

# The Midwives Saw and Feared

**ORNA PILZ**

(from *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash*, ed. Tamar Biala)

*He [the king of Egypt] said [to the midwives]: When you deliver the Hebrew women, look (u'rei-ten) at the birth stool. If it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live. The midwives feared God in awe (va-tir-ena) and did not do as the king of Egypt had told them. They let the boys live. (Exod 1: 16-17).*

The midwives were asked: Where did you get your fearful awe of God?

And they answered: From the great and deep things that we saw at the birth stool, from the mystery that embraces us morning and evening: human being after human being coming into the world; where does he come from and what does she bring with her? The goodness that her mother sees in him, the compassion and the love that she awakens, crying babies bursting forth from exhausted bodies, and the soft seal of God's finger imprinted on their faces.

The midwives were challenged:

But didn't it happen at Sinai that *All the people saw (ro-im) the thunder and the lightning and the voice of the Shofar and the smoking mountain and the people saw it and trembled and stood far off... and Moses said to the people do not fear (al ti-ru), for God has come to test you, to keep the fearful awe of God (yir-a-to) before you so that you will not transgress (Exod 20:15-17).* The fearful awe of God comes from the place of thunder and lightning!

And the midwives answered:

There is fearful awe (*yir-a*) that comes from external seeing (*re-i-ya*) and there is fearful awe that comes from internal vision (*re-i-ya*); a person can be frozen in terror, witnessing a supernatural miracle, which awakens and strengthens her sense of fearful awe. But for us, it doesn't work like that. Our fearful awe is *not in the heavens* (Deut 30:12). Our fearful awe of God arises precisely from within nature, from within the pain of what we witness on the birth stool. From there we learn to choose what is good, to protect life, to fight against death, and to resist evil.

## ***Commentary***

The biblical story relates that the Hebrew midwives violated the edict issued by Pharaoh and refused to kill the male babies. As the Bible explains, *The midwives feared God in awe and did not do as the king of Egypt had told them. They let the boys live* (Exod 1:17). The Hebrew word for “feared God in awe” can be interpreted in two ways: it may come from the root word for “awe,” or it may come from the root word for “vision.” Orna Pilz plays with the two meanings of this term, linking vision with faith.

According to Pilz, it was because the midwives “saw” that they came to “fear” and believe. Their God-fearing behavior was a product of what they saw.

The midrash opens with a question posed to the midwives: Where did they get the fear of and trust in God, which led them to act with such exceptional courage? The midwives explained that their faith developed from their work as midwives—from beholding the mystery and wonder that surrounds new life, and the love and compassion between mother and infant, and the seal of God’s finger imprinted on each child’s face.

They are then asked: But doesn’t the Torah teach that fear of God develops from experiences of fear and trembling, like the revelation of an exalted, transcendent God at Sinai?

The midwives explain that there are different types of experience that inspire faith in God. There is fear of God that is awakened by an encounter with a transcendent God and supernatural miracles, as with the revelation on Sinai. And then there is fear of God that springs from an encounter with an immanent God and the wonders of nature, as with the midwives, whose experience of the natural process of birth instilled in them a sense of God’s wondrousness. In witnessing birth, they came to appreciate life amid pain, which awakened their love and compassion and led them to choose life and to follow the path of goodness.