

PARSHAT SHEMOT

Midwives of the Hebrews

The first major attempt to stem the tide of Israelite growth consisted of Paroh ordering midwives to kill male babies at birth. Commentators identify the two midwives with whom he shares his nefarious plot as the "heads of the Department of Midwifery."

"The king of Egypt said to the [Hebrew] midwives [of the Hebrews], whose names were Shifrah and Puah." (1:15) "Whether they are Hebrew midwives — themselves Israelites, or midwives of the Hebrews — themselves Egyptians, depends on how one defines the term 'M'yaldot ha'Ivriyot.'" In "The Living Torah," Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan summarizes the two possibilities: "Some say that these midwives were Israelites (Rashbam), and Talmudic tradition associates them with Yocheved [Moshe's mother] and Miriam or Elisheva (Sotah 11b). Others say that the midwives were Egyptian (Malbim; Josephus)..."



Rabbi Avi Billet

Abraham and Kli Yakar also define them as Egyptians, and Kli Yakar supports his assessment with the depiction of their actions in 1:17: "The midwives feared G-d, and did not do as the Egyptian king had ordered them. They allowed the infant boys to live." He asks, rhetorically, were they Israelites, would the Torah have to tell us they feared G-d?

More to the point, and using logic, Rabbi J.H. Hertz writes in his commentary, "It is hardly probable that the king would have expected Hebrew women to slay the children of their own people."

As many authorities define these midwives as the "chief midwives," it is hard to understand, in a practical sense, how Miriam, Moshe's older sister, or Elisheva, Aharon's wife, could have been one of the chief midwives. According to the Pesikta Rabati 43, Miriam was 6 years old at the time her parents reunited, which would make her anywhere between age 3 and age 6 or 7 when she spoke to

Paroh. Aharon was 3 years older than Moshe; so saying that his wife, Yocheved's daughter-in-law, is working alongside her is also very difficult to accept as the reality.

According to those who identify Shifrah and Puah as Yocheved and Miriam, there are debates as to why they took on these second names, what the names mean, and which one was actually Shifrah and which one was Puah. Suffice to say, the entire re-identification of these two women leaves much unanswered.

Perhaps the approach of Kli Yakar, Abraham and Malbim is the most logical. It is very likely that women who became and become midwives do so because of their desire to participate in creation on a regular basis. A person who is so in tune to the miracle of childbirth cannot help becoming G-d-fearing.

Is it the least bit surprising that midwives, who have devoted their lives and careers to bringing life into the world, would do anything but preserve it? Do they need to be Hebrew midwives in order to do that? Or might they just have a

monopoly on servicing the Jewish community, because word gets around about how good they are?

Using a contemporary example, from the depths of the horrors of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem has made extreme efforts to find and showcase the "righteous gentiles" who put their lives at risk to save Jewish people during the Second World War. Not every person living in a culture of depravity is automatically as bad as the majority.

If Shifrah and Puah were Egyptians who feared G-d, we need not "cover" for their righteous actions by claiming them to be two of our own. They were women who loved babies, cared deeply about their clients and their profession, and would not give in to the awful demands of a totalitarian ruler — who was not monitoring their activities anyway.

Rabbi Kaplan concludes with a third opinion: "One source states that the midwives were proselytes (Midrash Tadshe 21)."

While the premise still finds a need to claim Shifrah and Puah as "two of our own," so to speak, this

Midrash unpacks a greater message than the one which identifies the midwives as the mother and sister of the human deliverer.

The prophet Zechariah (8:23) prophesies of a day when "Ten men of all the languages of the earth will grab hold of the cloak of a Jew and say 'We will go with you, for we have heard G-d is with you.'"

The prophet Micha (4:2) prophesied along similar lines "When many nations will say, 'Let us go up to the House of Hashem and the house of the G-d of Jacob. Let Him show us his ways, so we may follow His path. From Zion will Torah go forth, and the word of Hashem from Jerusalem.'"

If we conduct ourselves correctly, based on the teachings of the Torah and our ancestors, others will come to recognize the beauty of our G-d and our religion on their own and will join our ranks of their own volition.

Questions or comments? Contact Rabbi Avi Billet at newsroom@the-jewishstar.com

ON THE
Calendar

For a complete listing of upcoming community events, including items that didn't make it into the print edition, go to www.thejewishstar.com.

