

# Yocheved in the Torah

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<sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>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." <sup>17</sup>The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" <sup>19</sup>The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women

15 וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמִּילֹדֹת הָעִבְרִיֹת אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה: 16 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיִלְדֹכֶן אֶת-הָעִבְרִיֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אִם-בֵּן הוּא וְהַמַּתֵּן אֹתוֹ וְאִם-בַּת הִיא וְחִיָּה: 17 וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילֹדֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כְאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיֶינָן אֶת-בְּנֵי הַיְלָדִים: 18 וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם לַמִּילֹדֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מַדּוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיֶינָן אֶת-הַיְלָדִים: 19 וַתֹּאמְרֶן

together with the other inhabitants of Egypt. In the consciousness of Israel, this experience indelibly stamped Egypt as the "house of bondage." The word translated as "forced labor" also connotes ruthless behavior on the part of those in charge.

### THE MIDWIVES (vv. 15–22)

In response to the failure of his scheme, Pharaoh issues a barbarous decree to reduce the Israelite population.

**15. Hebrew** The Hebrew word *ivri* first appears in Gen. 14:13, as a descriptive term for Abram. It is used in the Bible when non-Israelites refer to Israelites or when the latter identify themselves to others. (A class of wandering people known as *apiru* is found in a variety of Near Eastern texts.) The origin of the term is a puzzle.

**midwives** It is possible that the two names given here are not of individuals but guilds of midwives.

**Shiphrah** The name appears in a list of slaves attached to an Egyptian estate and is indicated as Asiatic. It comes from a Semitic root meaning "beauty."

**Puah** This name, apparently meaning "young girl," is attested on documents at Ugarit (an ancient Canaanite city whose buried library was discovered in 1929). Midrashic tradition has identified the two women with Jochebed and Miriam.

**16. birthstool** Literally, "two stones," most likely the two bricks on which women in labor squatted opposite the midwife during childbirth.

**19.** The midwives respond evasively out of a sense of self-preservation and their desire to continue to save lives.

\* The rabbis say that Yocheved was Shiphrah

would not be a slave, so would I not be a master." An ancient rabbi taught: What made the work so unbearable? Not only that it was hard but that it seemed pointless. People are capable of working hard, but they burn out from a sense of futility, a sense that nothing will come of what they are doing.

**16. if it is a boy** Pharaoh assumed that the only threat to his power would be physical resistance by Israelite males. He could not conceive of the power of spiritual resistance, exemplified by the role women play in the Exodus narrative.

**17. The midwives, fearing God** The phrase translated as "the fear of God" (*yir-at Elohim*) is the closest the Torah comes to having a word for religion. The case of the midwives suggests that the essence of religion is not belief in the existence of God or any other theological precept, but belief that certain things are wrong because God has built stan-

dards of moral behavior into the universe. (In Gen. 20:11, Abraham is afraid that the Philistines will murder him and abduct his wife because "there is no fear of God in this place.") The midwives not only believed in God but also understood that God demands a high level of moral behavior. They were willing to risk punishment at the hands of Pharaoh rather than betray their allegiance to God. This is the first recorded case of civil disobedience, challenging government in the name of a higher authority. It would find an echo in the thousands of righteous gentiles who risked their own lives to protect Jews from the Nazis. The midwives begin a pattern that is continued in the story of Moses, whose life is repeatedly threatened by men and saved by women (his mother; Pharaoh's daughter; his sister, Miriam; his wife, Zipporah). "It was through righteous women that Israel was redeemed" (Exod. R. 1:12).

**19. the Hebrew women are not like the**

are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”<sup>20</sup>And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.<sup>21</sup>And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.<sup>22</sup>Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

הַמִּילָדוֹת אֶל־פְּרֵעָה כִּי לֹא כַנְּשִׁים  
הַמִּצְרִית הָעֵבְרִית כִּי־חַיִּוֹת הָיָה בְטָרֵם  
תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילָדוֹת וַיִּלְדוּ: <sup>20</sup> וַיֵּיטֵב  
אֱלֹהִים לַמִּילָדוֹת וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם וַיִּעֲצְמוּ  
מְאֹד: <sup>21</sup> וַיִּהְיֶה כִּי־יִרְאוּ הַמִּילָדוֹת אֶת־  
הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בְּתִים: <sup>22</sup> וַיִּצְוּ פְרֵעָה  
לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוד הִיאָרֶה  
תִּשְׁלִיכֵהוּ וְכָל־הַבַּת תְּחִיִּין: ס

**2** A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.<sup>2</sup>The woman con-

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־  
לֵוִי: <sup>2</sup> וַתְּהֵרָה הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּרְאֶה אֹתוֹ

**20. multiplied and increased** The narrative closes as it began (1:7), suggesting divine providence. Pharaoh’s diabolical measures have not changed the situation.

