

## **DARSHANUT**

*Darshanut, derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.*

*We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.*

## **THE PRICE OF ASSIMILATION**

**HARVEY MINKOFF**

ויאמר מלך מצרים למילדות העבריות אשר שם האחת שפרה ושם השנית פועה. ויאמר בילדכן את העבריות . . . אם בן הוא והמתן אתו . . .  
*And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives - one who was named Shifrah and the second named Puah - And he said, 'When you deliver the Hebrew women . . . if it is a son, you shall kill him . . . ' (Exodus 1:15-16)*

The midrash identifies the midwives with Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses. So how did they get the names Shifrah and Puah? Moreover, how could Pharaoh expect Hebrew nurses to kill the offspring of their own people? These questions have led some commentators to suggest that *Hebrew midwives* means not that they themselves were Hebrews but that they were non-Hebrews who worked for Hebrew women.

I believe that the answer to these questions - and the key to Pharaoh's scheme - lies in the repetition of ויאמר *he said* in two successive verses, and the translation of אשר. As usually understood, verse 15 breaks off after *midwives* and is left dangling because אשר is rendered as a relative pronoun, *Harvey Minkoff is a professor of linguistics at Hunter College in New York. He has written many articles about biblical translation and twelve books, most recently a study guide to Isaiah.*

literally: *the Hebrew midwives - of whom the name of one was Shifrah and the name of the second was Puah*. The next verse then repeats the dangling introduction and supplies what Pharaoh said.

However, a different picture emerges if וְאֵל is understood as the conjunction "that": "The king of Egypt said to the two Hebrew midwives *that* the name of one was Shifrah and the name of the second Puah."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the first time the king spoke to them, he gave them Egyptian names or titles. In effect he was offering them the opportunity to stop being mere Hebrew midwives, identified with an enslaved minority. Instead, they could be part of the royal administration, friends of the king, members of the elite. And that was all "he said"-וַיֹּאמֶר - to them at this first audience.

Some time later - perhaps a few minutes, perhaps a few days - after they had had time to contemplate the rewards of assimilation and collaboration, he called them back. This time, as in the second וַיֹּאמֶר, *He said, 'If it is a son, you shall kill him.'*

This reading explains why Pharaoh expects Hebrew nurses to be willing murderers of Hebrew children. He is not coming out of the blue to ask strangers, members of a community, to kill their own children. He first tempts them away from their community by offering them a new identity and a new community. Once they have had time to appreciate the advantages of their new situation, then he tells them the price, hoping that now they will gladly pay it. And this has been the pattern of assimilation throughout the ages. First comes the promise of economic opportunity, civil rights, full citizenship. Only later is the price revealed. And too often it is our children.

#### NOTES

1. The use of וְאֵל as a conjunction is much less common in Exodus than its use as a relative pronoun, but note Ex. 11:7, 'לִמְעַן תִּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יַפְלֶה ה', *so you will know that the Lord will distinguish*.