**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #06: Midwives, Masters, and Morality**

**Egypt’s New King**

The *Shemot* narrative opens with a new king, who rises up over Egypt unburdened by any loyalty to the Hebrew who once saved Egypt from famine:

And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. (*Shemot* 1:8)

It seems peculiar to suggest that this Pharaoh actually did not know Joseph.[[1]](#footnote-1) A conservative society, Egyptian kings tended to implement the policies of their predecessors. Possibly, the reference to a new king alludes to the founding of a new dynasty in Egypt, which would naturally be less committed to the sentiments of previous kings than a member of the same dynasty. [[2]](#footnote-2) Alternatively, Pharaoh’s outward lack of knowledge may indicate a deliberate decision, sparked by ingratitude and political expedience.[[3]](#footnote-3) Throwing off the yoke of a long-held debt and repudiating Joseph’s contribution to Egypt, Pharaoh’s “ignorance” of Joseph suggests a deliberate decision to erase ties with Joseph’s people, as reflected in the upcoming events. In any case, this betrayal constitutes a breach of trust, one that illuminates the character of the Egyptian king.

To promote his xenophobic policies, Pharaoh uses divisive scare tactics – such as the language of “us” and “them” – that are commonly wielded by autocrats and tyrants: “And he said to **his** nation: “Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is numerous and mightier than **us**. Let **us** deal wisely with **them**, lest **they** multiply and when war will break out, **they** will also join our **enemies** and fight against **us,** and **he** will go up from the land” (*Shemot* 1:9-10).[[4]](#footnote-4) Nothing unites a nation as much as a common enemy, and Pharaoh deftly employs this tactic. Devoid of rational arguments or a genuine cause for concern, Pharaoh conjures up an enemy. He maliciously ignites fear regarding Israel’s rapid population increase, hyperbolically alarming his constituents with the unlikely possibility that Israel could outnumber the indigenous Egyptians.

Perhaps in an effort to gain credibility, Pharaoh also offers a more realistic consideration, warning his nation that the fertile Israelites could ally themselves with Egypt’s enemies (perhaps referring to the ousted Semitic Hyksos)[[5]](#footnote-5) in battle. This could lead to a drastic situation, in which this nation will, ambiguously, “*ala* *min* *ha-aretz*.” The simplest translation of this phrase suggests that Pharaoh forebodingly describes Israel leaving Egypt. But why should the Egyptians care whether the Israelites leave?[[6]](#footnote-6) Commentators offer different explanations for this phrase. Rashi suggests that Pharaoh is speaking euphemistically, hinting that the Israelites will force the *Egyptians* out of the land. Ramban raises the possibility that the king’s phrasing alludes to warfare: the Israelites will rise up against Egypt from *their* land, namely Goshen, and fight the Egyptians.

Linguistically, this phrase recalls Joseph’s promise to his brothers on his deathbed: “God will surely remember you and *raise you up from this land* (*ve-he’ela etkhem min ha-aretz ha-zot*)to the land that He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (*Bereishit* 50:24).[[7]](#footnote-7) In our verse, Pharaoh echoes Joseph’s promise but in horror (*ve-ala min ha-aretz*); in a cruel twist, Pharaoh uses Joseph’s own optimistic words to convince the Egyptians to subvert Joseph’s legacy.

**Egypt’s Guilt**

Despite Pharaoh’s looming persona, the moral corruption that launches the story can be found within the Egyptian populace. Pharaoh does not suggest a plan, instead suggestively co-opting “his nation” to “act wisely” against these foreigners in their midst.[[8]](#footnote-8) Invoking Egypt’s renowned wisdom – and perhaps also suggesting that Egypt no longer needs nor welcomes the wisdom of Joseph (*Bereishit* 41:39) – Pharaoh invites his addressees (namely, the entire Egyptian nation) to take counsel together with him.[[9]](#footnote-9) The actions that follow Pharaoh’s alarmist speech are all in plural form (*they* placed taskmasters, *they* tormented, *they* embittered lives), implicating all of Egypt in the collaborative enslavement of the Israelites. Israel’s retrospective review of its experience in Egypt actually ignores Pharaoh’s role, instead focusing upon the collective culpability of the Egyptians: “And the *Egyptians* did evil to us, and *they* tormented us, and *they* placed upon us difficult labor” (*Devarim* 26:6).

