

Devar Torah for *Shemot*  
1/1/05

There are very few things in this world that either purely good, or purely evil. Those things that have the power to hurt, oftentimes also have the power to heal. That which has a capacity to do good, often has the capacity to do evil as well. In fact, it is often true that those things that have the greatest potential to help are the same things that have the greatest potential to harm.

The beginning of the story of Exodus demonstrates the capacity for good and evil, using two of the things in this world that have the greatest potential for both, namely, water and humanity.

Consider humanity: The first person we meet in (Exodus), is a "New Pharaoh." This is a Pharaoh who fears other people. He says to his community "Let us deal wisely with Israel, lest they multiply and join our enemies in a war against us" (paraphrasing Exodus 1:10). Pharaoh plots genocide. Male Israelite children are to be thrown to their death in the water. But just after we are told of Pharaoh, we are also told of שִׁפְרָה (*Shifrah*) and פּוּאָה (*Pu'ah*), the מְיַלְדוֹת הָעִבְרִית, *Hebrew midwives*. The Torah leaves some things about these women ambiguous. We aren't really told whether they are Israelites. After all "*Hebrew midwives*" may mean midwives that are Hebrews, or midwives to the Hebrews. To be sure, *Shifrah* and *Puah* are in fact Canaanite names, but that does not necessarily mean they are Israelites. The Rabbis said that *Shifrah* and *Puah* were *Miriam* and *Yocheved*, Moses mother and sister. But the Bible does not care to give us that information. What the Torah does think is important enough to tell us, is that *Shifrah* and *Puah* are יִרְאַי אֱ-הים - fearers of God (Ex. 1:17, 1:21). And because they feared God, they defied orders, and become the counterbalance to the evil potential of a Pharaoh who feared Israel, rather than God.

The heroism, of course, extends beyond the Hebrew midwives, even into Pharaoh's household, as his own daughter saves the life of a Hebrew, adopting the Hebrew as her son, giving her son to an Israelite to nurse, and, on his return, naming him מֹשֶׁה (*Moshe*, Moses). The righteousness of Pharaoh's own daughter brings salvation to the Jewish people, and eventual destruction to Pharaoh's evil.

Pharaoh demonstrates for us the most evil potential of humanity. The potential to kill, the potential to destroy. But humanity also has the capacity to help their fellow human beings. A capacity demonstrated to us by *Shifrah* and *Puah*, and by Pharaoh's daughter.

The Torah also teaches us this week about the potential found in the natural elements. Take water, for instance. It is the very basis of human life. There is no one thing more important to humanity than water. Our פְּרָשָׁה (torah reading) tells us of the great destructive potential of water. For it is the water into which the Israelite children were to be thrown. But much like the flood in the time of Noah, there is a תִּבְרָה, this time a small basket, not an Ark, that floats atop the water and leads our hero מֹשֶׁה (Moses) to safety, setting into action the Israelite's redemption from Egypt.

Much like this week's Torah reading, the events of this past week have taught us a lot about the potential for good and for evil. Just as the waters of the Nile were the demise of many Israelite children, the waters of the Indian Ocean proved to be the destruction of now over 150,000 people. But at the same time, the events of the past week have demonstrated to us some of the greatest of human potential. For this past week was not a week about fear of terrorism nor wars in Iraq. This was not a week about anger towards America, nor about the desire to kill others. Instead, this week was about the work of millions of people, and countless nations, to come to the aid of their brethren in need. In fact, it has been reported that this week was the single largest relief effort in the history of humanity. As is often the case, in the face of the greatest destruction, the greatest human potential is realized.

In light of the past week, I think it is important for each one of us to dedicate ourselves to realizing some more of our potential for good. I encourage each of you to participate in the relief effort, and there is a note in This Week @ Temple Israel that can help you find good places to send your support\*. But let us use this week to remind ourselves of our potential to combat other evils in this world, even outside of a crisis. We can think about what good we can do for our family and friends - how can we help them live better? How can we teach our children and grandchildren about our potential for good? What can we do to encourage scientific research that might stop the next tragedy before it even happens? What can we do to combat prejudice, hatred and genocide - so that there never again will be another Pharaoh?

May God find proper rest for all those who perished in the tsunami. And may we all find in its wake a renewed awareness of our great potential.

\* The American Institute of Philanthropy ([charitywatch.org](http://charitywatch.org)) provides a listing of the best ways to provide assistance to victims of the earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia, based on percentage of donations going to services. The American Jewish World Service is one of only 9 charities that received an "A" rating or better. To donate to AJWS, access [ajws.com](http://ajws.com) or call 1-800-889-7146. To view the list of charities, access [charitywatch.org](http://charitywatch.org) or visit the "Extras" section of Temple Israel's website.