

Herstory Service
Help Wanted: Women of Valor
(Exodus 1: 13-22; Proverbs 31:10-31)

When healer and teacher, Dr. Rachel Remen, wanted to share the fruits of her labor, she wrote a book that she called Kitchen Table Wisdom. Although she was educated in the best schools in the nation, the learning that she treasured most she received in the least lofty, the most egalitarian of places. “When I was a child,” she writes, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories...Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way wisdom gets passed along. The stuff that helps us to live a life worth remembering...the kitchen table is a level playing field. Everyone’s story matters.”¹

And like Jews everywhere, recently I was reminded of this. On Passover, Remen’s insight is affirmed and ritualized. The liturgical script for the Passover meal, the Haggadah, is from the Hebrew word, “l’hagid”, “to tell”. It is not, “to read”. Indeed, to tell the story correctly, to fulfill the obligations of Passover, one must leave the pages of the book and enter into the words and memories of those gathered around the table. Like Herstory, Stanford’s month-long commemoration of the contributions of women, more and more, the stories told around the Passover table include the stories of women. Some are family stories of courageous grandmothers. Some are traditional stories woven into innovative rituals—such as the cup of Miriam that now graces many Seder tables—a cup filled with pure, healing water to honor Miriam’s buoyancy and sustaining presence

throughout the Israelite's wilderness journey. Others are stories reclaimed by a close reading of the Bible and Midrash. Today's Exodus reading is one such story.

This story is told so concisely, 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, fearing God, 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 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 new life as they had before the decree. But when the Pharaoh confronted the midwives, they shrewdly used his own bigotry against him, shaking their shoulders in puzzlement and claiming that they were powerless to carry out his decree. Since the Hebrew women gave birth so quickly and easily, their services were 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.”ⁱⁱ

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 valor is even more striking. They were the premier nonviolent resisters to evil. 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 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 this dilemma. He understands the women to be not only

midwives, but community organizers as well. He says that Shiphrah and Puah were in charge of all the midwives. He 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 his coffers in the process! That's what I call women of valor!

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." ⁱⁱⁱ

"The exodus could never have taken place were it not for this first act of resistance to evil by Shiphrah and Puah." Without their empathy, there would be no stories over the Passover table. Without their courage, there would have been no example of freedom. Without their welcoming hands and hearts reaching for new life and hope, there would have been no Moses.

As we sit around our kitchen tables, as we tell the stories that tie us to our past and prepare us for our future, as we write and create Herstory, we ask — "Who are the resisters of evil in our time?" "Who are today's midwives of freedom?" "Who are the descendents of Shiphrah and Puah?" I think of several of their spiritual great granddaughters, women of valor, resisters to injustice that we have lost in the last year--

Rosa Parks, with her commitment to live divided no more. Coretta Scott King, with her fortitude in carrying out a dream of racial justice. Betty Friedan, with her willingness to name a problem invisible to others coupled with a fierce commitment to help women aspire to more. There are many women of valor. We can all tell stories of women who acted out of courage and conviction to defeat evil, to give birth to dreams, to provide hope in darkness. One story I'd like to tell today, one of Shiphrah and Puah's spiritual descendents I'd like to uphold was not only a resister; she also gave voice to women's history and women's contributions. She literally made Herstory.

Her name is Gerda Lerner. She was born in Vienna in 1920. As a teenager, she became involved in the underground movement to resist the Nazis. She was sent to prison, and then forced into exile with her family, until she had to leave them to come to America alone. Once here, she met her husband, Carl Lerner, and with him, she continued to be an activist in her adopted country. They became involved in unionizing the film industry, fighting against McCarthyism, organizing for civil rights, and advocating for better schools in New York City. When she began graduate studies in history at Columbia in 1963, her social activism had sensitized her to the history of marginalized groups. In her academic work, she began to ask simple yet provocative questions about another marginalized population—women. “What were women doing in different historical periods?” “How did they understand their own place in the world?” No one else was asking these questions, and her professors didn't approve. Nonetheless, Lerner persisted, writing her dissertation on Sarah and Angelina Grimke, two white, privileged Southern women who went North to fight against slavery. She believed that,

without knowing our own history, women could not imagine our capacity for full participation in the world. She refused to simply, “add women and stir” and she offered the first course on women’s history, and later, the first women’s history graduate program. She campaigned to establish women’s history month. By highlighting, teaching and giving voice to women throughout history, Gerda Lerner made it possible for contemporary women to imagine themselves making history.^{iv} Gerda Lerner was a storyteller, bringing the wisdom of women to kitchen tables around the world.

As an immigrant, as a refugee, Gerda Lerner understands history, even her own history, as a cord connecting the dead with the living. By telling our stories, we help to shape lives worth remembering. In, Fireweed: A Political Autobiography, Lerner conveys her intention, “I would like to tell the stories and find the pattern that reaches from the past to the future...the dead do not live on unchanged; they are alive and transformed because they live on in the transformed memory of the living. The living select what to remember, and what they select is what had meaning for them in the relationship with the dead person. If the living change, the memory of the dead within them also changes--that is natural and good...[like] some primitive tribes who plant the bones of their dead ancestors in the floor of their houses and who, when they move to new abodes, carry the bones of their ancestors with them.”^v By carrying those bones, by affecting a kind of resurrection of the stories of women, by shaping memory, Gerda Lerner, like Shiphrah and Puah, creates women of valor.

