

GIVING A VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

A commentary on *Parashat Shemot*

By Abigail Morris

It is an interesting fact about revolutions that they often start when things start to improve. In fact, when people are at their lowest, when they are at rock bottom either economically or physically it is very hard to revolt. Utter oppression leads to a loss of humanity. The ability to resist relies on a sense of self. If one's sense of self is so eroded, if people are so degraded they feel worthless then they will not fight back.

The first act of rebellion is crucial. It takes someone to step outside the shared circumstances and say: no – we are worth more, we deserve more, this is wrong.

The first act of revolutions is a voice. A voice that maybe starts as a cry of pain but is an expression of humanity. As a baby cries when it enters the world so a voice has the power to remind people of their shared humanity and their need to resist tyranny.

In *Parashat Shemot*, it is not Moses who starts the rebellion – although he, like many male leaders, gets all the credit. It is, in fact, two women. Two women, Shifra and Puah, whose names are largely forgotten. These two women were midwives – people who are there at the moment of birth, people who hear the cries of labouring women, and the cries of new-born babies.

Just as the French Revolution started with women rioting, the Occupy movement started with women protesting, so did the exodus from Egypt, this huge iconic rebellion against slavery, started with women.

Pharaoh asks Shifra and Puah, the two midwives, to kill all new-born baby boys, in effect to create genocide and destroy the Israelites. Without males the Israelites will not be able to reproduce

and will all die out. We can assume that the girl babies born to slave women would be taken by Egyptian men.

But these two women were rebellious. They defied Pharaoh. They did not do what he asked but, after delivering the babies, let the male babies live too. As if that was not daring enough, their bravery continues. Pharaoh summons the midwives and demands why they have not done as he commanded. He asks why they have let the boys live. Shifra and Puah may have been terrified but they speak out. And they speak out with wit and cheek and with *chutzpah*. They said, “*Oh dear, these Hebrew women are so fertile they keep giving birth in the fields and we cannot get to them*”. They turn Pharaoh's fears against him. They say, in effect, you are right to be scared about the Israelite's fertility, they are so fertile we cannot do what you want and kill the baby boys at birth.

They spoke up against Pharaoh's great power. Two slave women. The lowest of the low, defied the greatest power in the land. They protected defenceless babies and they spoke out. They gave a voice to the voiceless. They listened to the cries of their people and they gave their people back their humanity. They started the revolution. Their actions meant that Moses was not killed as a baby and he went on to lead the Jewish people out of slavery and to freedom. Jews are constantly reminded that they should remember they were once slaves and they should deal justly with strangers and treat foreigners well. And all of this started with two women. Women's

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