Far Rockaway - A panel of physicians will explore the issues of breast cancer in the Jewish community at a talk on Monday, January 11, 2010, at 8 pm at Congregation Shaaray Tefilah, 25 Central Avenue in Lawrence. The distinguished panel of physicians will include Dr. Jonathan Herman, a specialist in hereditary breast and ovarian cancer in the Ashkenazi Jewish community; Dr. Margo Spitzer, a specialist in the psychiatric aspects of breast and ovarian cancer at St. John's Episcopal Hospital; and Dr. Mendel Warszawsky, chief of oncology at St. John's Episcopal Hospital. To register online go to www.jccrp.org (under News@JCCRP, click December 7, 2009). For telephone information please call 718-869-7750. Light refreshments will be served.

Bellmore - Yiddish theater is coming to Bellmore. The Hazak Chapter of the Bellmore Jewish Center has announced that it is bringing to

Bellmore The Folksbiene Theatre's Traveling Troupe for a performance of "Mama's Loshn Kugel," a Yiddish musical revue with English supertitles, on Sunday, April 18, 2010, at 3 PM. A limited number of seats are available. Tickets are on sale now - \$18 adults, \$12 children 10-16 years old. Call Ruthe at (516) 221-8570 or Bill at (516) 221-2056.

New York City - Celebrate Jewish Heritage Night with the New York Knicks. Tuesday, February 9th, Knicks vs. the Kings. Tickets are \$36 for seating in the 300 level and include a Hebrew Knicks item. Visit tinyurl.com/jccrjhn2010 and enter promo code: JCRC. For more information contact Seth Bettan at 212.465.6516 or email seth.bettan@thegarden.com

ONGOING EVENTS

Far Rockaway - Rabbi Eytan Feiner's Machshavah Shiur in Sifrei Maharal on Chumash and Mo'adim for men and women has resumed. Tuesday evenings from 8:15 p.m. to 9:15 p.m. at Congregation Kneseth Israel, 728 Empire Ave., Far Rockaway. For more information call (718) 327-0500 or

www.whiteshul.com.

Cedarhurst - The JCC of the Greater Five Towns offers "Kids Corner," a program for special needs children, on Sundays, from 12:15 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. A light lunch is provided. For further information please call 516-569-6733, ext. 205.

Stony Brook - Sexual abuse and abduction prevention educational workshops. Parents for Megan's Law and The Crime Victims Center now offer age-appropriate sexual abuse and abduction prevention educational workshops for children, teens and adults. We'll come to your school or community organization. We've educated over 50,000 Long Island children and parents in public and private schools and in community organization! Call our Helpline for more information or to schedule a workshop today (631)-689-2672

Cedarhurst - The Beis Medrash of Cedarhurst holds a Flexible Morning Learning Program Mon. to Thurs. from 10:30 a.m. until 12:45 p.m. There are shiurim and chavrusas in Chumash, Gemara, Halacha and Chovos Halevavos. Learners may come and go as they please. The Beis Medrash of Cedarhurst is located

at 504 W. Broadway (off the corner of W. Broadway and Cedarhurst Ave.) Contact Rabbi Moshe Kaufman at (718) 471-2780 moshekaufman@gmail.com.

Cedarhurst - The JCC of the Greater Five Towns introduces a new program, "Pizza Pals," a social skills program for children with autism, 6th to 8th grade (ages 12-14). For further information please call 569-6733.

Cedarhurst - The JCC of the Greater Five Towns is offering a social day program called "Remember When." This program is especially designed for memory enhancement and socialization. The cost includes a full range of therapeutic activities, morning beverage, dessert, and a kosher lunch. Round-trip door to door handicapped accessible transportation is available on a limited basis. Registration is limited to first come first serve basis to ensure maximum benefits to each participant. The program runs on a summer schedule and meets at Sons of Israel in Woodmere. For further information call the JCC at 569-6733.



LEARN-A-THON

Judah Rhine and his son Kevin learning at Rambam Mesivta's annual father & son Learn-A-Thon on Friday, January 1. The father-son study was followed by a shiur given by Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, then by cholent, kugel and dancing.

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