

Disobeying Immoral Orders

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I prepare my sermon titles weeks in advance, in time for our *Chronicle* deadline. Therefore, when I planned to speak on “Disobeying Immoral Orders,” I did not know that, less than a week before I would deliver this sermon, Georgia’s Secretary of State would defy an unethical directive from the President of the United States, the leader of his own party, to “find” enough votes to change Georgia’s election result.ⁱ Or that, days later, Vice President Pence, both of Arkansas’ Senators, and our Congressman would defy the President’s unlawful order to subvert the Constitution. I also did not foresee that a mob of thousands, wielding Confederate flags and Nazi symbols, would heed the President’s incitement, another immoral order, by invading the United States Capitol.

No, I had in mind two biblical women who stand to lose much more than a future election. Early in this week’s Torah portion, Pharaoh, alarmed by the growing population of Israelites in his kingdom and groundlessly imagining that they might “join our enemies in fighting against us,”ⁱⁱ orders the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to murder every newborn Israelite boy.ⁱⁱⁱ

We biblical readers know nothing of these women before Pharaoh commands them to execute his genocidal plan. Pharaoh holds the power of life and death over everybody in his dominion, so we may well assume that they will obey him, until Shiphrah and Puah risk their lives by flouting the evil order, as “they let the boys live.”^{iv}

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, writes in *The Mussar Torah Commentary* about how profoundly we don’t know Shifrah and Puah. Even “the term ‘Hebrew midwives’ is ambiguous. Some commentaries [assume] that the midwives were themselves Israelite women[, while others] say that these were Egyptian midwives who helped the Israelite women give birth. They were Pharaoh’s own subjects, whom he expected to obey his command without question. According to this explanation, these Egyptian women reached across national and religious divides, feeling human and moral solidarity with their sisters, the Israelite women, in a bond stronger than their allegiance to their own king.”^v

Alas, Pharaoh was not the last to seek our people’s destruction. Ferdinand and Isabella expelled Jews from their land. For some four centuries thereafter, Spanish and Portuguese inquisitors successfully commanded their people to reveal Jews who remained, leading to countless brutal executions. None possessed the

tools of Adolf Hitler. The overwhelming majority of his people—not only Germans, but also populations in countries that the Nazis occupied across Europe—were “Hitler’s willing executioners,”^{vi} marshaling modern technology to exterminate millions of our people.

The Inquisition was largely successful, removing Jews and Judaism from the Iberian Peninsula, though tremendous numbers of our people saved themselves and our heritage by sacrificially choosing to leave their homes and build new lives in new lands.

During the Holocaust, though, Shiphrah and Puah reappeared. As many of you know, my mother, Gay Block, has photographed and spoken widely about Holocaust rescuers, Christians who risked their lives to save Jews threatened with Nazi extermination. One of those rescuers, Jan Karski, put it this way: “We should ... emphasize that after the war over one-half million Jews survived in Europe. Now some of them don’t owe anything to anybody. They survived in the camps; the Nazis had no time to finish them off... They survived in the mountains, in the forests, fighting, as Partisans. But most of them were helped by individuals, by priests, nuns, peasants, some workers, some intelligentsia, whatever they were... Now, to help a Jew during the war was very dangerous...[I]n Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, instantaneous death! Execution! Sometimes if the family was involved, the entire family shot! There were a few cases...where the Gestapo found out that the peasants in the village knew that there was some Jewish family in hiding, they burned the village, the entire village! And still there were people who were helping the Jews!”^{vii}

Torah does not give voice to Shiphrah and Puah, recording in their own words their motivation for saving the Israelite infant boys. Four decades after the Holocaust, rescuers who spoke with my mother judged their own actions unremarkable. “‘It is the normal thing to do,’ Arie van Mansum asserted. Dutch rescuer Semmy Riekerk said, ‘I’m not all good. I had the opportunity and I happened to have made the right choice. A human being is like a piano. Circumstances play the keys.’”^{viii}

Writing about Shiphrah and Puah, Rabbi Eilberg offers an explanation, observing that they “serve as exemplars of what the Mussar masters call *ometz lev*, a fascinating phrase, literally meaning ‘heart strength.’”^{ix} She goes on to acknowledge that this “heart strength” can be misdirected, asking, “In our own lives, when we sense power and urgency arising in our hearts, how are we to know whether we are acting ‘for God’s will,’ like...Shifrah and Pu’ah, or whether we are motivated by the desire for fame, admiration or personal gratification? Is the surge of strength welling up in us truly righteous anger for the sake of heaven or for the

sake of the world’s needs, or is it coming from the powerful force of our own ego desires? How do we discern when to trust the rush of activist energy and when to pause to interrogate it?”^x

Courage, in other words, can be used or misused. Some would label as “courageous” the frightful mob that invaded our nation’s Capitol this week. Indeed, *ometz lev*, “heart strength,” must have been required to stand up to Capitol Police, to breach barricades, to overrun an American citadel that has never been violently overtaken by an insurrection of American citizens.

Some, by contrast, will label as “cowards” the Republican office holders who stood up for democracy, insisting that “courage” would have been evidenced by supporting the President above the Constitution. Still others would argue that these office holders should not be praised simply for discharging their legal responsibility. By that logic, though, Shiphrah and Puah do not deserve our esteem for doing their jobs, delivering babies alive. And by that logic, Holocaust rescuers have not earned recognition, and some of them agreed, saying that they had only done what any decent person would do.

Rabbi Eilberg recalls that her college rabbi, Rabbi Al Axelrad, would give “an annual ‘Shifrah and Pu’ah Award’... [to] someone who had acted with moral courage despite potential danger to their lives or to their reputations.”^{xi} This Shabbat, while confessing that Vice President Pence, Senators Boozman and Cotton and Congressman Hill have neither risked their lives nor saved others, I would nevertheless nominate them for Rabbi Axelrad’s award in the names of Shifrah and Puah. Their correct action this week required *ometz lev*, “heart strength.”

Hillel said, “In a place where there is no human, strive to be human.”^{xii} This week in Washington, our President and 145 members of Congress declined to be humans. Our Vice President, Arkansas’ Senators, and our Congressman took the right action, in defiance of an immoral order. They are—in this instance and in this moment, at least—deserving of praise and honor.

Amen.

ⁱ Jack Durschlag, “Audio released of Trump call to Raffensperger,” *Fox News First*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/audio-released-of-trump-call-to-ga-secretary-of-state-seeking-additional-votes>.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 1:10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 1:15-16.

^{iv} Exodus 1:17.

^v Rabbi Amy Eilberg, “*Ometz Lev—Moral Courage: Women of Moral Courage*,” *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Barry H. Block, Editor, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, 84.

^{vi} Title of a book by Daniel Goldhagen.

vii Gay Block & Malka Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2020, 248.

viii *Ibid.*, 31.

ix Eilberg, 85.

x *Ibid.*

xi Eilberg, 83.

xii Pirkei Avot 2:5.