

JANUARY 1, 2017

Parashat Shemot

A Show of Hypocrisy

Therefore they did set over him (Exodus 1:11)

וישימו עליי (שמות א:יא)

After the United Nations passed a resolution criticizing the United States for declaring its intention to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, [CNN's Jake Tapper called out](#) the United Nations for giving a “moral platform” to dictators and human rights abusers and singling out Israel, [Ha'aretz reported](#). After pointing out that a full 86 percent of the U.N. General Assembly's resolutions criticizing a single country have focused on Israel, Tapper “scoffed at the fact that leaders responsible for humanitarian crises and human rights abuses are now lecturing the United States over its Israel policy,” saying that while, “Israel is not above criticism...considering the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, the lack of basic human rights in North Korea, the children starving in the streets of Venezuela, the citizens of Syria targeted for murder by their own leader using the most grotesque and painful of weapons, you have to ask is Israel truly deserving of 86 percent of the world's condemnation? Or possibly is something else afoot at the United Nations, something that allows the representative of the Assad government to lecture the United States for moving its embassy?” Tapper tapped into a hypocritical double standard that has been used against the Jewish people for millennia. In fact, Pharaoh used just such a ploy to enslave the Jews in Egypt.

Once the Egyptians made the fateful decision to enslave the Israelites, they faced a challenging technical question: How do you enslave an entire nation living freely in your country? According to the Talmud, the solution that Pharaoh devised and implemented involved a publicity campaign with a liberal dose of duplicity. Commenting on the verse, “Therefore they did set over him taskmasters...” (1:11) the Talmud (*Sotah* 11a) notes that the verse should have said that, “they did set over them.” Why does it refer to the Israelites in the singular? The Talmud teaches: “It was taught in the study house of Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Shimon: This teaches us that they brought a brick-mold and hung it around Pharaoh's neck; and every Israelite who complained that he was weak was told, ‘Are you weaker than Pharaoh?’” The Egyptian king had no intention of working in the fields, nor did he. Rather, he used the impression that he was willing to work to force the Israelites to work “together” with him. In this way, once they began to toil, they found themselves unable to free themselves from bondage.

Today, too many of the world's nations have adopted Pharaoh's tactics, imposing standards on others that they do not impose upon themselves. After becoming the United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Nikki Haley [noted the absurdity](#) of the U.N.'s double standard with regard to the Jewish state. This past month, when it decided to stand together with Israel, the United States became the target of this very same double standard. When the United States vetoed the resolution in the Security Council calling to void President Trump's declaration recognizing Jerusalem and the capital of Israel, [Haley asserted that](#), “The U.S. rejects the double standard which says Washington is not impartial when it decides where to place its own embassy, but the U.N. is a neutral party even though it consistently singles Israel out for condemnation.”

Nations have used similar double standards against Israel for far too long. We must applaud our elected officials' strong stand with Israel. Instead of considering counterproductive and biased resolutions seeking to condemn America for accepting Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the United Nations should urge the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table with Israel. That is the path to peace. ■

Facilitating the Blessing of Birth

Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1:15)

מילדות העבריות (שמות א:טו)

Earlier this month, a baby who was born in a refugee camp in Cyprus where his parents had fled to escape the ongoing Syrian civil war was diagnosed with a serious congenital heart defect. When officials from the Cypriot Ministry of Health realized that they could not provide the necessary care, they sent an urgent request to Israel's Ambassador to Nicosia Shmuel Rabel for assistance in saving the infant. According to the [Times of Israel](#), after Israel's Foreign Ministry issued the necessary permits, the Syrian father and son, together with an Arabic-speaking medical team, were airlifted to the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer where doctors began prepping the infant for surgery. This seemingly minor episode, which provided badly needed medical care to new parents with nowhere to turn, serves as another reminder of Israel's readiness to assist those in need whenever possible. And, as we see from *Parashat Shemot*, in helping save the lives of young babies, Israel might very well be repaying a very ancient debt.

After the a new Pharaoh, who does not remember Joseph, rises to power in Egypt and enslaves the Hebrews, he grows concerned with the slaves' exploding population. To address his fears, he proposes a gruesome, horrible solution. "And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the one was Shiprah, and the name of the other Puah; and he said: 'When you do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women you shall look upon the birthstool: if it be a son, then you shall kill him; but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.'" (1:15-16) As we know the midwives "feared God" (verse 17) and defied the command of the king, refusing to murder the male children. The Sages in the Talmud (*Sotah* 11b) identify the two Hebrew midwives named Shiprah and Puah as Jewish, and further, that they were none other than Moses' sister and mother Miriam and Yocheved, women destined to become matriarchs of the Jewish people.

Yet, Abarbanel disagrees. He writes, "They were not Hebrews, since how could [Pharaoh's] mind be confident that Hebrew women would murder their own [people's] babies?!" Rather, he explains that the term *meyaldot ha'ivriot* refers not the Hebrew midwives, but instead to "midwives of the Hebrews." Similarly, in his retelling of the story, Josephus explicitly assumes that the women were Egyptians who served as midwives for the Hebrews (*Antiquities* 2:206-207, Brill ed.) "[The King of Egypt commanded] ... that the midwives of the Egyptians should watch carefully the pangs of childbirth of the Hebrew women and should observe closely their deliveries. For he ordered that they should be delivered of children by these who because of kinship were not likely to transgress the wish of the king." According to this view, the refusal to kill the Jewish babies represented an act of defiance on the part of gentile women, willing to risk their own lives to protect the lives of helpless Jewish children. [ed. note: For a fascinating essay on this topic [see here](#)].

Today, the modern state of Israel is following the example of these great women who considered saving the lives of innocent babies a moral imperative. Israel has been assisting pregnant Syrian women for several years by transporting them to Israeli hospitals to give birth. [The Jerusalem Post](#) recently reported that after recognizing the need for a hospital to assist the hundreds of women who give birth each year in southern Syria, Israel facilitated the opening of a women's hospital in the village of Bariqa in the Quneitra region of the Syrian-controlled portion of the Golan Heights [ed. note: You can see pictures of the hospital [here](#)]. Israeli support includes the needed medical machinery, supplies and medicine. Major Dr. Sergei Kukitov, who coordinates the medical division of Israel's "Good Neighbors" initiative told the Israeli newspaper *Mekor Rishon* that in its first month of operation the hospital served 650 women, and has seen "over fifty births, seven cesarean section births and one set of twins—something that obviously gives us great joy." Israel's role in supporting the hospital is widely known, but has apparently not prevented the local population from seeking services there.

While Israel certainly hopes to change the hearts and minds of the Syrian population, its efforts to help birth healthy children also stem from a moral imperative to help those in need. In addition, this might be a way to repay the very ancient acts of kindness from the midwives of Egypt. ■

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