

SHIPHRA AND PUAH

ויאמר מלך מצרים למיילדות העברית אשר שם האחת שפֶּרָה ושם השנית פּוּעָה:

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

ויאמר בְּיַלְדֹכֶן אֶת־הָעֶבְרָיִוֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אֲמֹר הוּא וְהַמֶּתֶן אִתּוֹ וְאִם־בֵּת הוּא וְחָיָה:

saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool:
More exactly, the brick or stone supports used by Egyptian women during childbirth. if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”

וַתִּירָאנָּן הַמֵּיִלְדוֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיֶינָּן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים:

The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לַמֵּיִלְדוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מִדּוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיֶינָּן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים:

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?”

וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּן הַמֵּיִלְדוֹת אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי לֹא כֹנָשִׁים הַמִּצְרַיִת הָעֶבְרָיִת כִּי־חַיִּוֹת הֵנָּה בְּטָרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמֵּיִלְדוֹת וַיִּלְדוּ:

The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”

וַיִּשָׁב אֱלֹהִים לַמֵּיִלְדוֹת וַיַּרְבּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מְאֹד:

And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.

וַיְהִי כִּי־יִרְאוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים:

And because the midwives feared God, He established households^e*Meaning of Heb. batim uncertain.* for them.

וַיִּצְוָה פַּרְעֹה לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל־הַבֶּן הַיְלֹוֹד הַיְאֹרֶה תִשְׁלִיכֻהוּ וְכָל־הַבַּת תַּחֲיֶינָּן: }פ

Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

So who were these heroines who were willing to risk their lives only to never be mentioned in the Torah again?

The Talmud lets us in on the secret and reveals the real characters behind the code names Shifra and Puah.⁵ The Talmudic sage Rav held that

Shifra referred to Yocheved (Moses' mother) and Puah to Miriam (Moses' sister). The sage Shmuel argued that Puah was actually Elisheva (Moses' sister-in-law, Aaron's wife).

The commentator Rashi takes the view of Rav, and explains the mystery behind the names themselves. The name "Shifra," he says, translates as "improvement," a reference to the way that Yocheved would "improve" the newborns by cleaning them and straightening their limbs. "Puah" means "cooing," a reference to how Miriam would "coo" to the babies and sooth them.⁶

A Numbers Game

So just how many midwives were there? Let's take a step back. Sixty-six Jewish males descended to Egypt, along with many women.⁷ The commentaries tell us that at that point in history all Jewish mothers were having sextuplets.⁸ So that would mean that there was a population boom among the Jewish nation at that time. Their numbers were increasing so dramatically that Pharaoh feared they'd soon be strong enough to wage war against his country!⁹

So how did they do it? How did two midwives single-handedly deliver every baby from every mother?

Most commentaries¹⁰ offer a simple answer: There were in fact many midwives, up to 500 of them.¹¹ Shifra and Puah were merely the ones in charge of all other midwives, hence they were the ones Pharaoh addressed.

Yet Rashi neglects to mention this position, and speaks about Shifra and Puah as if they were the only midwives in Egypt—which would be

impossible!¹² What is even more mind-boggling is the possibility that the midwives weren't necessary at all. As the midwives tell Pharaoh: "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptians, they know how to deliver. They can give birth before a midwife even gets to them."¹³ We know that this wasn't merely an excuse the midwives gave to throw Pharaoh off, because Pharaoh could have easily verified their assertion.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that Yocheved and Miriam still had roles as midwives, as they were available in case of any complications during a birth. Even though they were only two people, their reputation as wellborn and righteous individuals (who would be granted Divine assistance if necessary) was enough to reassure the entire population of birthing women.¹⁴

Jewess or Gentile

What may not be known is whether Shifra and Puah were in fact Israelites. The verse says, "The king of Egypt spoke to the *miyaldot ha-ivriyot*, one of whom was named Shifra and the other Puah."¹⁵ The debate here is whether *miyaldot ha-ivriyot* is translated as "the Hebrew midwives" or "the midwives of Hebrews."

