

Giving Birth to the Future: Reflections for Mother's Day
(Exodus 1:13-22; I Samuel 1:1-20)

We have Anna Jarvis—or more accurately, her mother—to thank for Mother's Day. Before the Civil War, Anna Jarvis's mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis of West Virginia helped to start "Mothers' Day Work Clubs" to teach local women how to take care of their children. After the Civil War, with the country was still divided from searing conflict on the battlefield, the elder Jarvis organized "Mothers' Friendship Day, where mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation.

Following her mother's death, Anna Reeves Jarvis' daughter conceived of Mother's Day as a way of honoring the sacrifices mothers made for their children. She gained financial backing from department store magnate, John Wanamaker, and organized the first celebration at a Methodist church in Grafton, West Virginia. On the same day, thousands of people attended a Mother's Day event at Wanamaker's stores.

Jarvis argued that American holidays were biased toward male achievements and began a letter writing campaign to newspapers and politicians to create a day honoring motherhood. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson signed a measure officially establishing the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

Jarvis thought an appropriate celebration involved wearing a white carnation, visiting one's mother or attending church service. Despite having partnered in her campaign with Wanamaker, one of the most successful merchants of her time, she had not anticipated the commercialization of the holiday. Disturbed by the profiteering, long before it became the 35 billion dollar industry it is today, she sued merchants, spoke out against florists, disowned the holiday and lobbied to see it removed from the calendar.ⁱ

So we are left with a paradox—a woman who was responsible for valorizing motherhood—and was herself single and childless—devoted her life to politics and influencing public opinion. A woman who wanted to honor the work of her own mother as a peacemaker repudiated the selling of an image of motherhood that undermined her mother's—and her own values.

A contemporary of the elder Jarvis, abolitionist and suffragette Julie Ward Howe penned a "Mother's Day Proclamation", a call to action that asked mothers to unite in promoting world peace.

Maxim Gorky wrote, "Only mothers can think of the future - because they give birth to it in their children."ⁱⁱ

But what happens when that future is snatched away from them? Yesterday, mothers who have lost their children to police violence marched in our nation's capitol.

A Milwaukee mother whose 31-year old son, Dontre, was killed during a confrontation with police conceived of the march. Maria Hamilton formed “Mothers for Justice United,” saying, “*I believe Dontre planted, his physical life planted a seed for this movement. I know that his death will never be in vain...My mission is to make people aware that this is a bigger problem than anybody actually thought,*” she said. “*Now that the doors have come open, we want the doors to stay open until things start to get fixed.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Maria Hamilton is one of a long line of women whose desire for children and for their children’s future motivates them to do things they had never done before. The Bible is filled with stories of courageous women who pray or will the future into being. The barren, Biblical Hannah was misunderstood in the center of power in her time, as she prayed so fervently for a son at the altar at Shiloh that she was mistaken for a drunkard. Hannah’s personal petition was so authentic, so heartfelt, so visceral that she became the model in Jewish tradition for how to pray.

In Exodus, a story of heroic women resisting injustice and cruelty is told so concisely that its import is simple to miss. “The King of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “when you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, God-fearing women, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.” (Ex. 1:15-17) The Bible is matter-of-fact in describing this extraordinary act of nonviolent resistance. We can imagine the terror and conflict the midwives might have felt upon realizing the position they were in. Which should they obey: the Pharaoh or their conscience? We know their decision: despite great risk to their own lives and families, these midwives, who had been trained to bring life into the world, could not obey an unjust order, even that of the most powerful man alive. They are effective, but so quiet, that it has taken generations for readers to notice their heroism. Unlike Moses, who will fight against this very Pharaoh on behalf of the same people, the women do not confront the Pharaoh; they do not stage a protest. They simply did what they knew to be right—and they patiently and earnestly delivered the baby boys. Perhaps they were able to put worries about their own fate out of their minds as they worked--consoling the laboring mothers and celebrating the new lives as they had before the decree. But when the Pharaoh confronted the midwives, they shrewdly used his own racism against him. They shook their shoulders in puzzlement and claimed that they were powerless to carry out his decree. “The Hebrew women gave birth so quickly and easily,” they declared, “that their services were simply not called upon.”

As Rabbi Pinchas Peli puts it, “Two obscure working women defy the immoral orders of the mighty king, and begin a process of liberation that has had resounding universal and everlasting implications. The exodus could never have taken place were it not for this first act of resistance to evil by Shiphrah and Puah.”^{iv}

We know very little about these two obscure but valiant women. Indeed, we do not even know whether they were Hebrews or Egyptians. The text is deliciously ambiguous. *Meyaldot ha'ivriyot*, can mean either “Hebrew midwives” or “Midwives to

the Hebrews”. If the midwives were Hebrews, we can more readily understand how they mustered the courage to refuse to kill their own kin. Rather than become stealth instruments of death demanded by the Pharaoh’s great cruelty, the midwives were prepared to take on the mantle of martyrdom. But if they were Egyptian women, their courage is even more striking. They were the premier nonviolent resisters to evil. They were persistent peacemakers. They united for justice. They were the first human rights advocates.

