from a lecture by Mrs. Leah Kohn)

The story of Shifrah and Puah takes place during the time of the enslavement of the Jewish people by Pharaoh in Egypt. The Torah text tells us, "The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the first was Shifrah and the name of the second was Puah" "When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see them on the birthstool; if it is a son, you are to kill him, and if it is a daughter, she shall live (Exodus 1:15-17)." Pharaoh contrived this blatant - if secret - scheme upon failing to stop the growth of the Jewish people through backbreaking labor. He assumed that the Jewish midwives would follow his orders under threat of death. However, he did not reckon with their spiritual greatness and commitment to God and the Jewish Nation.

Our Sages tell us that the midwives Shifrah and Puah were none other than Jochebed and Miriam, the mother and sister of the yet to be born Moses. Rashi (R' Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, the preeminent Torah commentator) tells us that the name Shifra comes from a Hebrew root that means, "the capacity to make something better, or to improve its quality." In keeping with this characteristic, and contrary to Pharaoh's orders, Shifrah did everything she could to assist the Jewish women in childbirth and to care for their infants after delivery. The name Puah, comes from a Hebrew root that implies a particular gift of speech. Rashi comments that Puah was able to soothe a crying baby to sleep with her special way of talking. Shifrah and Puah's response to Pharaoh's ordination is surprising. We might have expected them to either:

1. Outright refuse to participate with Pharaoh, in keeping with the Torah mandate that a Jew who is ordered to kill another Jew under threat of his own death, should sacrifice his/her own life first, or...
2. Comply with his orders out of fear for their own lives.

Shifrah and Puah were on a very high spiritual level - obviously the type of women who would not hesitate to follow the way of the Torah, and to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of other Jews. Instead, they accept their mission from Pharaoh, and then do exactly the opposite of what he commands. Why this rather convoluted strategy? Considering Shifrah and Puah were not afraid of being put to death by Pharaoh for going against his orders, why did they not tell him, "no" to his face? Given their spiritual greatness, the approach they chose was definitely not an act of cowardice, but instead something more premeditated.

Shifrah and Puah's greatness does not lie only in the fact that they did not kill their fellow Jews. This we expect from every Jewish woman. Rather, what is extraordinary is that, under the circumstances, they had the cool and the ability to think and come up with an original solution. They knew that saying "no" to Pharaoh and losing their lives would only result in the appointment of another two Jewish midwives for the task. These two might be spiritually weaker and willing to give in to Pharaoh's demand, with the resulting termination of the Jewish Nation. So they say "yes" to Pharaoh while, to themselves they said, "we'll find a way to get out of this, but we won't give Pharaoh the option to approach other midwives, because we don't know who those others will be."

In contriving his plan of infanticide, Pharaoh did not reckon with Shifrah and Puah's fear of God. The Torah tells us, "the midwives feared God and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them" The text continues, "and they caused the boys to live" (Shemos, 1:17). In other words, the midwives' commitment to God included a commitment to the promulgation of the Jewish people, which they expressed not only by saving the lives of Jewish-born infants, but by doing everything in their power to care for them after birth. Further, the Midrash tells us that they prayed to God to preserve even the babies who were to die of natural causes, in order to avoid giving Pharaoh the impression that they were in fact abiding by his decree.

Pharaoh eventually summons Shifrah and Puah, and asks them, "How is it that you are not doing my job, whatever I told you to do?" They respond, "the Hebrew women are unlike the Egyptian women, for they are experts; before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth" (Shemos 1:19). The two midwives contend that there is only the afterbirth left by the time they arrive, and that to kill the newly born infants at this point would be to reveal their role as Pharaoh's secret agents. This, Shifrah and Puah argue, would only cause the Jewish women to further deceive them, by giving later due dates, in which case they would never know when a birth was taking place. Shifrah and Puah convinced Pharaoh to continue using their services, which enabled them to continue to preserve the Jewish people.

Subsequently, the Torah text tells us, "God benefited the midwives" and that, "the people increased and became very strong" (Exodus 1:19). Why are these two ideas placed together? And why are they followed by, "And it was because the midwives feared God that He made them houses" (Exodus 1:21). This last statement seems as though it should follow, "God benefited the midwives," as an explanation of the type of reward God gave them for their commitment.

The Or HaChaim (R' Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1743) explains that this seeming interruption - that the Jewish nation multiplied and got very strong - is part of the reward, in two ways. In one way, every baby that was born and remained alive was credited to Shifrah and Puah. Essentially, the Jewish people prospered in the merit of these two women. Even more beautiful, perhaps, is the second explanation that implies they sought no reward from God, but wanted only to serve Him as instruments for the survival of the Jewish people.

At this point in the text, the Torah introduces another story that further highlights the greatness of Shifrah and Puah, which we will explore in our next installment.

Women in Judaism, Copyright (c) 2000 by Mrs. Leah Kohn and ProjectGenesis, Inc.<!-- BEGIN
FOOTER ?