As mentioned before, we typically think of them as Jewish women, because Rashi says they are Yocheved and Miriam. In addition, both Targum Onkules (the Aramaic translation of the [Torah](#)) and Targum Yerushalmi (another Aramaic rendition of the Torah) translate the verse at its straightforward meaning: "Hebrew midwives."¹⁶

However, some commentaries question this stance and feel it doesn't fit with the context of the story. Rabbi Yehudah Hachassid (Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg 1150 – 1217) believed that Shifra and

Puah were actually righteous converts, as it wouldn't make sense that Pharaoh would ask two Jewish women to kill members of their own faith and family. The medieval Midrashic anthology *Yalkut Shimoni* names Shifra and Puah in a list of righteous converts, further supporting the notion that they were indeed Egyptians at first.¹⁷

The Malbim

Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, better known as Malbim, was a rabbi, master of Hebrew grammar and a biblical commentator. He had a novel approach to this whole story. The Malbim believed that Shifra and Puah are not names of people, but rather job titles. One job entailed helping a mother through the labor process, and the other cutting the umbilical cord and tending to the new baby's needs. He further states that Pharaoh addressed many midwives, not only two, and not two who were in charge of many. Further, he says that these were righteous Egyptian women who feared Gd and defied Pharaoh's commands and makes no mention of them converting.

Helping another Jew

The following story illustrates the importance of helping Jewish mothers, as it was revealed to the Baal Shem Tov.¹⁸

As a young man, the Baal Shem Tov would travel from city to city with a group of righteous and holy men who, disguised as paupers, would secretly help those in need. On one of these journeys, the group was in a city named Brody. While there, the Baal Shem Tov saw a poor man bent under his load, but with a bright, holy light radiating from his face.

This simple man was the laughing stock of the city because of his love for goat milk, and when people would catch sight of him, they would call out in laughter, "*Herschel Tzig, trog gezond*," "Herschel goatman, carry your load in health."

The Baal Shem Tov inquired in the town as to who this "Herschel goatman" was. He was told that Herschel was a simple man, a widower for 10 years, with two sons currently learning in *yeshivah*. He earned his keep as a porter, using all profits to provide for his four goats.

The Baal Shem Tov requested from on high that he learn the secret of the shining of Herschel goatman, who shone as bright as the day Moses descended with the Torah for the Jewish people. But Heaven was not forthcoming with the answer. So the Baal Shem Tov fasted and wept for three whole days, until Heaven finally revealed the mystery behind "Herschel goatman."

On the third day of his fast, after the Mincha services, the Baal Shem Tov met Herschel and asked for an invitation to his house. Herschel was more than excited to accept, and led him back to his home, offering a glass of milk free of charge.

Then Herschel began telling his story:

"Ten years ago I lost my wife. She was always very generous to people, constantly visiting the sick and tending to the needs of new mothers. During the mourning period, my wife appeared to me in a dream and told me of the great reward that awaited her for her charitable acts.

"She said, 'Herschel, I had heard a lot from the *maggidim* (preachers) about all the trials and tribulations that await us in the next world. But when

the heavenly courts asked me my name, and I responded, the souls of all the sick and new mothers that I had helped appeared. They pleaded on my behalf before the heavenly throne, and I was granted Gan Eden (paradise). Now Herschel, heed my advice and do as I did and you will be greatly rewarded.'

"Since then," said Herschel, "I purchased four goats and have lovingly cared for them in order to produce milk which I give to sickly and new mothers, all of whom have healed from it.

"My wife came to me in a dream last night and said that if I meet a poor man after Mincha who asks something from me, I should invite him in and offer him a glass of milk, because through him I will merit eternal salvation."

After learning the secret of the simple yet great man, the Baal Shem Tov took Herschel under his wing, and he learned and grew into a hidden *tzaddik*, helping thousands throughout his travels.