Indeed, whichever interpretation of “Hebrew midwives” we choose, whether standing up for one’s own or dismantling injustice directed toward the Other, we are still left with a rather practical question: “How could two midwives cope with all the babies born by this prolific people?” Even with a busy midwifery practice, could Shiphrah and Puah handle the volume? And a corollary: Could the numbers of male babies that two women deliver be enough to call forth the notice of the Pharaoh? Ibn Ezra, a medieval commentator, addresses these questions. He posits that the women were not only midwives, but community organizers as well. Shiphrah and Puah were in charge of all the midwives. Ibn Ezra speculates that there were 500 midwives and that these two were responsible for collecting the king’s taxes from the fees that the midwives received. So by Ibn Ezra’s interpretation, not only did Shiphrah and Puah resist the Pharaoh, they also led 500 women in civil disobedience, and diminished the Pharaoh coffers in the process! That’s what I call women giving birth to the future!

Listen again to Rabbi Peli, “Two obscure working women defy the immoral orders of the mighty king, and begin a process of liberation that has had resounding universal and everlasting implications. The exodus could never have taken place were it not for this first act of resistance to evil by Shiphrah and Puah.”^v

“The exodus could never have taken place were it not for this first act of resistance to evil by Shiphrah and Puah.” Without Shiphrah and Puah’s empathy, there would be no descendants, and no stories passed down to inspire them. Without Shiphrah and Puah’s courage, there would have been no example of freedom. Without Shiphrah and Puah’s welcoming hands and hearts reaching for new life and hope, there would have been no Moses.

Yet, even with Moses’ birth, there would have been no Moses to lead without another woman close at hand, without his sister, Miriam. The women labored, the midwives assisted, and Miriam stood watch, protecting her brother when he was placed in the water, in an ark amidst the bulrushes. Chava Romm celebrates Miriam in her poem, “Miriam Argues for Her Place as Prophetess.”

Exodus 2:1-10

That morning when we left you
in the bulrushes,
Scrubbed clean and freshly swaddled
in your simple basket,
I knew you were too precious

to abandon.

And when the princess
was taken by your innocence,
and claimed you for her own,
it was no mere fate that restored you
to the full breasts of your rightful mother,

but your sister's cunning.

You lived a stranger
in the house of the oppressor.
I grew among midwives,
stubborn tribeswomen,
who spared the newborn sons
in rank defiance of the pharaoh's orders

You learned to speak for us
before kings and officials.
I coaxed children from the narrows into light
with singing, tempered by our kin
laboring long in huts and brickyards.

My brother,
we have both been chosen.
What you witness on the mountain

cannot live without the miracles below.
Women draw water for the journey;
I have packed bells and timbrels.

Let us go.^{vi}

From the days of Shipharah and Puah until now, we need stories of our foremothers to mobilize, to motivate, to help to resist evil, to advocate for justice, to provide hope for freedom. Women who save lives, mothers who unite for justice, sisters who agitate for civil rights, midwives whose hands are outstretched toward those who are persecuted, so that they may give birth to hope. We are the descendants of Shipharah, Puah, Miriam and Hannah. We carry out the belief in reconciliation affirmed by Ann Reeves Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe and countless others who see in Mother's Day a day to celebrate women's power and women's values. We stand with Hannah and Maria Hamilton in their yearning for a future of love and of justice.

Poet Marge Piercy writes,
To Be of Use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.^{vii}

As we celebrate Mother's Day, honoring mothers in private and in public, may we all be engaged in work that is real. May we become people of use, learning from one another, sharing wisdom with one another, remembering and honoring those who came before us. May we all have worthwhile stories to tell and may we impart them with praise, with pride and with love. Happy Mother's Day.

ⁱ <http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/mothers-day>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/mothers.html#UUEG0KtpRd6EUQzK.99>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2015/05/09/405442122/million-moms-march-walks-washington-to-protest-police-violence>

^{iv} Pinchas H. Peli, Torah Today: A Renewed Encounter with Scripture, p. 57

^v Pinchas H. Peli, Torah Today: A Renewed Encounter with Scripture, p. 57

^{vi} Chava Romm, "Miriam Argues for Her Place as Prophetess," The Women's Torah Commentary, p. 330

^{vii} "To be of use" by Marge Piercy © 1973, 1982.

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