

“Shiphrah and Puah Resist”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Exodus 1:8-2:10  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on August 27, 2017

Shiphrah and Puah are two of our Old Testament heroes. Without their courage the great Exodus out of Egypt might never have occurred. They were midwives who dared to defy Pharaoh’s orders and put their own lives at risk to save the lives of others.

Shiphrah and Puah were two women who came of age in a time wrought with political unrest. You may remember that the Hebrew people first entered Egypt at the invitation of Pharaoh, who encouraged Joseph’s brothers to settle in the best part of the land. Pharaoh was deeply indebted to Joseph for saving his people from famine.

But through time, Pharaohs came and went and the Hebrews multiplied and a new Pharaoh rose to power “who did not know Joseph.” Somehow, by some failure of education or refusal to learn, the cultural memory had not been passed down to him. He did not see the Hebrew people as ancestors of the man who once saved Egypt. This Pharaoh saw the Hebrew people only as a threat to Egyptian existence. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase, and in the event of war, join our enemies against us.”

The new Pharaoh was an Egyptian nationalist, and we do not know if the rest of the Egyptians saw things the way Pharaoh did or if some of them were sympathetic to the Hebrews they’d been living alongside peacefully for years. As far as we know, the descendants of Joseph did nothing to provoke Pharaoh’s wrath, except to keep having babies, those rascals. And if I know the human race, not all of those babies were one hundred percent Hebrew. The story of the Hebrew presence in Egypt opens with Potipher’s wife chasing after Joseph, and though she failed to catch him, Joseph later married Asenath, an Egyptian woman, and she bore him two sons—Manasseh and Ephraim. So we know that from the beginning of Hebrew settlement in Egypt, there were mixed marriages and mixed babies. Perhaps there were Egyptians who, along with Pharaoh, resented this Hebrew infiltration into their land and into their lineage. Surely there were also Egyptians whose grandchildren grew up in Hebrew families for whom Pharaoh’s disdain was alarming and troubling.

Throughout Jewish history, Shiphrah and Puah have usually been regarded as Hebrew women, but the truth of the matter is that their ethnic identity is not entirely clear. The translation of v.15 could be “Hebrew midwives” or “midwives of the Hebrews.” On the one hand, Shiphrah and Puah sound more like Hebrew names than Egyptian ones. On the other hand, it doesn’t make a lot of sense that Pharaoh would trust Hebrew midwives to kill their own kind. Some scholars believe Shiphrah and Puah were Egyptian women who converted to the Hebrew faith.

I got pretty curious about the identity of Shiphrah and Puah. I wanted to know: were they Hebrew or Egyptian? I ended up reading a rather technical article by two Jewish scholars examining translations: “Hebrew midwives” vs. “midwives of the Hebrews.” I won’t bore you

with the details, but essentially, given the absence of vowel pointing in ancient texts, the scholars discussed how the assumed vocalization seems to differ from the Masoretic text to the Septuagint, and then they went on to outline the various appearances of Shiphrah and Puah in midrashic literature. Or, to summarize their findings in laymen's terms: No one really knows. Shiphrah and Puah could have been Hebrew or Egyptian—we can't be sure. But these two scholars argued that despite the somewhat more popular assumption that the midwives were Hebrew, there is good reason to think they were, in fact, Egyptian women tending to Hebrew women during childbirth.<sup>i</sup>

Of course, either way, these women were courageous. Either way, Pharaoh was on the throne, and they were not. If they were Hebrew, they had no reason to think Pharaoh would spare their lives should he discover their disobedience. If they were Egyptian, they stuck their necks out to save people who were not their own.

If they were Egyptian, that's a good indication that Pharaoh and his people didn't all think alike. Not all Egyptians thought the Hebrew babies should be killed, and some even put themselves at risk to resist Pharaoh's orders.

I think the ambiguity of their identity makes it easier to relate to Shiphrah and Puah, since our own identities vary according to the circumstance. In some instances we are the privileged, in others we are the disempowered, and sometimes we are the privileged whose privilege is precarious and dependent on our ongoing complacency in the face of injustice.

Shiphrah and Puah were in a position where they couldn't defy the Pharaoh outright and in the open—at least, not if they wanted to keep saving babies. When Pharaoh called them in for questioning, asking why they let the baby boys live, Shiphrah and Puah reported that Hebrew women were not like Egyptian women. Hebrew women were more vigorous, or to translate it more literally, Hebrew women were like beasts, like animals. In other words, they delivered those babies without any help. Pharaoh seemed to accept this answer as truthful, which means the women not only defied him, they duped him too.

A bit later Pharaoh's own daughter rescued baby Moses from the river, and in this instance there was no doubt—the Pharaoh's daughter was definitely Egyptian, not Hebrew. Even the Pharaoh's daughter did not agree with her father's genocide spree, and found her own way to resist.