**“*Avodat* *Parekh*” (Hard Labor)**

The labor itself is oppressive and random, including both fieldwork and construction. The slaves are not conscripted toward a societal need (as is generally the case in corvée labor);[[10]](#footnote-10) the point, rather, is the slavery itself: “to torment him with their burdens” (*Shemot* 1:11). The enslavement is designed to debilitate the Israelites, humiliating and demeaning them. Words pile up to describe their misery: taskmasters, torments, burdens, construction, hard labor, mortar, and bricks.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The repeated word *avad*, appearing five times in just two verses (*Shemot* 1:13-14), emphasizes the unremitting labor. Israelite life in Egypt is filled with meaningless labor; there is no higher goal than to survive the ordeal. Significantly, the *Shemot* story will pivot on the word *avad*, shifting a nation from mindless service of a human king to the lofty ideal of serving an eternal God (see the word *avad* in, e.g., *Shemot* 4:23; 7:16; 12:31). The exodus from Egypt does not aim to emancipate Israel from *all* burdens; true freedom is found by replacing service to a human king with service to God. The word *avad* will, in fact, prove to be a *leitwort* of the book of *Shemot*, appearing ninety-seven times in total and drawing attention to the book’s internal dynamic, which propels Israel from forced slavery constructing Pharaoh’s cities, to willing worship of God at Sinai, to meaningful construction of a Tabernacle for daily service to God. As it moves from purposeless menial labor to purposeful service, Israel reorders its national goals, constructing a noble existence defined by service of God.

The initial Egyptian strategy seems misguided: how will they reduce Israel’s number by enslaving them? Perhaps the Egyptians intend to weaken the people physically,[[12]](#footnote-12) or to keep the men and women physically separate so they cannot reproduce.[[13]](#footnote-13) If the aim is to reduce Israel’s fertility through enslavement, it seems that Egypt’s fabled wisdom falls short of its reputation.[[14]](#footnote-14) Egypt’s plans veer wildly off the mark as Israel thrives and multiplies amidst the slavery: “As they would torment them, so they multiplied and spread out, so that the Egyptians were disgusted by them” (1:12). Israel’s unanticipated fecundity breeds further hostility and loathing. A cloud of one-sided hatred swirls throughout Egypt, entrapping both oppressed and oppressor in the maw of human malice.

**A Murderous Society**

Having failed to curb the Israelites’ fertility, Pharaoh envisions an ominous solution as his second scheme, dealing directly in death. Pharaoh seems well aware of the nefarious nature of his plan, which he introduces gradually and surreptitiously. First, he enlists a narrow sector of society (perhaps only two women), namely, the midwives, to murder male infants at birth. This decree undermines Pharaoh’s initial strategy, destroying the manpower that would have eventually contributed to his work force. In any case, to diminish the future population, Pharaoh should rightly issue his decree against both male and female Israelites; the women, of course, will eventually bear the children. Pharaoh’s gender-based infanticide suggests an ulterior motive, perhaps driven by interest of a sexual nature. In a similar scenario, as Abraham and Sarai arrive in Egypt, a panicked Abraham considers the likelihood that the Egyptians will kill him to take his wife. On the backdrop of that incident, a *midrash* suggests that Pharaoh wants to eliminate the Israelite males so the Egyptian men can keep the Hebrew females for themselves.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Now that Pharaoh traffics in murder, he proceeds with caution. As Nachmanides notes, the vile plan may be unpalatable to a populace that considers itself within the bounds of basic decency.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is not long, however, before Pharaoh disposes of any pretense and openly commands all his people to throw the infants into the Nile River.[[17]](#footnote-17) As it turns out, Pharaoh need not have worried; the Egyptian populace offers not a word of protest to Pharaoh’s nefarious decree. Apparently, the Egyptians have become inured to the murder of the enslaved Israelites. The process of dehumanization is complete; Hebrews are no longer considered people worthy of basic human rights.

