



The “Burning Bush” may have been a bright desert herb, and inspired the shape of the Menorah

Shabbat Shalom, Mt. Sinai! This week we enter the Book of Exodus, and again begin to retell the story of our enslavement and liberation from Slavery. While most people connect the Exodus story with Passover in the Spring, our weekly Torah reading cycle also walks us through this liberation journey in the Winter. The ancient tale of struggle and liberation from slavery has fascinated and inspired many peoples of the world for centuries. Today let us focus on the role of the midwives Shifrah and Puah, who defied Pharaoh’s cruelty, and found ways to save the first-born male sons from death. The midwives are more than individual heroines against Pharaoh’s hard-heartedness; they are archetypes and symbols we should emulate. Midwives are by nature partners in bringing forth Life. While Pharaoh represents corruption and lust for power, the midwives represent the human capacity to revere and save life. This archetypal struggle lies at the heart of the Torah, and of Judaism: who will you serve? Will you serve your own lust for power and control, believing that all other beings exist only for your gratification? Or will you serve the God revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush, whose name is “I am Becoming”? Judaism wants us to be Midwives of life.

In every encounter, we should ask ourselves: how can I be a channel of Life? But Midwifery is not for the faint of heart. Birthing is dangerous and messy. So much is out of our control, so much can go awry. It seems safer simply keep one’s life in order. But if you only maintain order, you will miss the miracle of new life being born. You will miss the privilege, the joy, the exhilarating wonder of being present at Life’s Unfolding.

Our tradition also compares Moshe Rabbeynu to a midwife. Growing up in Pharaoh’s palace, he learns the ways of power, but he is not prepared to be a compassionate leader. When he runs away to the wilderness, he spends years as a shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro’s flocks. It is

as a shepherd that Moses learns to be a midwife for life, for a good shepherd must care for his flock, know each one by name, protect them from predators...and birth the lambs and kids. The Midrash relates that Moses arrived at the Burning Bush when he went to retrieve a lamb that had gone astray; and when God saw that Moshe had such compassion for the weak, God knew that Moses was ready to lead his people. It was only then that God called out from the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

Our tradition even considers God to be like a midwife. Egypt in Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*, which means "the Narrow Place" or "the "Constricted Place." This interpretation sees *Mitzrayim* as the womb, the ten plagues as the contractions of labor pains, and the parting of the Red Sea as the opening of the birth canal, through which God the Midwife delivers the Children of Israel to freedom. Birth can be a painful, traumatic, and bloody process, especially when the womb is constricted or when there are complications. So we celebrate with joy and awe when the baby finally leaves the birth canal and is born into Freedom. That is why the Song of the Sea describes how Miriam led the Children of Israel in singing, "*Mi chamocha ba'elim, Hashem, mi kamocho, ne'edar ba'kodesh*" - "Who can compare to You, Midwife of Life, among all the powers of the universe; what can compare to this awesome and holy experience of being present at the birth of new life!" (Exodus 15:11)

The God we Jews worship is both Midwife and Life Itself. God calls on us to transcend our fears, our arrogance, and our hardened and stubborn hearts, so that we might always choose the messy, exhilarating and holy task of being midwives for life. To what are you "giving birth"?