YOCHAVED

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בַּת-לֵוִי: 2

A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

וַתְּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא וַתִּצְפְּנֵהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים:

The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months.

וְלֹא-יִכְלָה עוֹד הַצְּפִינֹו וַתִּקַּח-לוֹ תַּבַּת גָּמָא וַתַּחמְרָה בַּחמֶר וּבְזָפַת וַתִּשָּׂם בָּהּ אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשָּׂם בְּסוּף עַל-שַׁפַּת הַיָּאָר:

When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.

וּתְתַצַּב אֶחָתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק לְדַעַת מַה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ:

And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

וּתְרַד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרִחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וְנִעְרַתֶּיהָ הִלְכֹת עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתִּבְיָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחֶהּ:

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it.

וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה־נֹעֵר בֶּכֶה וַתַּחֲמַל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לְדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה:

When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew child.”

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶחָתוֹ אֶל־בַּת־פַּרְעֹה הַאֵלֶּף וַקְרָאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקָת מִן הָעִבְרִיָּת וַתִּינַק לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד:

Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?”

וַתֹּאמֶר־לָהּ בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לָכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ הָעֵלְמָהּ וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־אִם הַיֶּלֶד:

And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.

וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַּת־פַּרְעֹה הֲיִלְכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינַקְתְּוֹ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֶּן אֶת־שִׂכְרְךָ וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּנְיַקְהוּ:

And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.

וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבֹאֶהוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מְשִׁיתָהוּ:

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses,^a*Heb. Mosheh from Egyptian for “born of”*; here associated with *mashah* “draw out.” explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

JEWISH WOMEN’S ARCHIVE: MIDRASH AND AGADDAH

The [midrash](#) portrays Yocheved as a wise woman who was righteous and God-fearing. By merit of her good deeds, she gave birth to the three leaders of the Exodus generation: Moses, Aaron, and [Miriam](#). A number of

miracles were performed for Yocheved in connection with the birth of Moses: she bore him at the age of one hundred and thirty, and God restored her youth and her beauty. Yocheved enjoyed longevity, living to witness the positions of leadership held by her children, and was even one of the Israelites who entered the land of Canaan.

The Conception and Birth of Yocheved

In addition to her given name, the [Torah](#) also designates Yocheved as the “daughter of Levi” ([Num. 26:59](#)): “The name of Amram’s wife was Yocheved daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt.” The midrash adds that she was conceived on the way to Egypt and was born between the walls (at the entrance to Egypt). Although the Torah asserts that Jacob’s household who came to Egypt numbered seventy souls, the Rabbis noted that only sixty-nine individuals are listed in [Gen. 46](#). One of the explanations of this discrepancy is that Yocheved completed the number seventy; she was not included in the list because she was still in her mother’s womb ([Gen. Rabbah 94:9](#)).

Yocheved bore Amram three righteous offspring. Each was a prophet, and each served Israel (provided them physical succor): by merit of Moses, the Israelites were given the manna; by merit of Aaron, clouds of glory surrounded the Israelites and protected them during their journeying in the wilderness; and by merit of Miriam, the well accompanied them wherever they went. Accordingly, [Prov. 14:1](#): “The wisest of women builds her house” is applied to Miriam ([Midrash Proverbs 14:1](#)). The midrash apparently understands “builds her house” in a broad sense, because Yocheved’s wisdom in the raising of her own children led to the building and firm establishment of the entire people of Israel.

Shiphrah Is Yocheved

The Rabbis identify Yocheved with [Shiphrah](#), one of the two Hebrew [midwives](#) (Shiphrah and [Puah](#)) who delivered the children of the Israelites during the Egyptian servitude. The Torah relates that the midwives did not fulfill Pharaoh's command because they feared God, who rewarded them for their actions: "He established households [*battim*] for them" ([Ex. 1:21](#)), which the Rabbis understand as priestly and Levitical households, or as royal households. Yocheved herself was from the tribe of Levi, and her two sons Aaron and Moses attained the High Priesthood and the scepter of royalty (BT [Sotah](#) 11b).