Over and over again in the Bible we find stories of ordinary courageous people living in an age of tyrants—be it Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar or Herod or Caesar. Over and over again, the people chose to fear God rather than man. They did what was right in the face of terrible wrong.

I wonder, what made two little midwives think they could make a difference in the midst of massive genocide? Even if they let the babies live, wouldn't Pharaoh find the boys eventually? What power did they really have? These women understood they had the power to follow their own conscience. They couldn't dethrone Pharaoh, but they could resist him nonetheless.

In recent months, the more I read these ancient texts, the more modern they become. As a child, I thought Pharaoh wanting to wipe out the Hebrew boys sounded archaic and barbaric. To me, the

Bible was a world far, far away and things happened back then that don't happen anymore. But as I grew older of course I learned about the Holocaust and saw that even the worst parts of history repeat themselves. As a modern American though, the Nazis also sounded archaic and barbaric to me—evil people from a world far, far away. But then I learned about Japanese internment camps here in the U.S. and more recently I learned about detention centers along our borders—many of which have imprisoned children for a profit. Just yesterday I read this in the news:

*“On Aug. 14 — two days after the nation watched in horror as hundreds of well-armed neo-Nazis and other white supremacists held a violent rally in Charlottesville, Virginia — a 17-year-old boy in downtown Boston allegedly picked up a rock and threw it through one of the six tall glass towers that make up the New England Holocaust Memorial.*

*Each tower is made of 22 glass panels and engraved with thousands of numbers representing the 6 million Jews murdered by Nazis during World War II. The rock reduced one of those panels to tiny glass shards strewn across the sidewalk, later swept into dustpans by city workers.*

*A day later, an unknown person shattered the glass doors at the K'hal Adas Yereim synagogue in Queens, New York — just hours after the nation watched in disbelief as the president of the United States described the white supremacists in Charlottesville as “fine people.” Across the country in Alameda, California, on Aug. 17, a security camera captured another unidentified vandal throwing rocks at Temple Israel, shattering multiple windows.*

*Since the rally in Charlottesville, the Anti-Defamation League has tracked dozens of anti-Semitic incidents across the United States. It's the sight of shattered glass at places of Jewish remembrance and worship, though, that is fraught with a terrifying poignance. On the night of Nov. 9, 1938, and into the next day, mobs in Germany massacred nearly 100 Jews and smashed the windows of Jewish businesses and synagogues. The night became known as Kristallnacht — “The Night of Broken Glass” — and was a preview of the Nazi effort to exterminate Jews from the Earth.”<sup>iii</sup>*

Friends, that's not all. In Texas, our border checkpoints remain in operation this weekend even as people attempt to escape Hurricane Harvey, meaning some immigrants have to decide whether to evacuate as advised and risk deportation or stay put and risk the life-threatening hurricane. Meanwhile our president pardons the sheriff from Arizona who repeatedly violated human rights and broke the law to crack down on immigration, the sheriff who would make prisoners wear pink underwear and force them on public parades through the streets. The Justice Department discovered women of color in detainment were denied basic sanitary items and were forced to remain with sheets or pants soiled from menstruation. They were put into solitary confinement for extended periods of time because of their inability to understand English. Meanwhile, the White House describes the sheriff as a “selfless public servant.” Meanwhile I keep hearing white people in this country spend more time criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-racist activists than they do denouncing white supremacy, neo-Nazis, and the KKK.

The truth of our times is that we belong to an era of human history in which we can stand for what is right or we can remain silent in defense of what is so terribly, terribly wrong. The truth of

our times is that whether you are Hebrew or Egyptian, Jewish or Muslim or Christian, whether you are blue or red or purple, we must come together to denounce evil, bigotry, and hate. It is as clear as can be that we are living in a time where the calling to do what is right transcends political alliances and party loyalty. It is clear that the Pharaohs of this day must meet resistance in the people of God, and anywhere that doesn't happen, the church is utterly irrelevant and without purpose. The church must determine whether it wants to be written into history as the priests who sanctioned a demonic order or as the prophets who declared their allegiance to God and God alone, prophets who stood between hate and its prey, prophets who put their lives and careers on the line to defend and protect the other.

The truth of our times is that we are all being called to reexamine our allegiances. As for me, and this congregation, we will serve Christ. Amen? For we know we serve a King unlike all earthly kings, a King who will one day say to us, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

These are the sacred words of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Moshe Lavee and Dr. Shana Strauch-Schick, "The 'Egyptian' Midwives: Recovering a Lost Midrashic Text and Exploring Why It May Have Been Forgotten," <http://thetorah.com/the-egyptian-midwives>

<sup>ii</sup> Christopher Mathias, "All the Swastikas and Broken Glass Since Charlottesville," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/anti-semitism-charlottesville-shattered-glass\\_us\\_599dd9f0e4b0d97c40011880](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/anti-semitism-charlottesville-shattered-glass_us_599dd9f0e4b0d97c40011880)