

In reminding us about the story of Irene Sendler, Leah connects this modern hero with two important figures in this week's Torah portion, Shifrah and Puah.

In the Midrash, these midwives are identified with Yocheved, Moses' mother, and Miriam, Moses' sister. The Sephardic commentary, Me'am Loez, which we are studying this year, connects their being unwilling to kill the babies with the angel's call to Abraham on Mount Moriah, "Don't send forth your hand to hurt the child, do not wound him in any way." But this identification of the midwives as Hebrews has many issues, including Miriam's being less than five years old at this time.

In the Bible itself the midwives are Egyptian women who are midwives to the Hebrews. That is the position of Philo and Josephus in the ancient period, and of the Greek translation of the Bible, The Septuagint, in the intertestamental period. Abravanel, a famous medieval Biblical commentator who lived in Portugal just before the expulsion, agrees.

Being Egyptian gives the midwives the protected status that allows them to speak back to the Pharaoh and not be killed. It is why the text says, "when you deliver the Hebrew women..." It is what enables them to use the Pharaoh's prejudices against the Israelites against him, telling Pharaoh that the Israelite women are like

animals and give birth too fast for them to intervene. Finally the text calls them “God Fearing”, which is a term the Bible uses particularly to praise non-Jews who act in moral ways. Their courage in standing up to the Pharaoh for the sake of children who are not of their own people or heritage, makes them role models for the ages.

Sometimes people present Jewish ethics as being concerned only with the treatment of Jews but unconcerned with how Jews treat outsiders. I heard a non-Jewish speaker describing Judaism that way just a year or so ago at Santa Clara was delighted to hear a nun stood up during the q and a and challenged the speaker pointing out that the commandment to “Love The Stranger As Yourself”, comes from the Jewish Bible, from Leviticus 19, the same source as “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself”. Sometimes though it is Jews who present the view that it is enough to take care of other Jews, and that the problems of other people should not be our concern. They argue that this is the more authentically Jewish perspective.

Our prayerbook, Mishkan T’filah, includes a prayer by Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel. Born in Latvia in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he served as chief rabbi during the years of the British Mandate. A

kabbalist, deeply steeped in Jewish mysticism, his writings have formed the basis for the theology of those who stress the uniqueness of the Jewish people. Yet, Rav Kook himself taught universal values. He maintained close relations with the secular leftist halutzim who were building up the land in his day despite the criticism of other Orthodox rabbis. This prayer posits a ladder that an individual might climb from self-regard to concern for others, from limited concern for one's own people and nation to a universalism which recognizes the value of all living things. His poem appears as follows in our prayerbook:

“There is one who sings the song of his own life, finding everything within himself.

There is one who leaves the circle of herself, and sings the songs of her people.

There is one whose voice rings with the song of humanity, hoping for the highest perfection.

And there is one who rises even higher, uniting with all creatures, and with all worlds, filling the universe with song.”

In childhood we care first for our family, and only over time for our neighbors and community. Only gradually do children come to see the importance of helping people who live far away and who are not like them. Modern curricula for

elementary schools are built on an understanding of these aspects of human development. They introduce children to the world in concentric circles from family and town until they come to their state and nation, and eventually the globe. Think of the mailing address given in the play Our Town, how it starts with the very local but then expands to recognize much broader connections:

Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America...Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the mind of God

Today we live in a universal world, where all are connected. That is why when we pray we follow the example of the Reform movement in Israel adding the words, *va kol yoshvei tevel*, and to all who live on the globe, to our prayer for peace.

But that addition is not just a Reform thing. Judaism teaches at its root *Adonai Echad*, the essential unity of the entire world. This universalism is reflected in the teachings of Rav Kook, a late 19<sup>th</sup> Century early 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox rabbi. It is reflected also in the Biblical story of Shifrah and Puah, who recognized the humanity and sanctity of Jewish babies, even as their monarch sought to exterminate them. It is an intrinsic part of Jewish moral teaching.

Leah, I am proud of your research on Irene Sendler and hope that she will be an example for you of courage and morality throughout your life.