



## Pesach - The Untold Story

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The story of Pesach is one of the best known in history. We've been telling it for over three thousand years. Yet what fascinates me is an aspect of the story we almost never tell. Ask anyone, Jew or non-Jew, who is the human hero of the exodus and the answer is almost bound to be Moses: liberator, prophet and fighter for justice. But the Torah tells a more complex, subtle and unexpected story. Alongside Moses - making his mission, even his very life, possible - are six other figures, all of them women. Overwhelmingly, the heroes of the exodus are heroines.

Who were they? The first, of course, was Yocheved, wife of Amram and mother of the three people who were to become the great leaders of the Israelites, Miriam, Aaron and Moses himself. It was Yocheved who, at the height of Egyptian persecution, had the courage to have a child, hide him for three months, and then devise a plan (placing him in an ark of bulrushes set afloat on the Nile) by which he might have a chance of being rescued. We know all too little of Yocheved. In her first appearance in the Torah she is unnamed. Yet, reading the narrative, we are left in no doubt about her bravery and resourcefulness. Not by accident did her children all become leaders.

The second was Miriam, Yocheved's daughter and Moses' sister. It was she who kept watch over the child as the ark floated down the river, and who approached Pharaoh's daughter with the suggestion that he be nursed among his own people. Once again the biblical text paints a portrait of the young Miriam as a figure of unusual fearlessness and presence of mind. Rabbinic tradition went further. In a quite extraordinary midrash, we read of how the young Miriam confronted her father Amram and persuaded him to change his mind. Hearing of the decree that every male Israelite baby would be drowned in the river, Amram led the Israelites in divorcing their wives so that there would be no more children. He had logic on his side. Could it be right to bring children into the world if there were a fifty per cent chance that they would be killed at birth? Yet Miriam, so the tradition goes, remonstrated with him. "Your decree," she said, "is worse than Pharaoh's. His affects only the boys; yours affects all. His deprives children of life in this world; yours will deprive them of life even in the world to come." Amram relented, and as a result, Moses was born. The implication of the story is clear. Miriam had more faith than her father.

The third, and in some ways the most intriguing, is Pharaoh's daughter, known to tradition as Bitya. It was she who had the courage to rescue an Israelite child and bring it up as her own in the very palace where her father was plotting the destruction of the Israelite people. Could we imagine a daughter of Hitler, or Eichmann, or Stalin, doing the same? There is something at once heroic and gracious about this lightly sketched figure - the woman who gave Moses his name - that compels our admiration.

The fourth makes her appearance somewhat later in the narrative: Zipporah, Moses' wife. The daughter of a Midianite priest, she is nonetheless determined to accompany Moses on his mission to Egypt, despite the fact that she has no reason to risk her life on such a hazardous venture. In a deeply enigmatic passage, it is she who saves Moses' life by performing a circumcision on their son. The impression we have of her is of a figure of iron willpower who, at a crucial moment, has a better sense than Moses himself of what God requires.

I have saved till last the two figures who appear first, because it is they who did most to enlarge the moral horizons of mankind. I refer to the two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who frustrated Pharaoh's first attempt at genocide. Told to kill the male Israelite children at birth, they "feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live." Summoned and accused of disobedience, they outwitted Pharaoh by constructing an ingenious cover story: the Hebrew women, they said, are vigorous and give birth before we arrive. They escaped punishment and saved lives.



The significance of the story of the midwives is that it is the first instance known to me of a principle that is one of Judaism's greatest contributions to civilization: the idea that there are moral limits to authority. There are instructions that should not be obeyed. There are crimes against humanity that cannot be excused by the claim that "I was only obeying orders." This concept, generally known as "civil disobedience," is usually attributed to the nineteenth century American writer Henry David Thoreau, and entered international consciousness after the Holocaust and the Nuremberg trials. Its true origin, though, lay thousands of years earlier in the actions of two women, Shifra and Puah. Through their understated courage they earned a front row seat among the heroes of the moral life. They taught us the primacy of conscience over conformity, the law of justice over the law of the land.

**Date Uploaded:** Sunday 23rd March 2014

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.kosher.org.uk/article/pesach-untold-story>