

## Pledging allegiance

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

August 24, 2008

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

It's a pledge, a promise. It's a pledge of allegiance, a promise of loyalty, a promise of loyalty to this flag, to this republic, to this nation.

It's a promise well made, because citizenship is a privilege, a privilege that entails certain responsibilities. As citizens we hold a common stake in the welfare of this nation and in the maintenance of its ideals, ideals of liberty and justice not just for some of us, but for all of us, for everyone. And so we promise not to betray those ideals, but to support and defend them and all those who are protected under their umbrella

It's a good promise, but not the best promise. It's a worthy allegiance, but not the highest of allegiances.

Egypt had an immigration problem. Their land was filled with foreign settlers, in particular a large and growing number of Israelites, so-called because they were descended from their patriarch, Israel, also known as Jacob. Most of the Egyptians didn't really know how the Israelites got there or when they came, but they did know that they were everywhere, everywhere they went, everywhere they looked! Some of their demographers were even suggesting that within as little as thirty years, the non-Egyptian residents of their nation would outnumber the native population!

So Egypt had an immigration problem, a looming crisis. It wasn't like the Israelites had done anything to undermine the government or to subvert the Egyptian way of life. They just went about their business, quietly providing for their families and enjoying the company of their neighbors. But they were a threat, because they were different, and because there was getting to be so many of them!

To be honest, as long as the Israelites were just a small clan living in the back corners of their cities and towns, the Egyptians didn't really worry much about them. But now there were so many of them, a large and powerful presence in the midst of Egyptian society.

*What might they do? What might become of our nation if these foreigners are allowed to keep on growing in number and influence? They are so different from us. Who knows what they might do!*

Actually, it was a double-edged sword for the Egyptians. They grew to hate and fear these foreigners among them, but they needed them. Their economy depended on this ready supply of cheap labor (OK ... slave labor!), so they didn't really want to get rid of the Israelites, just keep them under their thumb, just keep them small and weak enough that they didn't pose such a threat.

So, what to do?

First, the Egyptians tried repression. They took away many of the Israelites' rights and freedoms, and set them to work at the most arduous and undesirable jobs. But it didn't work. The Israelites only grew stronger and continued to thrive, their faces appearing in ever new neighborhoods throughout the land, still very much a threat.

So Egypt's king initiated a covert operation against the Israelite population. He secretly instructed the midwives attending the births of Hebrew babies to let the female babies live, but to kill any newborn male. But this operation failed too, because the midwives let the boys live.

Finally, the exasperated king ordered a campaign of open and brazen genocide.

*I call on all loyal Egyptians throughout the land to seize any newborn Israelite boys that you may come upon and throw them into the Nile!*

Look at that face! Look at the face of the Egyptian king -- angry and scared! Look at the face ... in the mirror!

And then, look into the faces of Shiphrah and Puah. Who were these women? Who were these midwives asked to do unspeakable things in the interest of national security?

There is no agreement among scholars as to whether the women were Hebrews or Egyptians. It is hard to imagine Hebrew women being served by Egyptian midwives at the most vulnerable and intimate moment of childbirth ... and yet. And yet, it is harder to imagine Egypt's king entrusting such a critical and delicate mission to a some of the Hebrews themselves. How could he expect Israelite midwives to do such a thing? What loyalties would they have to him or even to Egypt? And the phrase used to describe Shiphrah and Puah -- "God-fearing" -- is often used when speaking of gentile, non-Hebrew, believers.

So what if Shiphrah and Puah were Egyptian? Loyal Egyptians, all their lives keeping their pledge of allegiance to the nation in which they were born and raised? And now their king, the leader of their people, asks them to carry out a mission vital to Egypt's future stability and prosperity.

Look into their faces! What do you see? Do you see fear, not of the strange and different immigrants living among them, not even of the king and all his power, but fear of God? They are directed by a better promise, a higher allegiance, and they let the baby boys live.

And when the frustrated king sent for them and asked them to explain the failure of their mission, they said:

*Well, you see, Hebrew women are not like us, not like Egyptian women. (You can just see the king nodding his head in agreement: Of course! Of course!) We get there to help and it's already all over and done with. There's nothing we can do. Those Hebrew women are not like us. They give birth so easily. They just pop the babies right out! (Of course! Of course!)*

How fear and hatred can twist the mind, can make the mind believe that (of course!) this human being before me is really nothing like me!

But Shiphrah and Puah feared God. They could not, would not, take the life of another human being, even a stranger. And God blessed them! God blessed them with families of their own, the very blessing he had promised his own chosen people. But then -- of course! -- aren't Shiphrah and Puah his own people, too?

Shiphrah and Puah are God's people, and when they let the Hebrew boys live, they are doing God's work.

*The Lord takes care of those who are in a strange land.*

That's what the psalm says about our God: *The Lord takes care of those who are in a strange land.* The Lord took care of the sons and daughters of Jacob when they were slaves in Egypt, preserving them and protecting them and providing for them a man, a baby boy spared from the Egyptian reign of terror, a man, Moses, who would one day lead them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, a man who spoke with God and listened to God and obeyed God and led his people out on the day God redeemed them and delivered them from their enemies and claimed them as his own.

The Lord took care of the Israelites in a strange land, and the Lord expected them to do the same for the strangers among them. One of the commands given to the people of Israel after the exodus from Egypt was this:

*Remember to show love to the foreigners among you, because you were once foreigners in Egypt!*

The virtue of hospitality -- the virtue of compassion for the stranger, the foreigner, the immigrant, among them -- was central to their identity as God's people, as people made in the image of God.

The nation of Egypt neglected that virtue ... and paid the price of God's great anger. But at least two Egyptians did not forget. At least two Egyptians chose to say "No" when the king said "Go," choosing instead to honor a better promise, their highest allegiance.