

Shabbat Va-eira ShaLom



by Phyllis Chesler

We're down in Egypt but up to our eyeballs in myth and magic.

I'm wandering through the first two chapters of Shmot, greeting all the familiar figures: The women who protect Moshe: Yocheved, Miriam, Bitia/Bat-Ya/Thermutis, Zipporah—and of course, the midwives Shifra and Puah.

Are they outliers—or do they fit right in?

Ilana Pardes, quoted by Ellen Frankel, reminds us that Egypt's "guardian goddesses such as Ishtar and Innana serve as protectors of kings or heroes, sometimes called their "bridegrooms...(just consider) the central Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. Like the hawk-goddess Isis, whose fluttering wings, restore her dead husband-brother, Osiris, to life, Zipporah—whose name means bird—rescues Moses from death."

Is it heretical to note the ways in which our Torah shadows,

employs, but outmaneuvers the times and places in which the stories take place? I think not; some may.

Aha! I see something new this time round. I notice, for the first time, the use of "tanin" for snake (7:9; 7:10; 7:12) and the more familiar word "nahash" (4:3; 4:4; 7:15). Are these two different kinds of snakes? Is one not a snake at all?

And so I searched. According to Daniel Matt's commentaries in the Pritzker edition of the Zohar, the "tanin" has a "Biblical range of meaning which includes "serpent, crocodile, dragon, sea serpent, sea monster... above, a supernal holy serpent dominated the demonic powers."

I searched on and found an article by Dr. Scott B. Noegel, titled "Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus," which was published in 1996, in *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*. Noegel writes that our Hebrew word for magicians "hartumim" may be derived from the Egyptian "hrp-tp lector, priest, magician"; that in ancient Egypt, an upright cobra was the symbol of Egyptian royalty and divine authority (known as the Uraeus), and it was perched on top of Pharaoh's linen headdress, known as his *nemes*. This represented the power of the Egyptian snake goddess Wedjet. This is what Nahum Sarna, in the *JPS Torah Commentary* and Robert K. Ritner in his *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices* both suggest.

According to Noegel: "...the word for serpent appears in Egyptian magical texts as a synonym for a magical spell." I am not an Egyptologist, but if any of this is true, or at least useful, consider what God is having Moshe and Aharon do: They speak to Pharaoh by using sacred symbols that are theologically familiar to the ancient Egyptians.

The Zohar notes that Egyptian sorcerers can produce serpents. "So what mightiness was there in producing a serpent before Pharaoh?" Aha! Aharon's snake devours or swallows "vayibla" (7:12) that of the magicians. "Rabbi Yose said: 'Even their

own serpents turned back into wood, and Aaron's wood swallowed them.'"

Or, as Noegel puts it: "Aharon's devouring staff signaled the death knell to the conjurer's abilities."

Thus, the otherwise rather puzzling magic of the rods and the snakes actually constitute a coded warning to Pharaoh. God can not only match Egypt's power but can overcome it, swallow it right up, absorb all its power—and go far beyond it. When God creates lice "keenim" from dust, the magicians realize that "ezbah elohim hee" (8:15), this is God's work. We cannot do this.

May your Shabbat be filled with God's magic.