

Courage
Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers
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This week, we start at the beginning of the book of Exodus from the Torah. Within a few verses, a new Pharaoh takes over and immediately enslaves our people. The Israelites are forced to do hard labor building garrison cities for their ruler. Taskmasters oversee our people and they suffer. But it doesn't end there, it is then that Pharaoh gives two Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, a cruel task. He commands them that when they are delivering Israelites babies, if it's a male, they should murder him on the spot. The most powerful man in Egypt has issued an order to two subjugated women.

The Torah tells us that Shifra and Puah feared God and astoundingly did not do as the king ordered. The baby boys lived. It probably didn't take long for Pharaoh to realize that they defied his order. He summoned the poor women before him and barked, "Why have you let the boys live?" I imagine them looking at the floor shuffling their feet. An idea occurs to them. They respond cleverly, "It is because the Hebrew women are unlike the Egyptian women. They are vigorous and before a midwife can come to them, they have already given birth."

How did two women come to disobey Pharaoh? The Torah tells us it's because they feared God. They feared God more than they feared the king of Egypt. They knew it would be wrong to kill babies under any circumstance and they just couldn't bring themselves to do it. Etz Chayim, the Conservative Torah commentary says, "This is the first recorded case of civil disobedience, challenging government in the name of a higher authority. It would find an echo in the thousands of righteous gentiles who risked their own lives to protect Jews from the Nazis...It was through righteous women that Israel was redeemed."¹

Shifra and Puah were courageous and because of their acts, they saved lives. What does it take for a person to stand up and say this is not right, I can't abide, I will not go along, I object? How would you answer that? I would say when a person is in touch with their core values, wants to be honorable, and is willing to speak or act. We all have moments in our lives when we are confronted with ethical dilemmas. There are times when we have to choose between allegiance or loyalty and speaking up. These are not easy situations. To stage an intervention with a family member who is engaging in self destructive behavior can rupture the very fabric of a family. To tell a friend that you will not participate or go along with an act that you believe to be immoral, can risk alienation. And then there are those who are willing to risk their jobs because their conscience is pounding inside their heads.

When I came up with this idea of courage for tonight, it was on Tuesday but then on Wednesday, Jan. 6 a terrible thing happened to our great country. A mob incited by president

Trump stormed our capital, broke windows, accosted police, and put congress in lockdown. Is it courageous to say that the election was valid? Yes, I'm glad that Mitch McConnell acknowledged this week that the election between Trump and Biden wasn't close and overturning the election by "mere allegations from the losing side" would send America's democracy into a "death spiral." It was about time.

But I think there are clearer examples of courage. Many of us felt revulsion and dismay at the phone conversation between president Trump and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger of Georgia. Trump was pressuring him to "come up" with enough votes so he could win this state. What was interesting was how Brad Raffensperger calmly and firmly replied to the Commander in chief, "Well Mr. President, the challenge that you have is, the data you have is wrong." When Trump made an accusation that votes were counted three times, Brad said, "Mr. President... We did an audit of that and we proved conclusively that they were not scanned three times." And then Brad stated definitively, "We believe that we do have an accurate election." What did it take for Brad Raffensperger to speak truth to power and not crumble? Integrity and honesty were more important than ingratiating himself with the president. Even though he is a republican and likely voted for Trump himself, he wasn't willing to engage in fraud or wrongdoing.

One other political example of courage is Alexander Vindman, the top Ukrainian expert on the National Security council, who was listening in to the fateful phone call on July 25 when President Trump asked the newly elected president of Ukraine, to "us a favor" by investigating Joe Biden's son Hunter. Vindman recounts, "I just had a visceral reaction to what I was hearing," he says. "I suspected it was criminal, but I *knew* it was wrong." ²

Alexander Vindman, a man who served our country for years, testified before congress this fall in the impeachment inquiry. He started his opening words speaking about his father. "Dad, my sitting here today, in the U.S. Capitol, talking to our elected officials, is proof that you made the right decision 40 years ago to leave the Soviet Union and come here to the United States of America in search of a better life for our family. Do not worry. I will be fine for telling the truth."