According to one midrashic view, Shiphrah and Puah were mother and daughter— Yocheved and Miriam, while another states that they were daughter-in-law and mother-in-law—Yocheved and [Elisheba](#) daughter of Amminadab. Yocheved was given the name "Shiphrah" because she would cleanse (*meshaperet*) the newborn, by washing it and cleaning it after birth; another etymological explanation is that, by merit of her deeds, the Israelites were fruitful [*she-paru*] and multiplied in her time (*Sifrei on Numbers*, para. 78).

Yet another tradition explains that she *shiprah* her actions before God (i.e., performed good deeds that were pleasing to the Lord). An additional midrashic explanation of her name is that she smoothed over (*shiprah*) her daughter Puah's words. The latter had spoken impudently to Pharaoh, who sought to kill her in his anger. Shiphrah placated him, saying: "Do you pay attention to such a one as her? She is a witless baby."

[Ex. 1:17](#) relates that "the midwives, fearing God, let the boys live"; their reward for fearing God, according to the midrash, is Torah: because Yocheved feared the Lord, she gave birth to Moses, through whom the Torah was given (*Ex. Rabbah* 1:16).

Her Divorce and Remarriage to Amram

[Ex. 2](#) tells of the birth of Moses. It begins with the marriage of Yocheved and Amram, and then the reader is immediately told of Moses's birth, concealment and rescue. This sequence omits a lengthy period of time, for Yocheved and Amram already had two other children (Aaron and Miriam) when Moses was born. The Torah seemingly chose to concentrate on the birth of Israel's deliverer, and therefore did not mention his two elder siblings. The Rabbis resolve this abbreviated chronology by stating that Yocheved and Amram divorced, and [Ex. 2:1](#) portrays their remarriage.

According to this tradition, Amram was the leading scholar of the generation. When he saw that Pharaoh had decreed that all the boys be cast into the Nile, he proclaimed: "Are we laboring in vain?" (we give birth to sons who will eventually be killed), and so he divorced his wife. All Israel saw this, and in consequence they also divorced their wives.

Miriam, who was six years old at the time, said: "Father, father, your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh. Pharaoh only decreed against the males, but you have decreed against both the males and the females [since all the Israelites withdrew from their wives, neither sons nor daughters would come into the world]. Pharaoh decreed only for this world, but you decreed both for this world and the next [a baby that was born and died as a result of Pharaoh's decree would merit the World to Come, but an unborn child would not attain this]. It is doubtful whether the decree of the wicked Pharaoh will be fulfilled, but you are righteous, and your decree will undoubtedly be fulfilled."

Amram heeded his daughter, and returned to his wife, whom he remarried in a public celebration with all possible pomp and ceremony: he sat

her in a palanquin, Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the ministering angels proclaimed (Ps. 113:9): “He sets the childless woman [*akeret ha-bayit*] among her household as a happy mother of children.” Yocheved, who had been uprooted [*nitakrah*] from her home as a result of the decree of Pharaoh, would now be set happily among her household. All Israel saw this, and they, too, remarried their wives.

In the Rabbinic retelling, when Amram returned his wife, Yocheved was a hundred and thirty years of age, but signs of youth appeared on her: her body became smoother, her wrinkles were straightened out, and her former beauty was restored. She therefore was called “daughter [*bat*, which also means “young girl”] of Levi,” because she was once again as a young girl (BT *Bava Batra* 120a).

