

“A flea can bite the bottom of the Pope in Rome!” This is a line from a song that our son Isaiah is constantly singing as he prepares to perform at the Kiwanis festival (thanks to his number one booster Evelyn Greenberg). It’s a song from *Les Misérables*, which I’ve come to learn is missing from the American version of the show. (Too risqué, I suppose.) It’s a shame because it’s a very cute song, and with a message. The point of the song is that although some things or people might seem small and negligible, still - “A flea can bite the bottom of the Pope in Rome!” A little person or thing can have a significant effect.

This song could also be included in a musical about our Torah portion, *Shemot*—with a slight modification—a flea could bite the bottom of the Pharaoh in Egypt! And, indeed, they did.

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.’” (Ex. 1:8-10) The Israelites had to face adversity. They were slaves, trapped in their role with no way out. Or were they? It’s most interesting to take a look at the way the women of the story reacted to the adversity with which they were faced.

“The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifra and the other Puah, saying, ‘When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.’ The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.” (1:15-17) Who were Shifra and Puah? The Hebrew is unclear. It is not certain whether they were “Hebrew midwives” or Egyptian

women who were “midwives to the Hebrews.” If they are Hebrews, they exhibit extraordinary defiance against the Pharaoh. If they are Egyptians, their bravery is even more remarkable. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, in her book *ReVisions*, points out that the midwives hold enough importance for Pharaoh to command them directly by speech—or perhaps they pose enough of a threat. They belong to the privileged class, to be rewarded handsomely for doing Pharaoh’s dirty work. Thus they stand to lose a great deal if they aid the Hebrew women, who belong to the slave caste. Shifra and Puah give us a glimpse of a female “underground railroad.” They “fear God.” They are more afraid of God than of Pharaoh. If they are not Hebrews, whose God do they fear—their own or the God of the Hebrews? By coming into contact with Hebrew women, they are influenced by the monotheism and loyalty they witness and are inspired to fear the Hebrew God. They respect how much the Hebrew women have retained their dignity. Shifra and Puah do not accept this tyranny over the Hebrews by the new regime, for perhaps they remember the “old days” when Hebrews and Egyptians lived together in peace. Either way, they teach us a lesson in civil disobedience. (*ReVisions*, p.73)

We meet Moses’ parents in Exodus chapter 6. His father is called Amram, his mother, Yocheved. This is the only place in the Torah where the name of Moses’ mother is mentioned. Her name suggests humility: Ya-kavod, to God the glory goes. Not to me, the mother, but to the Father (God-Yah in Hebrew). The human father, Amram, is completely peripheral in the story, overshadowed by Yocheved and Miriam. He plays no role in the hiding or subsequent saving of his child. Yocheved engineers the saving of Moses. She was able to hide him for a time, the text tells us, because he was a “beautiful” or “good”

child. This word, in Hebrew *tov*, probably refers to Moses' being healthy or quiet. She constructs the basket in which Moses will survive the Nile River. Yocheved knew he could survive in the basket if he was healthy, and if he was quiet.

Miriam, whom the Torah initially calls simply "his sister," takes it upon herself to watch the baby in the basket to learn what would happen to him. Miriam plays a crucial role in the Exodus story. She organises Moses' adoption by Pharaoh's daughter. She ensures that Moses is brought back to his mother for nursing. And later she leads in song and dance at the sea. In Micah 6, we read of the "team" of three leaders: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. In the Talmud we read, "Three good leaders arose for Israel: Miriam, Moses and Aaron. On their account three things were given to the Israelites, the well, the pillar of smoke and the manna." (Ta'anit 9a) Miriam becomes associated with the ability of the Israelites to find water in the desert. Almost every story in which she appears takes place near water, as we see here in our story.

Finally, we see Pharaoh's daughter also defying the rules decreed by her father. Pharaoh's daughter saves Moses even though she is going against her father's wishes. She even offers to pay a wet nurse wages, even though Jews are slaves under her father. It seems that her father's policy had nothing to do with her maternal compassion. Could she really not have known that the baby was a Hebrew? Did she really not realize that the wet nurse was the child's mother? Perhaps she and Miriam and Yocheved were all working together. Why else would she offer to pay wages to a slave woman? She has great mercy, not only on the child, but on the whole family. As royalty, she has no reason to pay this Hebrew slave. As a woman, she has compassion on another woman.

Pharaoh's daughter is pictured in a positive light, though she is the daughter of the enemy. She takes a risk by bringing a Hebrew child into the palace to be raised as her own son. Surely this is a most independent woman, unafraid of her powerful father! The midrash asks: why did she go to the Nile on just that day? Perhaps she was going to it as a *mikveh*, to rid herself of the impurities of her father's house. She is righteous, more righteous than Pharaoh, and worthy to be the adoptive mother of the man who will eventually overturn her father's kingdom. Perhaps she hopes for just such an outcome.

The women—the midwives, Yocheved, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter—work together to act as a counter-cultural force against Pharaoh's oppression. They work, not behind the scenes, but visibly, affecting history. The women in this story never lose sight of normal human behaviour. When society told them that Hebrew boys were to be killed, they rebelled, each in the way she could. They never lose sight of normal human compassion and they do not allow technology or conflict to distort this vision.

We must learn from these women. We too can make changes—true, we are not fighting against a mighty Pharaoh, but we are fighting some strong, malevolent forces.

We should not be afraid to speak up and let our voices be heard. We should not be afraid to take action in support of something we believe in. We don't always have to work behind the scenes, taking the politically correct route, or the prudent tactics. I believe that speaking up, protesting, using our voices, and working for change makes a difference—no matter how small we may think we are. When our people unite, we are strong, and we can make a difference.

I believe that the hostage families coming together in hostage square weekly, daily even, has made a difference, and God willing, many of their loved ones will come home soon. When they do, we will need to use our voices again. Because, as we know too well, the world will deny what they see in front of them with their own eyes. They will deny the abuse, mistreatment and the torture the hostages have endured. They will deny the injustice and criminality of such treatment. And it will be up to us—every one of us—to use our voices and whatever platform we may have not to let that happen. We must be the fleas.

Our Torah portion tells us that we can make a difference. Let us have faith that this is so.

Amen.

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