

Friday Night Shabbat Sermon – January 9, 2026

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Resisting Pharaoh Without Becoming Pharaoh

There are moments when the Torah feels less like ancient scripture and more like a mirror held up to our lives.

This is one of those moments.

This Shabbat we begin the book of Exodus.

In Parashat Shemot, we return to a familiar story: that of a new king who ascends to the throne, one who chooses not to remember the role Joseph played in saving Egypt, and who chooses to see the presence of the Israelites as a threat to his people. And more importantly, to his power.

And thus begins the enslavement and oppression of our ancestors, and, in this week's Torah portion, the first signs of resistance.

First, the heroic acts of the two midwives, Shifra and Puah, who refuse to carry out Pharaoh's plan.

Then, a momentary act of resistance that turns into violence, as Moses confronts and kills an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave.

And before the parashah ends, Moses returns to Egypt with his brother Aaron and God's presence, and more importantly, God's direction. The ultimate leadership team is now in place to deliver the Israelites from slavery to freedom.

It's an action-packed portion (as many of them are!) but this one feels especially full and deeply prescient as we bring the events of this week into our sanctuary and our celebration.

We are living in a time when many people are afraid to resist power.

Afraid that speaking out, showing up, or standing in the wrong place at the wrong time could lead to violence, imprisonment, or worse.

Afraid that public resistance to ICE, to the policies of this administration, to systems that harm the vulnerable can cost not only freedom, but life itself.

The death of Renee Nicole Good (z'l) has only sharpened that fear.

A woman. A daughter. A mother. A human being. Killed in the context of a state action meant, we are told, to protect order.

And many are asking quietly, sometimes aloud: *What does faithful resistance look like now? How do we push back against unjust power without getting ourselves, or others, killed? And what does Judaism actually ask of us?*

As often as we look to the “sacred texts” of online news, organizational emails, and social media, we also have our Torah and rabbinic commentaries which have stood by our people for generations, hoping to offer solace, strength, wisdom and direction. So, for tonight, let’s look there.

This week’s Torah portion begins not with Moses but with two women most people barely remember: Shifra and Puah.

Pharaoh commands them to kill Hebrew baby boys at birth.

In response, they do not protest publicly. They do not organize a march. They do not storm the palace.

Instead, the Torah says simply: “They (the midwives) feared God and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them. They let the boys live.”

Shifra and Puah resist quietly. Strategically. Repeatedly.

They even lie when necessary. It takes only one verse before Pharaoh summons the women back into the palace to interrogate them: “Why have you let them live?”

(Point of interest: How much time has passed between the initial order and the follow-up interrogation? We don’t know. But, clearly, the impact of these two midwives was seen or felt by the highest ruler in the land, which says a lot about what they were able to do.)

“Why have you disobeyed me?” says the Pharaoh to midwives.

And the midwives reply, “Because the Israelite women are more vigorous and lively than Egyptian women and by the time we arrive to help with the birth, they are already done. The baby has arrived.” And, unbelievably, Pharaoh accepts their story; and, in this moment, he is defeated. His plans are disrupted. And while he eventually changes tactics, for now, they have successfully resisted.

And, more importantly, Shifra and Puah stay alive. And they help others stay alive.

And now the Torah tells us something extraordinary: *God dealt well with the midwives.*

The rabbis go further. They say these women are rewarded not with safety, but with futures: houses of priesthood, leadership, continuity.

As a result of their resistance, their actions don’t just interrupt violence; they multiply life.

Side note: I've often wondered why we don't have more children named after them. Their heroism is creative, courageous, collaborative, repeatable and impactful. And it provides an interesting foil for the next moment of resistance we encounter: Moses and the taskmaster.

We meet Moses in chapter 2. The description of his childhood is focused on his salvation. His emerging adulthood is marked by one act of violence.

Moses sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. He looks this way and that. He sees no one. Then, he kills the taskmaster.

Unlike the midwives, who receive God's blessing, the Torah does not praise him. God does not speak. And Moses immediately becomes a fugitive.

The rabbis are deeply conflicted about this moment.

Some justify Moses' anger. Others point to the consequences: Moses' exile and isolation, the delay for all of Israel in realizing their collective liberation.

The critique in rabbinic commentary is not that Moses was immoral, but that his resistance was immature. It was impetuous. It was isolated. It wasn't sustainable or repeatable.

It also reveals rabbinic discomfort with violence. **The midwives are celebrated, in part, because they resist Pharaoh without becoming Pharaoh.** Moses, in that moment, mirrors the brutality he hates.

Thankfully, his exile to Midian gives him time and space to mature. To connect with a new family led by Jethro the Midianite priest and to start a family of his own. To discover God in the flames of a burning bush. To reconnect with his brother. And to eventually return with a plan for collective liberation...which, as we know from previous encounters with this parasha, will take many more chapters and a beaten-down, broken-spirited nation agreeing, with all the risks and all the unknowns, that, yes, it is finally time to leave.

Said differently: **Moses must leave Egypt to learn what the midwives seemed to already know: that liberation is not a single heroic act, but a long discipline of calculated action, partnership, and moral clarity.**

And here is where the Torah speaks directly to our moment.

Because many of us feel torn between two fears: the fear of doing nothing and the fear of doing something that will only make things worse, or, God-forbid, put ourselves or our loved ones in danger.

If you've studied Maimonides' concept of the Golden Mean (which he borrowed from Aristotle), you'll remember his strong encouragement to see the Jewish way as finding a middle path between extremes.

Judaism refuses both paralysis and recklessness.

Our tradition does not ask us to be reckless martyrs. But it also does not permit us to be silent bystanders.

Instead, it asks us to resist in ways that preserve life, protect dignity, strengthen community, and refuse to let fear turn us into that which we oppose

Sometimes that resistance looks loud and public. And sometimes it looks quiet, relational, and strategic. Sometimes it is showing up in the streets. And sometimes it is showing up for one family, one neighbor, one vulnerable person, and refusing to cooperate with cruelty.

The midwives teach us that not all resistance is visible, but it is no less real. That the work of protecting life is itself a political act. That care is not retreat, it is defiance.

And the Torah insists that this kind of resistance is not weak. It is powerful enough to outlast Pharaoh.

So when we grieve someone like Renee Nicole Good (z'l), we grieve not only a life lost but a world that still confuses power with violence. And we recommit ourselves to a different path.

A Jewish path that says: We will not become numb. We will not become cruel. We will not become Pharaoh.

We will resist. With wisdom. With courage. With community. And above all, with a fierce commitment to life.

Because the truest resistance to unjust power is not destruction. It is the stubborn, sacred insistence that human life remains precious, no matter who the state says is expendable.

May we learn from the midwives.

May we refine our anger, as Moses had to.

And may our resistance help bring into being a world that does not need Pharaohs at all.