The Conception and Birth of Moses

In the Rabbinic exegesis, Yocheved was already pregnant with Moses before Amram divorced her, and the fetus in her womb was three months old when he remarried her. If so, then why does Ex. 2:1–2 state that he “married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son,” since she conceived before this second marriage? Rather, this verse teaches that Yocheved’s pregnancy was without suffering, just as she gave birth without pain. The Rabbis deduced from this that righteous women are not subject to the decree passed on Eve (that is, the curse of “in pain shall you bear children” [Gen. 3:16] does not apply to them) (BT *Sotah* 12a).

When Moses was born, Yocheved saw (Ex. 2:2) “how good [*tov*] he was.” The Rabbis ask what Yocheved saw that was special in her son, on account of which she sought to save him from Pharaoh’s death decree. According to one opinion, she realized that he was suited to be a prophet; according to another,

she saw that he was born circumcised; and according to a third exegetical suggestion, she saw that the entire house was filled with light ([BT Sotah 12a](#)).

In all three explanations, Yocheved immediately comprehended that her son was meant for greatness, and she discerned that he possessed unique spiritual qualities. According to another interpretation, Yocheved named her son “Tov” or “Tobiah,” which was what his parents called him until Pharaoh’s daughter renamed him “Moses” ([BT Sotah 12a](#)).

Yocheved succeeded in concealing Moses for three months ([Ex. 2:2](#)). In the midrashic exegesis, the Egyptians counted the months of her pregnancy only from her return to Amram; they did not know that she was already in the third month (see above), and so Moses could be hidden in his parents’ home until he had had time to grow and develop.

After three months Yocheved was forced to obey the decree of Pharaoh. The midrash describes in detail how she prepared the ark for Moses. She chose bulrushes, a soft and flexible material that is capable of withstanding contact with both soft and hard objects. She caulked it with “bitumen and pitch” ([Ex. 2:3](#)), lining the inside with bitumen, and coating it on the outside with pitch, so that Moses would not smell the bad odor given off by the latter. The wording “she placed it among the reeds” (*ibid.*) teaches that Yocheved put the ark in a protected place, where bushes and reeds grew.

Another midrash has Yocheved building a little canopy for Moses inside the ark, for she said to herself: Perhaps I will not see him under his wedding canopy ([BT Sotah 12a–b](#)). This portrayal emphasizes the painstaking attention that Yocheved paid to every detail in the ark. She took leave of her baby with a heavy heart and tried with all her might to protect him and ensure that he remain alive.

Moses’s Wet Nurse

In the midrashic account, the daughter of Pharaoh saw that Moses was hungry when she drew him from the river. She brought him to all the Egyptian women, but Moses was not willing to nurse from any of them. Moses said: The mouth that will speak with God will not nurse something impure [the milk of non-Jews]. Consequently, Miriam came and offered to the daughter of Pharaoh her mother Yocheved, who was “a Hebrew” ([Ex. 2:7](#), [BT Sotah 12b](#)). According to another midrash, Moses rejected the breasts of the Egyptian women because he said: “God will speak with me. The next day the Egyptian women would say that I nursed the one who speaks with the *Shekhinah* [the Divine Presence]” (*Ex. Rabbah* 1:25).

Yocheved nursed Moses for twenty-four months (*Ex. Rabbah* 1:26). God returned her child to her, thus granting her a part of her reward for keeping alive the Hebrew boys (*Ex. Rabbah* 1:25; for the identification of Yocheved with Shiphrah, see above).

Yocheved entered the Land of Canaan

When Moses was about to die, he addressed God and begged for his life. One of the arguments advanced by Moses was his mother’s suffering. He said: “Master of the Universe! My mother Yocheved’s teeth were blunted by [the death of] two of her children in her lifetime; will more of her teeth be blunted by my death?” But this argument, too, was of no avail (*Deut. Rabbah* [ed. Lieberman], pp. 40–41). This exegesis teaches of Yocheved’s longevity, and that she was still alive when Moses died. This is corroborated by another early midrash, that states that Yocheved was one of the offspring of Jacob who went down to Egypt and was also among those who entered the land of Canaan (*Seder Olam Rabbah* 9).