Parashat Shemot

Numbers 1:15-21

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמְיַלְּדֹת הָעִבְרִיֹּת אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאַחַת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה: וַיֹּאמֶר
בְּיַלֶּדְכֶן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל־הָאָבְנָיִם אִם־בֵּן הוּא וַהֲמִתֶּן אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בַּת הִוא וָחָיָה:
וַתִּירֶאןָ הַמְיַלְּדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ אֶת־הַיְלָדִים:
וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לַמְיַלְּדֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מַדּוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתְּחַיֶּיןָ
אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: וַתֹּאמַרְןָ הַמְיַלְּדֹת אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי לֹא כַנָּשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיֹּת הָעִבְרִיֹּת כִּי־חָיוֹת הֵנָּה
בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמְיַלֶּדֶת וְיָלָדוּ: וַיֵּיטֶב אֱלֹהִים לַמְיַלְּדֹת וַיִּרֶב הָעָם וַיַּעַצְמוּ מְאֹד: וַיְהִי
כִּי־יָרְאוּ הַמְיַלְּדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים:

(15) The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, (16) 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." (17) The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. (18) So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" (19) 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." (20) And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. (21) And [God] established households for the midwives, because they feared God.

Guiding Question
What does moral courage look like when resistance takes the form of simply doing one's job faithfully?

Section I: Power Meets Professional Conscience

Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*
[1923–2005, United States]

Pharaoh's command is chilling precisely because it is bureaucratic. He does not order soldiers, but workers, to weaponize their roles in service of state policy.

James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*
[1945–, United States]

The Torah highlights the ordinariness of the setting to emphasize that moral collapse and moral resistance often occur within routine structures rather than dramatic confrontations.

Questions
- Why does Pharaoh rely on professionals rather than force?
- What moral pressure is created when wrongdoing is embedded in ordinary work?

Section II: Fear of God Versus Fear of Power

Avivah Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*
[1944–, United Kingdom / Israel]

"Fear of God" here does not indicate piety alone. It signals an alternative moral horizon that interrupts the logic of obedience.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*
[1892–1971, United States]

Individuals may retain moral clarity even when institutions normalize injustice. Ethical insight often survives longest at the margins of power.

Questions

- What kind of fear enables resistance rather than paralysis?
- How does the Torah distinguish between reverence and compliance?

Section III: Names That Refuse Erasure

Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*
[1928–2010, United States / Israel]

Shifra and Puah are named; Pharaoh is not. The Torah subtly reorders significance, elevating moral agency over political authority.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*
[1948–2020, United Kingdom]

Naming is an ethical act. To be named is to be recognized as a bearer of responsibility and worth.

Questions

- Why does the Torah preserve the names of the midwives but not the king?
- What does naming signal about where the text locates moral authority?

Section IV: Resistance Without Heroics

Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*
[1933–, United States]

The midwives do not overthrow Pharaoh. They simply refuse to cooperate. The Torah presents noncompliance as a form of quiet, sustained defiance.

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*
[1906–1975, Germany / United States]

Evil advances not only through fanaticism, but through participation without reflection. Interrupting that participation is itself a moral act.

Questions

- What is gained, and what is limited, by resistance that works within the system?
- How does this model of defiance complicate modern expectations of protest?

Closing Question

If redemption begins not with miracles but with professionals refusing to betray their conscience, what responsibilities fall on those whose daily work shapes the lives of others?