



# Ohr Yerushalayim News

10th January 2015 - Volume 7 - Issue 26 – פרשת שמות – י"ט טבת תשע"ה

## Who Called Whom What?

Dani Epstein

In the beginning of שמות we read the following:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדוֹת הָעֵבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֵחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה

The King of Egypt said to the midwives of the Ivrim of which one was called Shifroh and the other Puah.

The question is: who called the midwives Shifra and Puah?

Rashi comments as follows:

שפּרה: זו יוכבד על שם שמשפרת את הולד

פּועה: זו מרים שפועה ומדברת והוגה לולד כדרך הנשים המפייסות תינוק הבוכה

Shifra: this was Yocheved since she made the children look nice

Puah: This is Miriam, who would coo and talk to the babies in the way women do who are calming a crying child

So it seems quite straightforward, Shifra refers to Yocheved, and Puah to Miriam. Or does it?

The מדרש רבה records the following argument:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדוֹת וְגו' מֵה הֵיוּ הַמִּילֵדוֹת רַב אָמַר כֻּלָּהּ וְחִמּוּתָהּ וַיֹּכבֵד וְאֵלֵי־שִׁבְעָה בַת עֵמִינָדָב, רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָן אָמַר אִשָּׁה וְבַתָּהּ וַיֹּכבֵד וּמִרְיָם

The King of Egypt said to the midwives etc. Who were the midwives? Rav says "A daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law, i.e. Yocheved and Elisheva the daughter of Aminodov". Rav Shmuel Bar Nachmon says: "A woman and her daughter; Yocheved and Miriam."

So, clearly Rashi is not quoting from this midrash, since he does not mention the argument. Furthermore, the midrash provides a long list of explanations for the name Shifra, but the explanation Rashi provides for Puah is not listed there.

Nonetheless, the conventional reading of Rashi is that these names were assigned to Yocheved and Miriam by the Torah, perhaps as a comment on their incredible daring in the face of Pharaoh's orders. Certainly he appears to stand by his contention that Shifra and Puah refer to Yocheved and Miriam, since further on Rashi writes this:

ויעש להם בתים: - בתי כהונה ולויה ומלכות שקרוין בתים.

He made houses for them: Houses of Priesthood, Levites and Royalty which are referred to as "houses".

I'm very grateful to Simon Grant for bringing the following explanation to my attention. In his work "Shaarei Simcha", Rav Simcha Bunim Sofer – commonly known as the Shevet Sofer - has quite a different take on this. Pharaoh did not want to get rid of the Ivrim by mass-murder because that was something which the Egyptian hoi-polloi would never allow without some considerable convincing. (The Ivrim were not unpopular with the indigenous Egyptians, since they had been accorded great honour by the previous Pharaoh, and the incredible blessing that Ya'akov had brought down with him was probably still extant in the cultural memory). He therefore decided to get rid of them by plot.

Now, Pharaoh couldn't simply tell the midwives to go and kill off all the baby boys, because a sudden sharp rise in the mortality rate of male newborns would point the finger of suspicion at Pharaoh. So he got really smart and called in Yocheved and Miriam and appointed them to the job of Senior Baby Beautician and Chief Baby Comforter

respectively, and did so publicly and by Royal Fiat, officially naming them Shifra and Puah. They were also put in charge of all the midwives (who were not Ivrim, but Egyptian). What's more, they had to provide their services at no cost! An ancient world socialist health system.

The verses appear to support this, since לְמִילֵדוֹת הָעֵבְרִית can be read to mean "the midwives of the Ivrim" as opposed to "the midwives who are Ivri".

He was now able to tell the Egyptian midwives to go and kill all the Ivri baby boys, because no-one would suspect the sudden high mortality rate of Ivri boys as a plot from Pharaoh. After all, he was the one who created a national health service and had put two Ivri women in charge of it all.

As always, Rav Meir Leibush Malbim has an analytical approach that demands a rigorous fidelity to the text. Initially he takes much the same view as the Shevet Sofer.

Firstly, as Rav Avrohom Ibn Ezra notes, a population with the combined size of Goshen and Egypt could simply not survive with two midwives. So they – Yocheved and Miriam – were put in charge of all the midwives. The Malbim argues that there were two specialities: those midwives who dealt with the mothers and baby during birth and they were known as "Shifra", and the midwives who dealt with the health of the babies, known as a "Puah".

