

These Are the Names: Our Women Heroes

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Perhaps more than any other Torah portion, Shemot brings out that it is not only men, but women too, who possess tremendous courage and quick-thinking intelligence. You know, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Yocheved and Miriam, to Shifrah, Puah, and Batyah. For if it was not for these women, the liberation of the Jewish people might never have occurred. We have been taught to remember the names of the Torah's heroic great men. Let us remember the names of the Torah's heroic great women as well.

On this Shabbat we begin the reading of the Torah's second book, Exodus. Forty chapters long, Exodus describes just one year in the life of the Jewish people. But what a year it was! At its beginning, the Hebrews serve Pharaoh. By the end, they serve God. At the beginning, the Hebrews feel God's conspicuous absence in the midst of their suffering; by the end, they will feel God's miraculous presence. At the beginning, the Hebrews erect pyramids; by its end, they will construct the *mishkan*, the desert sanctuary. At the beginning, the Hebrews quarreled among each other. By the end, the 12 Hebrew tribes will be forged, both physically and spiritually, into one united people, a nation.

In Hebrew, the book of Exodus is called *sefer shemot*, "the book of names." And names play a crucial role in this first Torah reading. Indeed, three very special names are mentioned for the very first time in the Torah.

In this parashah we learn the name of the man who will liberate the Hebrews from slavery, the man who will be called the greatest prophet the Jewish people has ever produced. What is his name? His name is Moshe, Moses.

In this parashah the Hebrews are no longer called by the names of their individual tribes. Instead of twelve names, they have just one name. What is that unified name? It is *b'nei yisrael*, "the children of Israel."

In this parashah God is not called "*Elohim*," which means "God." More significantly, God is referred to by God's essential name: in Hebrew, it is *yhvh*, *yud hei vav hei*. This name is sacred. Only the high priest was permitted to pronounce it, and then only once a year on Yom Kippur. In our Bible and prayerbook, whenever we see God's name, *yhvh*, we read instead the euphemism, *adonai*, which means "my lord."

So this Torah portion is distinguished by these special names. It is also distinguished by the heroic actions of very special women. But do we know their names?

In this parashah, two women refuse to obey Pharaoh's genocidal command to kill all the Hebrew males babies? Who are they? They are two midwives. What are their names? Their names are Shifrah and Puah.

In this parashah, it is a woman who devises the plan to save Moses from certain death by casting him into the waters of the Nile? Who is it? It is Moses' mother. And what is her name? Her name is Yocheved.

In this parashah, it is a woman who saves Moses from drowning in the Nile river. Who is it? Why it is none other than Pharaoh's own daughter! What is her name? Her name is Batyah.

In this parashah, it is a woman who persuades Pharaoh's daughter to hire Yocheved as Moses' nurse? Who is it? It is Moses' sister. And what is her name? Her name is Miryam, Miriam. Perhaps more than any other Torah portion, *Shemot* brings out that it is not only men, but women too, who possess tremendous courage and quick-thinking intelligence.

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