**Midwives and Morality**

Pharaoh’s murderous plan, as noted, proceeds in two distinct stages.[[18]](#footnote-18) He first turns to the midwives, Shifra and Puah, soliciting their surreptitious cooperation: “You shall look at the birthstool; if it is a boy, kill him, but if it is a girl, she shall live.”[[19]](#footnote-19) It seems ludicrous to think that they could keep this operation secret; it will not take long before the Israelites realize that the midwives are methodically killing their newborn boys. Perhaps the goal is not secrecy but efficiency; the babies have scarcely lived, and the mechanism for annihilation is immediate, brooking little resistance. In any case, Pharaoh’s plan fails, due to a factor that he did not take into account: the moral compunctions of the midwives, who fear God more than they fear the human king.

In an unlikely act of resistance, the midwives refuse to carry out Pharaoh’s order. Bolstered by religious or moral ideals, the midwives do not simply refuse to obey Pharaoh’s command but work actively to oppose it. Pharaoh instructs them to kill, while they vigorously keep the infants alive: “And they gave life to the boys” (1:17). This is especially troubling to Pharaoh, whose accusation echoes their subversive actions (1:18): “Why did you do this thing, giving life to the boys?” The midwives’ defiance of Pharaoh’s decree actually may not be so surprising; midwives are not in the business of murder. Pharaoh, however, is still the most powerful man in the country and the midwives’ insubordination could have severe consequences. Moreover, up until this point, no one else in Egypt cares to muster resistance to Pharaoh’s schemes.

When Pharaoh questions the midwives, they respond with what appears to be an improbable lie: “For the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are *chayot*; before the midwife comes, they have given birth!” (1:19). Do the midwives really think that they can convince Pharaoh that all Israelite women give birth at accelerated speed, before the arrival of a midwife? Their precise intention hinges on the word they use to describe the Israelite women, *chayot*, which comes from the root *chai*, meaning life and could denote animals, lively, or midwives.[[20]](#footnote-20) One possibility is that the word evokes animals, who do not have need of midwives at their births.[[21]](#footnote-21) The midwives may deliberately use this word to express feigned revulsion for the “beastly” Israelite women, in a bid to convince Pharaoh that they too regard the Israelites with loathing, but are nevertheless unable to fulfill his command. Alternatively, this word could refer to the women’s exceptional health and vigor, which causes them to give birth quickly. In this reading, the midwives rather admiringly depict Hebrew women as stronger and livelier than Egyptian women.[[22]](#footnote-22) While this hints to the future triumph of the Israelites, it seems nevertheless an unlikely tactic for the midwives, who run the risk of angering Pharaoh. The midwives’ words may cleverly conceal a dual meaning: Pharaoh is meant to hear a slur (“animals”), even as they express their esteem (“lively”). The third possibility is that they mean to suggest the Israelite women are trained in the art of midwifery,[[23]](#footnote-23) and rarely enlist the services of a professional midwife; thus, there is simply no opportunity to fulfill the king’s instructions.

Oddly, the midwives’ faltering excuse appears to appease Pharaoh, who does not respond to their words and does not punish them for their insubordination (or for their failure to uphold his command).[[24]](#footnote-24) Instead, the next two verses describe the reward that the midwives receive from God:

And God benefitted the midwives and the nation multiplied and became very strong. And it was because the midwives feared God, and He made for them houses. (*Shemot* 1:20-21)

Commentators discuss whether God benefits the midwives by ensuring that the nation multiplied and became strong (as verse 20 suggests, and as the midwives apparently hoped would happen),[[25]](#footnote-25) or by somehow constructing houses for them (as the following verse states, and as will be discussed below).[[26]](#footnote-26) In either case, the fact that the midwives receive reward from God (and no punishment from Pharaoh) suggests that God triumphs in yet another clash with the Egyptian king.

Nevertheless, there is some debate as to the identity of the unnamed subject who makes houses (“and **he** made”) for the courageous midwives. Some interpreters posit that the subject is not God but rather Pharaoh, who made the midwives “houses” to imprison them – which would indicate Pharaoh’s punitive wrath.[[27]](#footnote-27) It does, after all, seem peculiar that Pharaoh would allow their actions to pass with impunity. Yet, this approach seems difficult to sustain on both syntactic and ideological grounds. The word God appears directly before the verb with the unidentified subject in verse 21 (“and he made”); Pharaoh has not been mentioned at all since 1:19. More significantly, this is our final contact with the heroic midwives, and it would be theologically disturbing to cast our final glance at them languishing in prison.

