

Soul Sisters 3 – Shiphrah and Puah



artist Lucy D'Souza Leigh Russell
Memorial Panel in Leeds, UK.

Exodus 1:8-10,15-20

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' ... The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.

Take note that only boys and men are considered a threat to the Egyptian empire. What could a woman do to take down an Empire? And yet, as we see in this story of the two midwives, by simply saying No to the Pharaoh, they played the opening hand in liberating the Israelites from slavery. They did it so creatively that Pharaoh could not accuse them of disobedience – they knew that that no man dared to question the mysteries of how women brought babies to birth!

Current biblical and Torah scholars enjoy debating whether the midwives were Hebrews themselves, or Egyptian women who served the Hebrew community. Why else would Pharaoh expect them to follow his orders? Who would trust Hebrew women to murder their own children? Others argue that the midwives “feared God” – a sign that if they were not Hebrews, they were likely worshippers of Yahweh.

What can our Soul Sisters Shiphrah and Puah teach us? There are times when we are called to follow our hearts, even when the culture or “Empire” demands that we restrict, exclude or deny compassion to others. In those times, standing for what is right is the best reward.

Question for Reflection: Can you remember a time when you questioned a ruling or law that seemed unjust? Was there a creative way you expressed your “no”?

Prayer: *O God of many nations, you are the source of all life. You provoke us at times with our differences, but you also enrich us when we meet face to face, and build bridges from one heart to another. Give us courage, we pray, when we are pressured to act in ways that do not express our love for you and for one another. Amen*