

# The Midwives of Exodus: an Interfaith Text Study

## *Based on Exodus 1:8-22*

### English translation #1:

Exodus 1:8-22 - New International Version (NIV) translation

<sup>8</sup>Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. <sup>9</sup>“Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup>Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

<sup>11</sup>So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup>But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites <sup>13</sup>and worked them ruthlessly. <sup>14</sup>They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

<sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shifrah and Puah, <sup>16</sup>“When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” <sup>17</sup>The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup>Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

<sup>19</sup>The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

<sup>20</sup>So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. <sup>21</sup>And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

<sup>22</sup>Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

Just who are these midwives? Let's take a closer look...

<p><b>טו</b> וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם, לַמִּיֻלְדֹת הָעֵבְרִית, אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָת שִׁפְרָה, וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה.</p>	<p><b>15</b> And the king of Egypt spoke to the <b>Hebrew midwives</b>, of whom the name of the one was Shifrah, and the name of the other Puah;</p>
<p><b>טז</b> וַיֹּאמֶר, בְּיֻלְדְּכֶן אֶת-הָעֵבְרִיּוֹת, וַרְאִיתֶן, עַל-הָאֲבָנִים: ֶאֱם-בֵּן הוּא, וְהַמֶּתֶן אֹתוֹ, וְאִם-בַּת הוּא וְחָיָה.</p>	<p><b>16</b> and he said: “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”</p>
<p><b>יז</b> וַתִּירָאנָּן הַמִּיֻלְדֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם; וַתַּחֲיֶינָּן, אֶת-הַיְלָדִים.</p>	<p><b>17</b> The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.</p>
<p><b>יח</b> וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם, לַמִּיֻלְדֹת, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן, מַדּוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה; וַתַּחֲיֶינָּן, אֶת-הַיְלָדִים.</p>	<p><b>18</b> Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”</p>
<p><b>יט</b> וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּן הַמִּיֻלְדֹת אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, כִּי לֹא כְנָשִׁים הַמִּצְרִית הָעֵבְרִית: ֶכִּי-חַיֹּת הֵנָּה, בְּטָרָם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּיֻלְדֹת וַיֻּלְדוּ.</p>	<p><b>19</b> The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; <b>they are vigorous</b> and give birth before the midwives arrive.”</p>
<p><b>כ</b> וַיֵּיטֵב אֱלֹהִים, לַמִּיֻלְדֹת; וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ, מְאֹד.</p>	<p><b>20</b> So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.</p>
<p><b>כא</b> וַיְהִי, כִּי-יִרְאוּ הַמִּיֻלְדֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים; וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם, בָּתִּים.</p>	<p><b>21</b> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.</p>
<p><b>כב</b> וַיִּצַו פַּרְעֹה, לְכָל-עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר: ֶכָּל-הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוֹד, הַיְאָרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ, וְכָל-הַבַּת, תַּחֲיֶינָּן.</p>	<p><b>22</b> Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”</p>



Judy Klitsner, in *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*: “[The Torah] deliberately withholds any definitive ethnic marking of these women. Had the text chosen to be explicit, it could have used an adjectival form of the term *benei Yisrael* (children of Israel), the designation used throughout the story [instead of the term *meyaldot ha-ivriyot*] . . . They were midwives of either Hebrew or Egyptian lineage.”

## Questions for discussion:

1. How does our understanding of the story of the Exodus change when we consider the possibility that Shifrah and Puah were not Hebrews?
2. How do non-Jewish allies and advocates support the survival and growth of the Jewish community?
3. God recognized Shifrah and Puah by giving them “houses,” which could mean several different things. How do we recognize, thank, reward, or appreciate non-Jewish allies in our midst?



## What about midrashic traditions that teach that these midwives were Hebrews?

From my book, *Moses: A Stranger among Us*:

“In midrash, the creative interpretive literature of the ancient rabbis, the claim is made that Shifra and Puah were actually Moses’s mother and sister, Yocheved and Miriam. While this interpretive tradition yields its own richness, it is not an interpretation that is evident through a plain reading of the Torah text. Rashi, the French medieval Torah scholar, presents this midrashic tradition in his commentary on the midwives. However, not all of the classic Torah commentators share this view. Don Isaac Abravanel (1437 – 1508) comments about Shifra and Puah, “They were Egyptian women who were midwives for the Hebrews; how could Pharaoh expect Hebrew women to kill Hebrew babies?” This is one of those cases in which I prefer the Torah’s ambiguity to the midrashic tradition’s creative new claims.”

English translation of Abravanel’s comment taken from Michael Carasik’s *The JPS Miqra’ot Gedolot: Exodus*.”