**21. established households** Or families. God

rewarded their virtue by blessing them with large families.

**22.** All else having failed, Pharaoh issues a final decree. He mobilizes “all his people,” the entire apparatus of the state, to annihilate the Israelites.

### THE BIRTH AND YOUTH OF MOSES (2:1–25)

#### THE ABANDONMENT AND SALVATION OF MOSES (vv. 1–10)

**1. man . . . woman** This refers to Amram and Yocheved. Note the lack of personal names in this part of the story, except for Moses at the end.

**married** The Hebrew root לקח (literally, “to take”), is frequently used of marriage. The narrative focuses on the role of the mother.

**2. she saw how beautiful he was** The word *tov* usually means “good.” Here it might also convey the sense of “robust, healthy.”

**Egyptian women** Why does Pharaoh choose to believe this improbable excuse? The Hebrew word here translated “vigorous” literally means “like animals.” Pharaoh is ready to believe that the Israelites are virtually a different species, less human and less deserving of life than are the Egyptians, so that he can proceed with his program of persecution and slaughter.

**22. all his people** Why did Pharaoh involve all the people rather than leave it to the authorities or the army? Persecution cannot be successful without the complicity of the community.

hero, of noble birth, is raised by peasants and ultimately returns to his lofty origins. Moses, an Israelite raised in Pharaoh’s palace, returns to his people, as if to suggest that it was nobler to be a common Israelite than an Egyptian prince.

**1. A certain man of the house of Levi** The text implied that Moses was born shortly after his parents married. But we know that they had two older children, Miriam and Aaron. The Midrash resolves the problem in this way: Moses’ parents already had two children when Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite males would be killed. His father and mother divorced, his father declaring, “What is the point of having another child only to see him killed?” But Miriam reproached her father, saying, “You are worse than Pharaoh. Pharaoh only threatens the males; you eliminate the possibility of any child. Pharaoh’s decree may not be carried out, but your decision not to have children cer-

#### CHAPTER 2

The story of Moses’ birth and early years contains many elements common to hero legends: The special child, endangered at birth but rescued, undergoes a period of separation and then returns as a changed person with a mission. But there is one notable difference. The typical

\* The rabbis say this man's name is Amram (Moses's father) and the rabbis say Yocheved is the name of his wife (ie Moshe's mother)

ceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

<sup>5</sup>The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must

כִּי־טוֹב הוּא וַתִּצְפְּנֶהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים :  
 3 וְלֹא־יִכְלָה עוֹד הַצְּפִינֹו וַתִּקַּח־לוֹ תֵּבַת  
 גֹּמָא וַתַּחְמְרָהּ בַּחֲמֵר וּבְזִפְתִּים וַתַּשֶּׂם בָּהּ  
 אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַתָּשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיָּאָר :  
 4 וַתִּתְצַב אַחֲתָו מֵרְחֹק לְדַעַה מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה  
 לוֹ :

5 וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאָר  
 וּנְעוּרֹתֶיהָ הִלְכֹת עַל־יַד הַיָּאָר וַתֵּרֶא  
 אֶת־הַתֵּבָה בְּתוֹף הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־  
 אַמָּתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ : 6 וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־  
 הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה־נֹעֵר בֶּכֶה וַתַּחֲמַל עָלָיו  
 וַתֵּאמֶר מִי־לִדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה : 7 וַתֵּאמֶר

3. The desperate mother, because of the decree, takes every possible precaution to ensure the baby's safety.

**a wicker basket** The receptacle is called *tevah*. The word appears elsewhere in the Bible only as the ark in which Noah and his family were saved from the waters of the Flood (Gen. 6:14). The use of the word here heightens our awareness of the infant's vulnerability and of divine protection. The reminder of the Flood tells us once again that the birth of Moses signals a new era in history.

**wicker** The Hebrew word *gome* is the "papyrus plant," once abundant in the marshlands of the Nile delta. Its huge stems, often more than 10 feet high, were used by the Egyptians for a variety of purposes, especially for the construction

of light boats. Both *gome* and *tevah* are Egyptian words, giving local color to the story.

**reeds** The Hebrew word *suf*, also borrowed from Egyptian, is a "reed thicket." By placing the basket among the reeds, the mother prevented it from being carried downstream.

**4. his sister** Miriam.

**at a distance** Thus she was inconspicuous and would not arouse suspicions that the child was not really abandoned.

**5. to bathe in the Nile** An Egyptian princess would not have bathed publicly in the mighty, crocodile-infested river itself. This bathing place was no doubt one of the Nile's many rivulets, where privacy and safety could be ensured. The mother of Moses probably selected that spot after observing the princess's character and habits.

tainly will be." She persuaded her parents to reunite, and Moses was born shortly afterward. The other Israelites followed both decisions of her parents, divorcing and reuniting. Because of her action, the Sages call Miriam a redeemer of Israel every bit as much as her brothers (BT Sot. 12a).

