

A WINDOW FOR THE SPARROWS

A Devotional Meditation on Shemot (Names)

Exodus 1:1-6:1; Isaiah 27:6-28:13, 29:22-23; Psalm 44:20-22; Matthew 10:29-31

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Human rights complicate matters. That's the impression I received in graduate school when we discussed the impact of President Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights. It's much easier to conduct diplomacy and manage matters of state when human beings are reduced to statistics. When we leave out the faces and the names of real people, we can do anything. That's because we don't have to count the real cost.

This is how the fates of multitudes have been decided since the first governments were established. National interests sometimes require kings and presidents to take harsh measures to keep their nations intact, and keep themselves in power. That's how we get Soviet gulags, Nazi concentration camps, strategic bombing campaigns, and migrant caravans through Mexico. It's also how we get policies that weaponize food distribution, fishing rights, and family planning.

Governments aren't the only ones guilty of turning human beings into numbers. It happens everywhere. Big corporations are notorious for favoring profit margins over the best interests of their employees and customers. Small companies do the same sometimes. So do churches when it comes to emphasizing numbers in Sunday School and dollars in the weekly offering over families saved and lives changed.

Messiah Yeshua had something to say about this. When He sent His disciples out to minister, he told them:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29-31 ESV

One thing we learn from Yeshua's instructions is that our Creator Himself places the value on every single human life. What's puzzling and grievous to us is that even our Creator allows the destruction of life when necessary. We learn that from the laments of His people Israel when they ask why He has afflicted them. Here's an example from the sons of Korah:

If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,



Little Rosie and the Sparrow. Photo by Hash Milhan, April 26, 2011, [via Flickr](#).

would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.
Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Psalm 44:20-22 ESV

These are God's covenant people crying out to Him. They, of course, would be the ones to do so. The wicked and those with no connection to the Almighty wouldn't be expected to call out to God in this way. Perhaps they would ask Him for relief from suffering, but not in the same way as those who know Him and are wounded not only at the suffering they endure, but at the apparent truth that God Himself has either brought it on them or allowed it. Why, if they are so valuable, does God not preserve them from such pain?

Maybe that's not the right question to ask. Maybe instead of asking why, we should act when given the opportunity. That seems to be what Shiphra and Puah did when an ancient statesman made a calculated decision that placed national interests over the value of certain human lives:

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

Exodus 1:15-21 ESV

We know the names of these courageous women because they obeyed God rather than a wicked man. But what did they think when they saw Egypt's Pharaoh respond to their courage by commanding his people to throw the Hebrew boys into the Nile? Did they think they had failed? Did they think they had brought even worse suffering on their people? Did they suppose that their choice of a lesser evil of lying to Pharaoh had brought the wrath of God on them and their people?

This is the human dilemma. It's our dilemma because it's God's dilemma. Evil happens, and sometimes we have to navigate between and among evils to find a way to save at least some life. But which lives do we save? Which are worthy – or more worthy? Is one particular life worth more than a hundred or a thousand others? What if it's the life of one innocent child weighed against a thousand criminals? Are we even in a position to make such a choice?

We all want to see evil eradicated from our lives. Perhaps what we should want more is to see wickedness eradicated. Evil happens, but wickedness is a choice. Wicked people do evil things because they do not know better, or choose to do evil even though they do know better. Can we do anything about that?

Yes, we can. We can mitigate the damage, we can rescue those in harm's way, and we can create conditions by which the wicked are confronted with righteousness. How they respond is between them and our merciful, yet just, Creator.

We shouldn't expect instant results. Shiphra and Puah did see individual Hebrew boys saved, perhaps on a daily basis, but they probably didn't live to see the deliverer God sent to take Israel out of Egypt. He was one of those infants they couldn't save, but God took care of that. Then he had to grow up and be prepared for the monumental task of acting as God's agent in fulfilling His covenant promises to His people. That process took 80 years, and by that time the midwives' great-grandchildren had joined the chorus of lament and supplication for deliverance.

Why should we expect things to be different? Our grandparents and great-grandparents had their own evils to endure, sometimes perpetrated by wicked people, and sometimes spawned by their own shortsighted disobedience. Yet they endured, and we are here because of it. Somehow they chose to value life, or at least value it enough to open a window for the sparrows to fly free.