

It's curious to think that an entire story could be changed by the absence of one or two persons. But that's the case with our Influencers for this week. Shiphrah and Puah, who are only briefly mentioned and have only one line of dialogue, are pivotal in Moses' story, and in the whole story of the Hebrew people's liberation. Should Shiphrah and Puah not have chosen to act the way they did, should they have been missing from the story, the whole Exodus story may have looked and been told very differently.

In most of the commentaries I've read this week, Shiphrah and Puah are gathered together alongside Moses' mother, Sister, and Pharaoh's daughter as some of the women who kept Moses alive. However, as I noticed last time with Hagar, because scripture has often been read from a patriarchal perspective, this interpretation portrays these women as supportive characters in someone else's story; in this case, Moses' story. But looking at them on their own, they are strong women in their own right. They stand up to Pharaoh, they practice civil disobedience, and they undermine Pharaoh's authority over an enslaved people. By doing so, they prevent a genocide, and by extension, ensure the story of God's people continues; they birth new life and liberation, instead of death.

Our scripture reading bridges the narrative between Genesis and Exodus. Genesis concludes with the Hebrew people settled in Egypt, where Joseph—having found favour with Pharaoh—secured a place of safety and privilege for his family. However, Exodus opens with a dramatic shift: a new Pharaoh arises who does not know Joseph. What emerges from this shift is fear and xenophobia.

Pharaoh perceives the Hebrew presence as a threat to his own power, privilege and authority. His response reflects a timeless playbook used by leaders across history whenever they fear a marginalized group: First, he limits their freedom. When that proves insufficient, he enslaves them. And when even that fails to suppress them, he turns to the ultimate tool of control: systemic genocide.

And we've seen this pattern repeat through the course of history. From the National Socialist Regime in Germany in the 1930s and '40s to the early decades of Confederation in Canada, to

apartheid-era South Africa and to the ongoing situation Israel/Palestine. Each case follows the same trajectory: restriction, bondage, and attempts at elimination.

Take the Canadian example, the historic *Indian Act*, designed for the legal and cultural erasure of Indigenous Peoples. Under section 12, the state decreed that if an Indigenous woman married a non-Indigenous man, she and her children lost their legal identity as Indigenous people, and they would lose their right to live on their ancestral land. It was a calculated, bureaucratic mechanism to quietly shrink the population over generations.

Likewise, Pharaoh doesn't begin with violence; instead, he begins with policy. He summons the Hebrew midwives, in our story represented by Shiphrah and Puah, and instructed them to commit infanticide, quietly killing the male children, while allowing the female children to live.

Our scripture tells us that "The midwives, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live." (Exodus 1:17) If we lean into the Jewish tradition of Midrash, that is, an expansive way of reading scripture that fills its silences, we could imagine Shiphrah and Puah meeting with their colleagues to discuss this latest directive from Pharaoh. Wilda Gafney offers us this imaginative take on things:

"Hundreds of women come to the place of Shiphrah's tent. Many bring daughters, granddaughters, and nieces whom they are apprenticing in the profession. Some are pregnant; others are nursing. Take more than a day for everyone to gather, eat, and rest from their journeys. And there is talk. Shop talk, women's words, shared experiences, and new techniques: herbs to stop bleeding, herbs to bring on labour, teas to increase milk production, ways to limit pregnancies.

Finally, Shiphrah speaks. She tells them Pharaoh's words. The women gasp. Some mutter. Some shout. Some of the children are frightened. Shiphrah and Puah shush them and call for calm. Shiphrah begins to prophecy: 'God has brought our people a mighty long way. And I don't believe God has brought us this far to leave us. Do not fear this pharaoh or his warriors, not his warhorses nor his chariots. God will blow them away like smoke in the wind. In our days, before our eyes, God will break the back of Egypt and wash away its might. God will rise up one of our sons to lead us and all our children out of this house of slavery. Our hands and our wombs do God's work. We will deliver the deliverer. We will keep them safe until the day that God calls them to lead us to freedom. We shall receive our freedom, dancing to woman-

song if we trust in the mighty power of Shaddai, who drew us from her holy womb, whose spirit covers the earth.'

Shiphrah takes her seat, Puah speaks: 'Trust in God-Whose-Name-Is-Holy. This is what we shall do: deliver babies; hide as many of the boys as you can. Raise others as girls. Do not worry about the Egyptians; they will not come house to house to check on women! They cannot imagine that we would defy the pharaoh whom they revere as a living God.'

*The women leave the convocation of birthing-women. Days, weeks, then months go by. Pharaoh is too busy to think about the Hebrew birthing-women. Someone mentions that the Hebrew people are still growing, in spite of Pharaoh's commandment. He summons them back to explain themselves."*¹

Shiphrah and Puah, don't protest, they don't launch a coup, instead they show up, and do what they're called to do, deliver life.

This kind of quiet, faithful resistance is not confined to scripture. In Canada, one woman answered the same call when her people faced bureaucratic erasure. Elder Mary Two-Axe Earley of Kahnawà:ke (gah-nah-WAH-gay) spent much of her life fighting the injustices the Indian Act created for Status Indian women.

