

These are the Names
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More than any other Torah portion, Parashat 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 to Batyah, Miriam, Puah, Shifrah, and Yocheved. If it were 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.

Let's learn Torah together. 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, two 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 was his name? His name was 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 was that unified name? It was *B'nei Israel*, "the children of Israel."

In this parashah God was not called "*Elohim*" which is generic for "God." God was referred to by God's unpronounceable name, whose Hebrew consonants are *YHVH*. 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 prayer book, whenever we see God's name, *YHVH*, we read instead the euphemism, *adonai*, which means "my lord."

So this Torah portion is distinguished by special names. And these names – Moshe, B'nei Israel, *YHVH* – are well-known to us. This Torah portion is also distinguished by the heroic actions of some very special women. But do we know their names?

In this parashah, two Hebrew women, midwives, refuse to obey Pharaoh's genocidal command to kill all the Hebrew male babies. What are their names? Let's read Exodus 1:15-17. Their names are Shifrah and Puah.

Now let's read Exodus 2:1-10. In this parashah, a Hebrew woman devises the plan to save Moses from certain death by casting him into the waters of the Nile. Who was it? It was Moses' mother. And what is her name? Exodus chapter 2 doesn't say. In Exodus chapter 6 we learn her name is Yocheved.

In this parashah, an Egyptian woman saves Moses from drowning in the Nile river. Who was it? It was none other than Pharaoh's own daughter! What is her name? Exodus, chapter 2 doesn't say. From the midrash, we learn her name is Batyah.

In this parashah, a Hebrew woman persuades Pharaoh's daughter to hire Yocheved as Moses' nurse. Who was it? It was Moses' sister. And what is her name? Exodus chapter 2 doesn't say. We learn in Exodus 15 that her name was *Miryam*, Miriam.

More than any other Torah portion, *parashat shemot* brings out that it is not only men, but women too, who possess tremendous courage and quick-thinking intelligence. This made Pharaoh's plan to enslave the Hebrews all the more flawed. He thought that by getting rid of all the males, the Hebrews would be weak. But it is the women who outwit and defeat him. It is the women who bear the children and defy the Pharaoh.

You know, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Yocheved and Miriam, to Shifrah, Puah, and Batyah. For if it were 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 also remember the names of the Torah's heroic great women. In alphabetical order they are: Batyah, Miriam, Puah, Shifrah, and Yocheved.