He goes on to note the strange repetition of the word "וַיֹּאמֶר":

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדוֹת הָעֵבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֵחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִדְכֶן אֶת הָעֵבְרִיּוֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל הָאֲבָבִים אִם בֶּן הוּא וְהַמֵּתָן אֹתוֹ וְאִם בַּת הוּא וְחִיָּה

As a rule, when there are two occurrences of the word וַיֹּאמֶר in what appears to be the same part of the narrative, this implies that two distinct conversations were held. So, why did Pharaoh have two conversations with Yocheved and Miriam? Or did he?

## The Week Ahead

### פרשת שמות

|                              |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Candle Lighting              | 3.55pm          |
| Mincha & Kabbolas Shabbos    | 4.00pm          |
| Seder HaLimud                | 8.40am          |
| Shacharis                    | 9.00am          |
| סוף זמן ק"ש                  | 10.19am         |
| 1st Mincha                   | 1.30pm          |
| Rov's Hilchos Shabbos Shiur  | 3.19pm          |
| 2nd Mincha                   | 3.49pm          |
| Seuda Shlishis               | following       |
| Motzei Shabbos               | 5.09pm          |
| Ovos uBonim                  | 6.24pm          |
| Sunday                       | 7.15am / 8.20am |
| Monday / Thursday            | 6.45am / 7.10am |
| Tuesday / Wednesday / Friday | 6.45am / 7.20am |
| Mincha & Maariv              | 4.05pm          |
| Late Maariv                  | 8.00pm          |

Well, what Pharaoh wanted to achieve was the death of all the male children, but he had a dilemma. If he publicly announced the execution of all male babies this would be a politically dangerous step for him. But how was he to carry out such a complex plan all on his own? Surely the best way to deal with this “problem” was to tackle it at source.

So after appointing the two Ivrim women, Pharaoh had a quiet word with the Egyptian midwives on the side to deal with the Ivri baby boys. Of course he did not give them direct instructions to murder the boys, and we know this because had they violated an explicit order they would have been killed rather than be invited to the palace for an interview post facto by Pharaoh, as we see later on: **וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמִּיּוֹדוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מִדּוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיֶינּוּ.**

**את הילדים** - So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, that you have enabled the boys to live?" Had he issued a direct order, what he should have said was "Why did you disobey me?"

Now we can understand that the first instance of the occurrence of **וַיִּאמֶר** is referring to the appointment of Yocheved and Miriam, with second **וַיִּאמֶר** being the quiet suggestion he made to the Egyptian midwives. Since it was only a suggestion the word **וַיִּאמֶר** he said – is used to denote this, as opposed to using **וַיִּצַו** he commanded.

The Egyptian midwives realised that if the King was not giving them an order but merely making a suggestion on how they could deal with the “Ivri problem”, the moral responsibility of the deaths of the children they killed would be on their heads. However, **וַתִּירָאנָה הַמִּיּוֹדוֹת אֶת אֱלֹהִים**, they feared Elo-him and decided not to follow the royal “suggestion”. Not only that, they did exactly the opposite and provided everything the child would require in order to survive: resuscitation, water and food.

What really got Pharaoh's goat was that not only did they deliver the boys, but they provided them with food everything they needed to give them a good start to life. This is why he yelled at them **וַתַּחֲיֶינּוּ אֶת הַיְלָדִים** as opposed to yelling at them for not killing the babies. It's one thing being unwilling to actually kill the babies. It's quite another to go and actively help the boys survive, and for that there was no excuse.

The Egyptian midwives were in hot water now, but they were prepared and answered very wisely.

**כִּי לֹא כַנְשִׁים הַמִּצְרַיִת הָעֵבְרִית כִּי חַיּוֹת הֵנָּה בְּטָרֵם תְּבֹאוּ אֵלֶיהֶן הַמִּיּוֹדוֹת וַיִּלְדוּ**

Unlike the Egyptian women are the Ivrim, because they are skilled in midwifery. By the time the [Egyptian] midwife arrives, they have given birth.

The midwives explained to Pharaoh that not only were the the Ivri women were able to perform themselves all the jobs the Shifra midwives would do, they were also capable of doing the jobs of the Puah midwives as well. So imagine if only the Shifra midwives turn up, or the Puahs would attended as well but just hang around and not bother to do anything; all the Ivrim would become suspicious of their sudden lack of attendance or inactivity and that suspicion would fall on Pharaoh. So the Egyptian midwives claimed that by carrying out both Shifra and Puah midwifery they were in fact protecting Pharaoh!