Born on reserve, Mary moved to Brooklyn at age 18 and married an Irish-American man. Because she married a non-Indigenous man, Canada's paternalistic *Indian Act* stripped her of her legal Indian status. Without legal status, Mary lost the right to own property on her reserve, vote in band elections, or even be buried alongside her people. Any First Nations woman who married a non-status man suffered the same fate—relegated to what Mary called "the status of nobodies." Upon her husband's death in 1969, Mary had to transfer ownership of her own home to her daughter—whose marriage to a Kahnawà:ke (gah-nah-WAH-gay) man preserved her status—just to return to the reserve. The law had turned a mother into a dependent in her own house.

Mary spent nearly 20 years travelling the country, writing letters, and giving speeches to challenge this law, defending the core principle that a woman's identity should never be

¹ Gafney, Wilda. 2017. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. First edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. pg. 90.

defined by her husband. Her tireless advocacy paid off in 1985 when the Canadian federal government amended the *Indian Act* (Bill C-31), removing the discriminatory clause. Mary became the first person to have her rights legally restored under the new legislation, a victory that ultimately restored rights to tens of thousands of First Nations women and their children. At the reinstatement ceremony, she said, "Now I'll have legal rights again. After all these years, I'll be legally entitled to live on the reserve, to own property, die and be buried with my own people."

Just as Mary Two-Axe Earley refused to accept what the law had done to her people, Shiprah and Puah refused to implement what Pharaoh demanded. One fought through legislation and testimony. The other through quiet, daily resistance. Both understood that policy is never neutral—it is either an instrument of liberation or a weapon of erasure.

Pharaoh didn't give up so easily. When the Hebrews kept multiplying despite his orders, he summoned the midwives back to account for their disobedience. Their response was brilliant and subversive: "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they're strong, vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." "The pharaoh seems to be at a loss for words. In fact, he never speaks to them again. The birthing women leave the royal audience unscathed, in spite of their disobedience."² "Whether they're lying or telling the truth, their response was an act of creative resistance that kept the babies alive."³ And the Hebrews kept multiplying and becoming more numerous.

This same pattern of policy-based erasure played out in Canada, where the residential school system was designed to separate Indigenous children from their mothers' language, faith, and families. The stated goal was assimilation—"kill the Indian in the child"—through institutions that took children away from their homes for generations. Though the wounds run deep, there were those who resisted, who held space for survival, who midwived life back into the community.

Dr. Gladys Cook (Topahdewin), a Dakota elder and survivor of the residential school system herself, spent her entire adult life practicing a restorative, spiritual midwifery. She carried the scars of her own experience, but she chose to become a healer rather than be defined by harm. She became coordinator of the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program in

² Gafney, pg. 91.

³ Japinga, Lynn. 2017. *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament: Who They Were and Why They Matter*. First edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. pg 47.

Portage la Prairie, but her work went far beyond counselling. She sat with survivors—men, women, children—holding them with patience as they navigated the journey toward recovery. She helped them reclaim their original language, traditional ceremonies, and ancestral sovereignty, bringing them back into the light. She blended Christian faith with Dakota spirituality, showing that healing was possible without abandoning either heritage. For her lifelong commitment to healing her people, she received the Order of Manitoba and the Indspire Award.

Where Shiprah and Puah used their skill to preserve life in the face of state-sanctioned infanticide, Gladys used her voice, her presence, and her recovery to restore life in the wake of state-sanctioned cultural erasure. Where Mary Two-Axe Earley fought to reclaim legal status lost through discriminatory law, Gladys fought to reclaim spirit and culture lost through institutional harm. All four women chose to be on the side of life.

“One of the great ironies in this story is that the king wanted to eliminate the boys, who might rebel when they became adults, but the girls and women undermined his plans. The king assumed that women were weak and harmless, but wise, resourceful women brought down his kingdom.”⁴

Our own Anabaptist story has accounts of equally courageous women subverting the rules. Take, for instance, the story of Margaret Hellwart, who on numerous occasions escaped the chains meant to confine her. Beginning in 1608, when she was approximately 40 years old, Margaret refused repeated warnings from Lutheran church authorities to conform to their faith and practice. Summoned before a church court twice in consecutive years with no result, the authorities resorted to chaining her to the floor of her house—a punishment inflicted twenty-one times between 1610 and 1621. Yet Margaret proved to be an escape artist of remarkable skill; no sooner was the chain fastened to her ankle than she was free again. On one occasion, when church officials visited unannounced, she simply waited until they were near and put the chain back in place behind her. She continued her work freely, visiting neighbours, attending Anabaptist meetings, and even winning converts—including a widow named Maria, who was similarly chained.

Despite relentless persecution, Margaret remained unwavering. During interrogations, she mocked her captors with a knowing smile. In 1618, when summoned once more, she declared she was over fifty and past learning anything new, insisting she knew the way God had taught

⁴ Japinga, pg. 48

her and would obey God rather than human authorities. She told the court she intended to remain an Anabaptist until the end of her life, dismissing their efforts as pointless. Three years later, when summoned again, she asked only that they leave her alone, reasoning that she would not live much longer anyway. After January 1621, when she was 53, the records fall silent.

Shiphrah, Puah, Mary, Gladys and Margaret remind us that justice is a collaborative, labour-intensive process. It requires strength in the face of pain, pushing against the contraction of oppressive systems, and refusing to let go until the new thing is born. May we all have the courage to be midwives of justice, helping birth new systems that reflect God's dream among us.

Amen