And so, it appears that God gives the midwives houses. These houses may allude to a physical structure, but they also connote something more enduring: family, dynasty, and posterity.[[28]](#footnote-28) Houses are built with walls, connoting a safe haven where one can shape their own values, distinct from the surrounding culture. It is a fitting reward that the women who defied Pharaoh (an appellation that literally means “Great House” in Egyptian) receive their own houses, where they can continue to transmit a different morality than the one cultivated by the Egyptian “house of slavery.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

The midwives pave the way for Israel’s ability to construct houses in Egypt that distinguish them from the local population. These houses will assume a prominent role on the night of the Exodus. Israel dabs the blood of the paschal sacrifice on the doorposts and lintel of each of their houses, to illustrate that they are inside serving God, even amidst an idolatrous culture. In their actions and remuneration, the midwives teach Israel how to construct a unique house and a moral society.

**Righteous Women**

Although many adhere to the idea that the midwives are Hebrew women (after all, many Rabbinic sources identify them as Miriam and Yocheved), from a textual perspective, the ethnicity of the midwives is ambiguous, generating a spirited, but evenly matched, debate. Are these courageous women Hebrew (“Hebrew midwives”) or Egyptian (“midwives of the Hebrews”)?[[30]](#footnote-30) On the one hand, it seems unlikely that Pharaoh would expect that he could trust Hebrew women to carry out his brutal decree against the Hebrew children; on the other, given the virulent hostility between the peoples, would Hebrew women trust Egyptian midwives to birth their babies?

Rabbinic exegetes commonly regard the midwives as Israelites.[[31]](#footnote-31) Some sources specifically identify Shifra and Puah as Yocheved and Miriam, Moses’ mother and sister.[[32]](#footnote-32) While this approach easily accounts for their strong resistance to Pharaoh’s decree – and the names Shifra and Puah appear to be Semitic rather than Egyptian – it seems unlikely that Pharaoh would furtively enlist Hebrew midwives to act against their own people. A second approach suggests that Pharaoh enlists Egyptian midwives to carry out this delicate task.[[33]](#footnote-33) Indeed, verse 19 implies that these women attend both Hebrew and Egyptian births, a position perhaps improbable for a Hebrew midwife, who may not be trusted to attend to Egyptian births. The phrase “fear of God” that motivates the resistance of Egyptian midwives recalls its appearance elsewhere in the Bible, where it has universal, moral implications.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This debate continues to rage among modern scholars, yet the textual ambiguity renders the discussion beside the point. Our attention focuses on the character of the midwives, rather than their ethnicity. In contrast to the nameless figures of the chapter, Shifra and Puah allow their moral conscience to overcome their fear of power and adherence to societal norms. The midwives’ ideology shapes their actions; these women save lives because of their profession, their personal integrity, and their gender. Dedicated to bringing children into the world, the midwives cherish human life, and they are willing to risk their own lives to preserve that sacrosanct ideal.

Ironically, in a chapter that opens by naming only men, it is the women whose actions stand out, and who receive names. It is their agency, autonomy, and virtue that gives them identity; all other characters in the chapter remain nameless.

Women will emerge prominently in the next chapter as well, as they work to secure the salvation of Israel’s savior, while the men’s absence constitutes a glaring omission. In an unexpected twist, Pharaoh’s daughter will also commit herself to preserving life (even a life she knows is Hebrew), in a direct contrast to her father’s murderous policies. Like the (possibly Egyptian) midwives, the story of Pharaoh’s daughter highlights gender as a factor in her moral decision to save the Hebrew baby she finds in the ark.