Game, set, but not quite match. Pharaoh had one more trick up his royal sleeve.

Since he realised that his plot failed miserably, and that the midwives all feared Elo-him, he decided to out his plan and publicly announced his intentions. The problem was implementing them. Who exactly was going to kill the male babies? Certainly not the midwives, whom as he had just discovered he was unable to coerce en-masse and were quite unwilling to do so.

Pharaoh therefore decided to enlist his entire nation to do the job, and ran a propaganda campaign against the Ivrim. But how would they know when an Ivri woman was about to have a child? They would hardly hang around Goshen to read the “wails, bells and knells” column in the local Goshen press.

In order to know when the Ivri women were about to give birth, he had houses constructed for all the midwives where they were required to sit in whilst on duty, and he had a supervisor sit there as well. When an Ivri man came rushing in calling for a midwife, the supervisor would instruct someone to go with and deal with the baby if it was a boy.

Hence the order of the verses:

**וַיִּטֹּב אֱלֹקִים לַמִּיּוֹדוֹת וַיַּרְבֵּה הָעָם וַיַּעֲצְמוּ מֵאֵד**

Hashem repaid the midwives for their good deeds by making the Ivri population explode.

**וַיְהִי כִּי יָרְאוּ הַמִּיּוֹדוֹת אֶת אֱלֹקִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בְּתֵיבִים**

When Pharaoh saw that the Egyptian midwives feared Elo-him, Pharaoh created houses for them to sit in.

**וַיִּצַו פְּרַעֲוֹה לְכָל עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל הַבֵּן הַיּוֹדֵד תִּשְׁלִיכֵהוּ וְכָל הַבַּת תַּחֲיֶינָהּ**  
The Pharaoh commanded his people to keep track of the births via the supervisors in order to kill the male babies.

So who called the midwives Shifra and Puah? Which midwives were called Shifra and Puah?

The conventional reading of Rashi appears to imply that the Torah calls Yocheved and Miriam by the name Shifra and Puah in order to praise them for the “extra mile” they went in their care for the babies. Rav Simcha Bunim Sofer clearly states that this name was assigned to them by Pharaoh, not the Torah. According to the Malbim, neither Yocheved nor Miriam were called Shifra or Puah by anyone. These were the professional terms of art employed by the population of Egypt and Goshen to distinguish the two classes of practitioners of midwifery. Perhaps Yocheved and Miriam were midwives as the midrash suggests, or perhaps they were simply the directors of the Post-Natal division of the Egyptian National Health Service, but either way they had no special claim to the usage of the names Shifra and Puah.

Both these explanations illuminate the decision of Rashi not to quote the midrash in its entirety, but to partially quote and paraphrase in order to explain that those names referred to professional roles.

### Addendum I

Don Yitzchak Abarbanel states quite clearly, inter alia, that the **מִיּוֹדוֹת הָעֵבְרִית** were the Egyptian midwives, and broadly follows the approach outlined above.

### Addendum II

Chaim Green of Golders Green observed that that there is a precedent for Pharaoh naming someone when they were appointed to a high post, that of **וַיִּקְרָא פְּרַעֲוֹה שֵׁם-יוֹסֵף, צִפְנַת פַּעֲנֵה** - in which we read: Pharaoh named Yosef “Tsofnas Panayach”, meaning the “revealer of hidden things” (Rashi).

### Hit For Six

**D Fine (Shortvort.com)**

I see a(nother) head! The Midrash Rabbah (1:8) says that in Egypt the Bnei Yisrael gave birth to six babies at once (don't worry - angels came and looked after the kids throughout their youth until their teenage years - so it was not a constant nappy-changing affair).

Now where is this hinted at in the Torah? The Midrash (and Ba'al HaTurim) point out that the six phrases in 1:7 ‘and Bnei Yisrael multiplied, swarmed, increased, strengthened, very much’ hint at these sextuplet births. However, as the Mizrahi points out, it seems that Rashi did not learn like this. For Rashi (1:7) points out that the women of Bnei Yisrael had six babies in one go from the third phrase of the pasuk (vayishretzu).

If Rashi held like the Ba'al HaTurim then he should have put this observation on all the phrases of the pasuk - or at least on the last word. As the Sifsei Chachamim say, it seems that Rashi is explaining the pasuk according to one opinion brought in the Yalkut; that the hint to these sextuplet births is from the interesting word vayishretzu alone.

How? For vayishretzu comes from the word sheretz (an insect/creature), and apparently there are some sheratzim that give birth to six children at once.