Brad Raffensperger, Alexander Vindman, Shifra, and Puah are examples of people willing to risk a lot because of their morals and principals. We really don't need, though, such an extreme examples to think about courage because there are times in our day to day lives where we exemplify it and times when we fall short.

One of my moments of shame was when I was a teenager on the high school swim team. I was a senior and it was my second year on the team. For some reason, there was a tradition of hazing the freshman swimmers. I don't remember the details. I have flashes of them being called names and being rustled into the locker room and sprayed with stuff. I do remember a girl

that I befriended who didn't want to submit to this treatment. I, however, encouraged her to go along with it. "It would be over soon", I counseled. She did endure it but I felt terrible. I knew this was degrading and wrong but I lacked the courage to back her and speak out. Looking back, I'm astounded the swimming coach didn't put an end to this but perhaps that was a different time. My own shame stayed with me years later.

Fast forward to a time when I was an assistant rabbi in I.L. I was on a retreat in Oconomowoc, WI with two other congregations. I was the only rabbi from Temple Chai and the other rabbi there was older than me and had been on this retreat for years. On Saturday, he started to act erratically. I mean he barked orders to the staff and yelled at the kids. He demanded every activity be a certain way. The teens and adults were growing scared of him. He was a man on verge of losing control of himself. At one point, he even grabbed a kid by his shoulders. I saw his behavior clearly worsening and the staff was demoralized. It was only me, the new 28 year old rabbi. I couldn't bear it anymore. I told the staff not to worry they would not have to deal with him the last day.

That morning, I intercepted him coming out of his room and told him to not come to breakfast or the following activities. My heart beating through my chest. As he argued with me, I informed him that if he did, I would make a big scene and publicly humiliate him. He stayed back. The staff and kids sighed in relief. I told the rabbi of my synagogue what occurred and I got a call from the other rabbi's president and laid it all out. It appears that this rabbi was sadly losing it at other times. His contract wasn't renewed and it was awkward when I would run into him at conferences. While I felt that I did the right thing, I also felt terrible about it all.

Do you have moments that you rose to the occasion? These are times when we can feel proud of ourselves, when we stood up and said, "This is not right. I will not go along with it." And there are times when we will fall short. We all do. We argued ourselves out of doing the right thing. We convinced ourselves that we would do more harm than good. We told ourselves that it was for the best. It is when we are able to be honest with ourselves, then it is time for *Teshuva*, repentance. We aren't only supposed to talk about repentance during the High Holy Days, you know.

We are taught in the Talmud that Rabbi Eliezer said: Repent one day before your death. Rabbi Eliezer's students asked him: But does a person know the day on which he will die? He said to them: All the more so this is a good piece of advice, and one should repent today lest he die tomorrow."³ So in other words, *Teshuvah* is not only for Yom Kippur, we are supposed to evaluate and reevaluate throughout the year what we say or don't say, do or don't do. And ultimately learn from our mistakes. So I guess we all need to engage in our own *heshbon hanefesh*, our own accounting of our soul. As I can only hope that more of our political leaders do so.

The Torah tells us that God dealt well with the midwives, Shifra and Puah, and established households for them and our people increased. While things worked out for them, they certainly didn't for Alexander Vindman. He and his brother were removed from the White House and Vindman's career in the army was over.

While doing the right thing doesn't always work to our personal advantage and can have negative outcomes, who we are and our character matters more. Being able to live with ourselves and our choices and decisions is critical to our peace of mind. And so, we wrestle with our humanity and conflicting interests. We wrestle with the needs of necessities and our pride. And we struggle to be the best person that we can be.

My grandmother, who I called Graful, said it best to me as a child, "Nancy, Zie a Mesnch. Be a mensch. Always be a good person.

May we always have the courage to wrestle with ourselves and strive to make our communities and nations a better place for all.

Notes

1 Etz Chayim page 320 Ex. R. 1:12

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/alexander-vindman-trump-putin-useful-idiot/616341/>

3 Shabbat 153 a