Our Proverbs text asks, “Eshet Chayil, mi yimtza?-- A woman of valor, who can find?” These words are traditionally chanted by a husband to his wife at the Sabbath table, reflecting his appreciation for her noble character and manifold activities. It is often spoken at women’s funerals as a eulogy. Eshet chayil is sometimes translated “a good wife”, since isha-- the Hebrew word for “woman” and “wife” is the same. But the root chayil, valor, occurs in several places, sometimes meaning bravery (Ps. 76:6), or triumph (Ps. 118:15) or capability (Prov. 12:4), or wealth (Prov. 13:22). The word for soldier comes from the same root. Without diminishing the traditional recognition of a woman of valor as shaper, manager and supporter of the household, this text can also shed light on women of valor in the world. A recent feminist commentary by the Jewish Women’s Archives brings a new layer of meaning by pairing quotes from contemporary women with the biblical text. Through this juxtaposition of ancient and modern, the commentators broaden Proverbs, proposing a new understanding of what it means to be an eshet chayil, a woman of valor. And by doing so, they tell new stories.

Judge Justine Wise Polier lived from 1903-1987. She was not only the first woman justice in New York but she was also a fighter for the rights of the poor and disempowered. When Proverbs says, “her lamp never goes out at night.” Justice Polier suggests, “So, one lived two lives - one worked during the day at one’s job, and then pitched into the things that seemed most important at night.” Long before there was discussion about work/life balance, Justice Polier recognizes that the work of the family and the work of the world both require, and bring light.

Another writer cited in this commentary is the inimitable feminist politician Bella Abzug. When asked when she became a feminist, she responded, “The day I was born.” Her life bore testimony to her belief that the world needed repair-- and she should be among those doing the fixing. And fix, she did. First as a lawyer specializing in labor, tenants rights, civil rights and liberties, later in the anti-nuclear movement, the peace movement, then as a Congresswoman, and ultimately through work with the United Nations, Bella Abzug, with her trademark hats and her loud voice, mobilized the world. At her funeral in 1998, Geraldine Ferraro said, “She didn’t knock politely on the door. She didn’t even push it open or batter it down. She took it off the hinges forever.”^{vi} Both Bella Abzug’s style and power were legendary, so it is not surprising that her words comment on the text, “She is clothed with strength and splendor; she looks to the future cheerfully,” Abzug wrote: I believe very deeply that the hope of an effective women’s political movement lies in reaching out...to working women, to young women, to black women, to women on welfare—and joining their strength together with millions of other American women who are on the move all over this country demanding an end to discrimination and fighting for their rights as full and equal citizens.

Finally, the last line of the Proverbs text is coupled with words from a contemporary of Abzug and Polier. Gertrude Elion was a chemist who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Among the many drugs she developed were the first chemotherapeutic agents for childhood leukemia, the immunosuppressant that made organ transplantation possible, the first effective anti-viral medication, and treatments for lupus, hepatitis,

arthritis, and gout.^{vii} As a gloss on the Proverbs text, "Extol her for the fruit of her hand, and let her works praise her in the gates," Gertrude Elion said, "What greater joy can you have than to know what an impact your work has had on people's lives?"^{viii}

Justine Polier, Bella Abzug and Gertrude Elion were each women of valor, embodying the words of Proverbs through their lives. Their stories connect the dead to the living. They were each pioneers, and after them, in part, because of them, women of valor occupy the laboratory, the halls of power, the judge's chambers, the picket-lines, the classroom and the birthing rooms. Women of valor girded with strength, whose lamp never goes out, clothed with strength and splendor, looking to the future cheerfully, extolled for the fruit of their hands, whose works praise them in the gates. Women who save lives, women who advocate for human rights, women who agitate for civil rights, women whose hands are outstretched toward those who are persecuted in order to give birth to hope. The stories of such women can be told at our kitchen tables. From the days of Shipharah and Puah until now, we need these stories to mobilize, to motivate, to help to resist evil, to advocate for justice, to provide hope for freedom. We are the descendants of Shipharah and Puah. We reap the legacy of Gerda Lerner's activism and history. We remember contemporary women of valor as we read our ancient texts. Through their efforts, through their wisdom, comes a further question: Won't you be a woman of valor? Won't you be a man of valor? Whether at home or in the world, we can, indeed, in the words of poet Marge Piercy, be of use.

Piercy writes,

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.^{ix}

This Herstory season, may we all be engaged in work that it real. May we become women of valor, men of valor, people of use, learning from one another, sharing wisdom with one another. May we all have worthwhile stories to tell and may we impart them with praise, love and pride at our kitchen tables.

ⁱ Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., Kitchen Table Wisdom, pp. xxv-xxvi

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

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

^{iv} Judith Rosenbaum and Karla Goldman, "Eight Jewish Women Who Changed the World", Reform Judaism, Winter, 2005, p. 36.;

http://www.nwhp.org/tlp/biographies/lerner/lerner_bio.html

^v Gerda Lerner, Fireweed: A Political Autobiography, Temple University Press, p. 2

^{vi} Rosenbaum and Goldman, pp. 40, 46

^{vii} Jewish Women's Archive, "JWA - Gertrude Elion - Overview,"

<<http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/elion/over.html>> (April 21, 2006).

^{viii} <http://www.jwa.org/discover/throughtheyear/march/talmud/nav_prev.html> (April 21, 2006).

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

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