

TORAH WEEKLY



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Special Delivery

By: Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher (Originally Published 2012)

Midwifery wasn't supposed to be a dangerous profession.

But then again, these weren't normal times. Pharaoh, in a panic that the savior of the Jewish People would soon be born, orders the Jewish midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill every male child born to the Jewish women. Shifra and Puah knew good and well that to disobey Pharaoh could mean death. But, says the Torah, they were G-d- fearing women. And G-d forbids killing babies, even on pain of death. So, they hemmed and hawed to Pharaoh, while the babies kept on coming.

Who were these two heroic women? Rashi (1:15) tells us that Shifra was none other than Yocheved, Moshe's mother, and Puah was Miriam, Moshe's sister. Why the name change, you ask? Rashi further explains that the name Shifra connotes that she beautified and pampered (no, not those pampers) the baby, while Puah was so called because she would make cooing noises (think poo-poo-poo) to calm the infant.

Wonderful names, but, if it were me, I'd prefer a name that personified selflessness in saving those babies from death, rather than one that told of my babysitting abilities. Yet the Torah saw fit to identify these women with names that bespoke their baby-care talents. Why?

Rabbi Shimshon Pincus (1944-2001), in his work Tiferes Torah, explains that the greatness of Yocheved and Miriam – a.k.a. Shifra and Puah – did not lie merely in their willingness to sacrifice their lives to fulfill G-d's Will. Certainly, G-d's Word motivated them to risk their lives. But the primary focus of their lives was to be "mothers" of the Jewish Nation. They didn't merely deliver the babies; they looked after their well-being to the nth degree, even to the point of beautifying and calming the children, as a mother would do for her child.

However, if we were to merely examine their heroic refusal of Pharaoh, we wouldn't necessarily conclude that their lifelong devotion was to be a "mother" to all the Jewish babies. One could argue that they simply realized it was improper to save their lives through taking another. However, when we discover that even after illegally delivering the babies alive, they cared for them, pampered them, cooed to them, going to great lengths to take care of their most insignificant needs, we realize that these women had a much greater mission in mind. Hence, the names they were given, Shifra and Puah, are indeed quite apropos, for they tell us of the lifelong desire of this great mother-daughter team to care for all the Jewish babies as a mother would.

The Torah tells us that as reward for their efforts, Hashem gave them "houses". What is the nature of these houses? Rashi (1:21) explains that Yocheved was the matriarch of the House of the Priesthood; she had a son Aharon, from whom would descend Kohanim; she also merited to have a major part of the House of the Levites descend from her, through her son Moshe. Miriam would merit to be the progenitor of the House of David, as David, King of Israel, descended from her.

Rabbi Pincus explains that these "houses" were a fitting reward for Yocheved and Miriam. Since, as was explained, their sole desire was to be a "mother" to the Jewish people, Hashem responded in kind, and they became the founders of two of the most prestigious dynasties in Jewish history.

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Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

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