The names of Moses' parents are not revealed to us until 6:20. Why does the Torah not mention their names at this point? To teach us that any Jewish family can give rise to a great person. In the same way, we set aside a chair for Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, whenever a Jewish baby is brought into the Covenant, as if to say: "Perhaps this will be the one to make the world into the kingdom of God."

2. The mother's delight at seeing her newborn child echoes God's delight at contemplat-

ing the newly created world: "Behold it was good" (B. Jacob).

**5. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile** Would not the daughter of Pharaoh have servants to bring water for her bath? Bar Yoḥai suggests that she (perhaps an idealistic adolescent) opposed her father's policy of murdering the Israelite children; she went to bathe in the Nile as a way of simultaneously identifying with Israel at the place of its suffering and cleansing herself of her father's defiling policies (BT Sot. 12b). Another commentator sees Pharaoh's daughter as going along with her father's policies until she saw the endangered Hebrew child. Until that moment, the Israelites had been an abstraction, and she was prepared to believe the worst about them. Once she encountered an innocent, vul-

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be a Hebrew child.”<sup>7</sup> Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?”<sup>8</sup> And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.<sup>9</sup> And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.<sup>10</sup> When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

אָחֹתוֹ אֶל-בַּת-פַּרְעֹה הָאֵלֶּף וְקָרָאתִי לָהּ  
אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקָת מִן הָעִבְרִית וְתִינֶק לָהּ  
אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד׃<sup>8</sup> וַתֹּאמֶר-לָהּ בַת-פַּרְעֹה לְכִי  
וְתִלְךְ הָעֵלְמָה וְתִקְרָא אֶת-אֵם הַיֶּלֶד׃  
<sup>9</sup> וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַת-פַּרְעֹה הֲיִלְכִי אֶת-  
הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינְקֵהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֵּן אֶת-  
שְׂכָרְךָ וְתִקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וְתִנְיָקֵהוּ׃  
<sup>10</sup> וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבֹאֶהוּ לְבַת-פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי-  
לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי  
מִן-הַמַּיִם מָשִׂיתֵהוּ׃

<sup>11</sup>Some time after that, when Moses had

וַיְהִי <sup>11</sup>בְּיָמָיו הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא

MOSES IS RETURNED TO HIS MOTHER  
(vv. 7–10)

Ironically, the evil intentions of Pharaoh are unknowingly thwarted by his own daughter. The arrangements she makes follow a pattern found in Mesopotamian legal documents relating to the adoption of foundlings. These “wet nurse contracts” specify payment for the services of nursing and rearing the infant; they stipulate that, after weaning, the right of possession belongs to the one who paid for the child’s upbringing. That the princess can personally execute such a contract accords with the relatively high social and legal position of women in ancient Egypt. She possessed rights of inheritance and disposal of property and enjoyed a fair measure of economic independence.

**10.** The high infant mortality rate in the ancient world dictated that formal adoption and naming by the adoptive parent be postponed until after weaning, which took place at a much later age than in modern societies.

**Moses** The Hebrew *Moshe* is of Egyptian origin. Its verbal stem *ms’i* means “to be born,” and the noun *ms* means “a child, son.” It is a frequent part of ancient Egyptian personal names, usually with the addition of the name of a god, as illustrated by Ahmose, Ptahmose, Ramose, and Thotmose. Two papyri from the time of Ramses II mention officials named Mose.

**explaining** A Hebrew origin for the name is attributed to the Egyptian princess. Through wordplay, the Egyptian *Mose* is connected with Hebrew *משה*, “to draw up/out (of water).” Note the ironic wordplay. She intended it as “the one who is drawn out (of the water).” *Moshe* is active in form and means “one who draws out,” a name that fits his future situation better than his present one.

THE CHARACTER OF MOSES (vv. 11–15)

How did Moses spend his days in the royal palace, and how long did he remain there? The Bible is not interested in such details. Like other privileged boys in court and bureaucratic circles in Egypt, Moses at an early age would have begun his formal education, which lasted about 12 years. Concentrating largely on basic skills and knowledge, it would have been conducted under a regimen of strict discipline, with drill and memorization as the basic teaching techniques. The Bible is concerned with Moses’ character and commitments, which are illustrated by three incidents that display his moral passion and his inability to tolerate injustice: 2:11–12, 13, and 16–17. These qualities mark him as being worthy to lead the struggle for the liberation of the Israelites.

nerable Israelite, however, she had to recognize her common humanity with them. “Only one who can hear the cry of Moses the infant will be able to properly understand the words of Moses the lawgiver” (Isaac Luria). A rabbinic tradition has it that Pharaoh’s daughter later

joined the Israelite people at the time of the Exodus and that she stood at Sinai with them.