Rabbinic commentaries take note of the role of women in the Exodus narrative, asserting that Israel was redeemed from Egypt “in the merit of righteous women” (*Sota* 11b). Different *midrashim* offer various scenarios to illustrate this phenomenon. In one *midrash*, Pharaoh succeeds in crushing the morale of the men, who lose hope in the future and refuse to procreate.[[35]](#footnote-35) Following Amram’s lead, the despairing men divorce their wives in droves. This prompts Amram’s daughter (Miriam) to accuse him of doing more damage than Pharaoh, whose decree only affected the male Israelites. By divorcing their wives, the men ensure that no females will be born either. According to the *midrash*, Amram accepts his daughter’s argument and returns to his wife, followed by the other Israelite men. Another *midrash* admiringly portrays the women engaged in various activities in a bid to ensure continued childbirth: using mirrors to beautify themselves[[36]](#footnote-36) and seducing their husbands with food.[[37]](#footnote-37)

As much of society abandons its value for human life, the women continue to cling to it. Desperation breeds fierceness, and the women show that they are willing to commit bold acts to fight for survival. Gender proves to be a determining factor in this story; those who have a womb (*rechem*) seem most likely to act upon their compassion (*rachamim*).[[38]](#footnote-38) Compassion prevails, and Israel continues to exist. Truly, in the merit of righteous women.

