

# The Book of Names

Sheila Jelen '87 | BronfmanTorah | Shemot 2016

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In [Parshat Shemot](#), we are introduced to four women: Shifra and Puah, who served as midwives to the Jewish women, and Yocheved and Miriam, Moshe's mother and sister. Strangely, in his [commentary on Exodus 1:15](#), Rashi condenses the four women into two, asserting that "Shifra" and "Puah" were Yocheved and Miriam's professional names, the names that describe the kind of work they did as they helped the Israelite women give birth. Rashi says:

"Shifra is Yocheved, because she would improve (le-shaper) the newborn, [help it towards health instead of letting ailing babies die]. Puah was the name used for Miriam, because she would coo (puah) and speak to the child, like a woman trying to pacify a crying child."

שפרה. זו יוכבד על שם שמשפרת את הולד  
פועה. זו מרים שפועה ומדברת והוגה לולד  
כדרך הנשים המפיסות תינוק הבוכה פועה לשון צעקה, כמו כיולדה אפעה:

This particular Rashi has always disturbed me, because it seems to reflect a desire to minimize the presence of women within the Biblical narrative. There aren't many parshiyot that can boast the presence of four women within the first two chapters. Why conflate them, turning four into two?

In the course of re-reading *Parshat Shemot* to prepare this essay, however, I came to realize that the conflation of the midwives Shifra and Puah with the characters of Yocheved and Miriam is just one of several instances in the Parshah where the Biblical text and its rabbinic interpreters grapple with what it means to reinvent ourselves multiple times in the course of a life, or even in the span of a day, while still being true to who we strive to be in the world.

Yocheved and Miriam, in other words, were not just Moshe's mother and sister. Shifra and Puah were not just midwives appointed by Pharaoh to do away with the Israelite babies. They were all these things, and more. The rabbinic impulse to conflate all the women in the parshah emphasizes the womens' versatility, not their irrelevance.

*Sefer Shemot* can be translated, "The Book of Names." Having begun with remarks on the strange and interesting flattening of Shifra and Puah into Yocheved and Miriam, I would like to reflect a bit more on the way names are deployed in this Parshah.

Moshe's name, in contrast to that of his sister and mother does not change. This is considered noteworthy by the rabbis. How could it be that the daughter of Pharaoh gave him the only name he would ever use? "*For from the water I drew him out (Meshitihu),*" she says in [Chapter 2:11](#), and this name sticks with him. The rabbis are distressed by the idea of the daughter of Pharaoh naming Moshe for two

12/31/15

reasons: How did she come to know Hebrew? Why didn't his own mother name him?

Furthermore, if one were to argue that different facets of one's identity should lead to different Biblical names, as Rashi argues in the case of Shifra and Puah, Yocheved and Miriam, one would assume that Moshe would have at least three different names. Moshe, born into an Israelite family, raised by Egyptian royalty, leaves Egypt for Midian where he becomes a shepherd and marries the daughter of a Midianite high priest. Whereas Yocheved's and Miriam's versatility is emphasized in the rabbinic notion of their being identified in the Biblical text by many names, Moshe's singularity of name, the stubbornness of his given name, highlights this dynamic from a different perspective. In Moshe's case, the very continuity of his identity, despite his rebirth throughout the narrative, as a Jew, as an Egyptian, as a Midianite, is represented by the singularity of his name.

Pharaoh himself presents a different variation on this dynamic of names in *Parshat Shemot*. The Israelites' trouble began when a "new king" arose over Egypt in Chapter 1:8, "one who did not know Joseph." Here we hear from Rashi about different ways of understanding the transformation in leadership. He cites an argument between Talmudic scholars Rav and Shmuel: Rav explains that a new king came to power, and Shmuel says the old king was still in power, but he made new laws, ones that were not so favorable to the Israelites. All this confusion could have been averted, if the King's actual name was mentioned in the text. But he remains unnamed.

In the immortal [words of Zelda](#) (in Marcia Falk's translation):

"Each of us has a name  
given by God  
and given by our parents..."

For some, like Moshe, this means continuity of self despite the vagaries of personal history. For others, like Yocheved and Miriam, this means continuity of self despite a proliferation of names.

12/31/15

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