**11. when Moses had grown up** An ancient rabbi taught: The phrase “he grew up” occurs twice (vv. 10–11), once referring to physical maturity, the second time to a sense of re-

## שִׁפְרָה – Shiphrah

[Jewish midwife in Egypt] (Exodus 1:15)

□ Shiphrah is Jochebed [mother of Moses]; Puah is Miriam (Sotah 11b).

□ Shiphrah and Puah were proselytes (Midrash Tadshe, Beis HaMidrash 3:191).

□ They did not do as the king of Egypt said to them (Exodus 1:17). He proposed to them a sinful act, which they refused (Sotah 11b).

□ [She was called] Shiphrah because she cleansed (מִשְׁפְּרָה) the child when he was born covered with blood; the people of Israel multiplied (פָּרַר) at her hand; her deeds were pleasant (שִׁפְרָה) before God; and she appeased (מִשְׁפְּרָה) [Pharaoh for] her daughter's words, for [Miriam had] stuck her nose up at Pharaoh and [Shiphrah] appeased him, saying,

“Why do you pay attention to her? She is [only] a child; she has no understanding” (Shemos Rabbah 1:13).

□ [They] saved the male children alive (Exodus 1:18). They [Shiphrah and Puah] collected water and food from the houses of the rich women and gave it to the poor women, who [thus] sustained their children. [In addition,] they prayed before the Holy One, Blessed is He, that the babies be born unblemished (Shemos Rabbah 1:15).

□ And He made of them houses (Exodus 1:21). Pharaoh attempted to kill them, but the Holy One, Blessed is He [concealed them by] covering them like two beams of a house (Midrash HaGadol, Shemos 1:21).

## יֹכֶבֶד – Jochebed

[Moses' mother] (Exodus 6:20)

□ Jochebed was among those who came to Egypt and among those who left (Seder Olam Rabbah 9).

□ She was conceived on the way to Egypt and born between the walls [i.e., at the entrance to Egypt] (Bava Basra 120a).

□ Why was she called Jochebed (יֹכֶבֶד)? Because her face had a semblance of the Divine radiance (יֵי הַכְבוֹד) (Midrash HaGadol, Bereishis 23:1).

□ Son of Harum (I Chronicles 4:8). This refers to Jochebed (Sifri Beha'aloscha 78).

□ Shiphrah [of Exodus 1:15] is Jochebed (Sotah 11b).

□ His wife Hajehudiah (I Chronicles 4:18) refers to Jochebed. Why was she called Jehudiah? Because she brought many Jews (Yehudim) into the world (Vayikra Rabbah 1:3).

□ The Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1:15) were Jochebed and Miriam (Sotah 11b).

□ Miriam would accompany Jochebed and assist her [in her midwifery] (Shemos Rabbah 1:13).

Yocheved in the  
rabbinic texts

□ Because Jochebed feared the Holy One, Blessed is He, He brought forth Moses from her (ibid. 1:16).

□ A man of the house of Levi went (Exodus 2:1) on the advice of his daughter. When the wicked Pharaoh decreed, “Every son who is born you shall cast into the Nile” (ibid. 1:22), [Amram] said, “We toil in vain,” and he divorced his wife. “Your decree is harsher than Pharaoh’s,” said his daughter. “Pharaoh’s decree is only against the males; yours is against the males and the females.” [Thereupon Amram] took back his wife and seated her in a palanquin [for the wedding procession]. Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the ministering angels said, “The mother of children is joyful” (Psalms 113:9) (Sotah 12a).

□ Why was [Amram's] name not mentioned [in Exodus 2:1]? Because he took his wife back quietly. Since she too returned quietly, her name is not mentioned [either] (Zohar 2:19).

□ He took the daughter (בֵּית) of Levi (Exodus 2:1). Can a person 130 years old be called בֵּית, a daughter or girl? Signs of youth appeared in her. Her skin became smooth, the wrinkles were straightened, and her beauty was restored (Bava Basra 120a).

□ [After he took her back,] the woman conceived and bore a son (Exodus 2:2). Was she not three months pregnant before he took her back? Rather, [the verse mentions the conception together with the birth to teach that] just as the conception was painless, so was the birth (Sotah 12a).

□ The woman took the child and nursed him (Exodus 2:9). At that time the Holy One, Blessed is He, gave her a bit of her reward. For sustaining the [Jewish] infants, the Holy One, Blessed is He, returned her son to her (Shemos Rabbah 1:25).

□ Eldad and Medad were sons of Elzaphan son of Parnach, whom Jochebed daughter of Levi bore him, [for] after her husband Amram had divorced her, she had married [Parnach. All this took place] before Moses was born (Targum Yonasan, Bamidbar 11:26).