1. This question spawns the Rabbinic debate between Rav and Shmuel cited in *Sota* 11a (and *Eruvin* 53a and elsewhere): “One said it was truly a new king and one said that [the king] renewed his policies.” As evidence to support the view that this is not actually a new king, the Gemara observes that there is no mention of the previous king dying before the description of the new king’s rise. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Josephus (Book II, chapter 9, 1) assumes that this new king with new policies refers to a new dynasty: “Having, in length of time, forgotten the benefits they had received from Joseph, particularly the crown being now come in another family, they became very abusive to the Israelites and contrived many ways of afflicting them.” Translation of W. Whiston in *The Complete Works of Josephus*(Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. None of this is particularly surprising to the contemporary Jew. Sinister accusations of disloyalty were levelled against German Jewish veterans less than twenty years after they received medals of honor for courage and loyalty in World War I. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although I have loosely translated the phrase *ve-ala min ha-aretz*, its meaning is disputed. We will soon examine various possible meanings of this phrase. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Hyksos were a predominantly Semitic group of foreigners who retained control of Lower Egypt for approximately one hundred years (circa 1650-1550 BCE, making up the fifteenth and sixteenth dynasties). The reign of the Semitic Hyksos was considered a humiliation for Egyptians. Many years after their fall, Pharaoh Hatshepsut (1480-1469 BCE) carved an inscription in her temple recalling the Hyksos’ ruination of the country. The impact of the Hyksos had a long-lasting effecting that could easily translate into a heightened suspicion of foreigners, especially Semitic ones. See Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, pp. 15-17; Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rashbam suggests that the Israelites were already enslaved, and therefore their exit would have a detrimental economic impact. He also hints to the possibility that any mass exodus from Egypt would constitute a disgrace for the proud country. In his explanation of Pharaoh’s hesitation to allow Joseph’s family to bury Jacob in Canaan in *Bereishit* 50, Abravanel suggests that the Egyptians had already set their sights on enslaving Israel at that point, thereby lending support to Rashbam’s claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Language of Israel “rising up from the land of Egypt” appears again as Israel exits Egypt in *Shemot* 13:18, illustrating how Joseph’s words ultimately triumph over Pharaoh’s attempt to undermine them. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Significantly, this is the first time in the Bible that Israel is called a “nation.” It is the hateful gaze of the enemy that transforms Israel into a nation. Similarly, Haman’s malevolent and xenophobic description of “one nation scattered among the nations… whose laws are different from any other nation” (*Esther* 3:8), restores Israel’s sense of identity in Persia, where they seem to have blended into society. (In chapters 1 and 2 of the book, the only noticeable Jew is Mordechai (*Esther* 2:5): “A Judean man lived in Shushan.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. W. H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 131, suggests that the words *hava* *nitchakma* (“come, let us act wisely”) constitute an invitation to Pharaoh’s advisors to take counsel together. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There was extensive construction in the Delta area at the beginning of the nineteenth dynasty, as the capitol of Egypt moved there. Although it is not possible to definitively date the Pharaoh of our story, perhaps Pharaoh intends to use the Hebrew slaves as an opportunity to secure cheap labor for the renovation of the Delta area. Even if so, this seems to be a secondary consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Several words used here (*hava*, mortar, bricks, *pen*) recall the construction of Babylon and its Tower in *Bereishit* 11. Both stories point to a society’s investment in construction that sows evil rather than good, a society that removes God from its plans. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, p. 23, describes Israel’s, “degrading, exhausting and backbreaking toil.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Sota* 11b maintains that they gave women jobs that traditionally belong to males, while men performed what are generally female tasks. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, e.g., *Yeshayahu* 19:11-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Shemot Rabba* 1:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nachmanides, *Shemot* 1:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Both the Nile and Egypt itself have become vehicles of death instead of life. In a fitting punishment, the first two plagues will corrupt the Nile, which spews forth blood and putrid frogs in a parody of its life-giving force. Between these dark roles, in chapter 2, the Nile will briefly return to its life-giving nature, as it protectively harbors Moses, the future redeemer of the imperiled Israelites, who will emerge from the waters to combat Pharaoh’s evil schemes. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. R’ Elchanan Samet (*Iyunim Be-Parashot Ha-Shavua*, First Series (Jerusalem: Ma’aliyot, 2002), pp. 156-166) maintains that the plan to enslave the nation had proceeded along two similar stages. First, Pharaoh enlisted a narrow splice of Egypt’s society, the taskmasters, who undertook the initial task of enslaving Israel. Only afterwards did the active torment of the Israelites become widespread; in verse 13, all Egyptians function as taskmasters over Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Debate forms around whether Pharaoh in fact speaks only to two individual midwives. Can two midwives possibly suffice for this rapidly growing nation? Ibn Ezra explains that these women were supervisors of a large group of midwives (at least five hundred, in his view). In an expansion of Rashi’s etymological explanation of the names Shifra (who beautified the child) and Puah (who consoled the child), Abravanel suggests that these are not proper names, but rather professional terms for the pair of women who would attend every birth (there was a beautifier, a *shifra*, and a consoler, a *puah*). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Although the word *chaya* generally does not mean midwife in Biblical Hebrew, it often appears in later Rabbinic sources with this meaning (e.g., Tosefta *Bava Batra* 8, 2; Yerushalmi *Kiddushin* 4; *Shir* *Ha-shirim* *Rabba* 4:5). Therefore, many exegetes understood this to be the primary meaning of the word *chayot* in *Shemot* 1:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Abravanel, *Shemot* 1:16, and R’ Shimshon Raphael Hirsch. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, Rashbam, Bekhor Shor’s first approach, Ibn Ezra, and Ralbag. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Rashi, Bekhor Shor’s second approach, and Seforno. This is apparently the meaning of Onkelos’ translation as well (see R’ Avraham ben Ha-Rambam’s explanation). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. As we will see, some commentators discern a punitive act by Pharaoh in 1:21. I do not find this interpretation compelling, as I will explain below. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Bekhor Shor, Chizkuni, Ibn Caspi, and Shadal. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Seforno. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Rashbam, R’ Yitzchak Arama, and Malbim. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Sota* 11b maintains that God gives the midwives, Shifra and Puah (identified here as Yocheved and Miriam), the house of priesthood (for Yocheved’s descendants) and the house of kingship (for Miriam’s descendants) as their reward. Part of this interpretation (the reward of the house of priesthood) may be influenced by the upcoming verse that contains the word *bayit* (house) appended to the word Levite (*Shemot* 2:1): “And a man went from the ***House*** *of Levites* and he took (married) a Levite girl.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See, e.g., *Shemot* 13:3, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This debate relates to the subsequent episode (2:1-10), in which the infant Moses is rescued by two Hebrew women (specifically Yocheved and Miriam, who are identified with Shifra and Puah according to some *midrashim*) and an Egyptian woman, the daughter of Pharaoh. It seems that the point is that ethnicity is not the critical element here; it is compassion (generated by a maternal instinct) that ultimately determines who will flout an evil decree in a bid to save helpless children. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See, e.g., *Shemot Rabba* 1:17, Onkelos, Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. E.g., *Sota* 11b, as cited previously. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See, e.g., Abravanel, Shadal, and Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, II, 9:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See *Bereishit* 20:11; 42:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Sota* 12a, *Shemot Rabba* 1:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Tanchuma Pekudei* 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Sota* 11b, *Shemot Rabba* 1:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See *Midrash Aggada* (Buber) *Devarim* 1 and my discussion on the relationship between the womb and compassion in Y. Ziegler, *Lamentations: Faith in a Turbulent World* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2021), pp. 371-375. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)