

# *A Mother's Sacrifice: Jochebed's Story*

## Chapter One

*The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives,  
whose names were Shiphrah and Puah,  
“When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth  
on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him;  
but if it is a girl, let her live.”  
~ Exodus 1:15-16 ~*

**Slaves' village outside Waset, Egypt  
Apep, third month of Shemu, the harvest season, 1330 B.C.**

The lavender hues of dawn glowed through the single window in Jochebed's mud brick house. The end of another restless night. Expecting her third child, she'd been as ill-tempered as a crocodile with her poor husband Amram.

Too big to climb to the roof, where the air was cooler, she'd slept on the packed dirt floor of their tiny house for many weeks. Though she urged him to join the children, Amram stayed with her. She rolled to her left side and faced him, stretching out her hand to caress his face.

He slept so peacefully, as he did every night after an arduous day's work. She slid her hand down his arm to his hand, coarse and calloused. How could hands so rough and hardened hold her so tenderly?

She hadn't told him, but this pregnancy had been different. The baby hadn't moved as much, hadn't been as active as the others. She hadn't grown as big. The midwives said it wasn't serious enough to concern them, but Jochebed worried.

She winced, feeling a slight tightening low and across her abdomen. She rolled onto her back, thinking a change of position might help—then inhaled sharply and drew up her knees when a hard contraction robbed dawn's peace. She held her breath, waiting for it to pass, and released a slight groan as the births of her other children came to mind.

Amram stirred, his eyes slow to open. A slight smile revealed his lone dimple. “Did you say something, *ahuvati*?”

The contraction ebbed, and a smile played on her lips. She loved it when he called her ‘my love.’ How she wished she could let him sleep longer, but the birth of their son Aaron was complete in less than a morning. “Amram, send Miriam to get the midwives.”

Her husband was on his feet before his eyes were open, his graying hair skewed in every direction. “Now? Are you all right? When did your pains begin?”

Jochebed accepted his help to stand. “Just send Miriam for the midwives, *ahuvi*.” She returned his endearment and pecked his cheek with a kiss. “Perhaps you and little Aaron can stay with me until Miriam returns with Puah and Shifra.”

“Of course. Yes.” He reached the mud brick steps at the back of the house in five long strides, climbed to the top, and poked his head through the small, square opening in the ceiling. The sound of his whispers filtered down to her as he talked to their seven-year-old daughter.

Moments later, Miriam's bare feet hit the steps, a sleepy smile lighting her features. “I'll be right back, *Imma*.” She patted Jochebed's tummy on her way out of the reed-curtained doorway to fetch Puah,

the young, single midwife, who lived only three doors away. Shifra lived five houses north and usually needed to care for her husband and four children before attending a birth.

Thankfully, three-year-old Aaron remained asleep while Amram stoked the cook fire and added water to the barley she'd soaked overnight for their morning meal, then placed that pot over the fire.

Another contraction tore through Jochebed, sending her to one knee. She hoped Puah would bring the birthing bricks to her before going to tell Shifra they were needed. The pains were already intense and coming quickly.

Amram knelt beside her and wrapped her shoulders with his strong arm. "Breathe, Kebi. That's what the midwives say, isn't it?"

She nodded, releasing the breath she'd been holding, and tried to inhale and exhale in rhythm with her beloved. He was trembling. This was as hard on him as it was on her. "I've had two easy births and healthy children, Amram. This one will be the same." No need now to tell him of her worries. Or mention Benjamin ...

He turned away, sniffled, and nodded his agreement. No words meant his emotions were too raw to speak.

*El Shaddai, comfort my Amram.*

When Jochebed spent her marriageable years caring for her ailing parents, her older brother showed his gratitude by arranging a marriage with his eldest son—Amram. Though she was nearly too old to be considered a bride by most men, Amram had treated her like a precious treasure from the moment he met her. She knew, however, that he was the gift Shaddai had given her, not the other way around.

Another contraction stole her breath, and Amram shot a concerned look her way. She smiled through gritted teeth.

His warm brown eyes infused her with strength, and she let him lead her to their woven-reed sleeping mat. "I'll sit behind you," he said, leaning against the wall. "You can lie back on my chest until the midwives bring their birthing contraptions."

She leaned back, enduring a few more pains, squeezing her husband's strong hands. He began reciting the sacred, ancient stories, which helped distract them both. Noah's great flood. Abraham's calling. Isaac's love for Rebekah. And Jochebed's favorite: when the Angel of the Lord wrestled with Father Jacob and renamed him *Israel*. Amram's rhythmic voice washed over her, soothing her even when the pains grew more frequent and intense.

Little Miriam rushed through the doorway, tears streaming down rosy cheeks. "Puah is gone. Shifra too." Her shoulders shook, and she buried her face in her hands. "I tried to find them, but . . . They're gone. Just gone."

Behind her, Amram stiffened but said nothing, likely thinking of everything that could go wrong without the midwives' assistance.

When one in three babies did not survive birth, and half of the remaining children did not make it past their first year, his concern was not misplaced.

#

"Shhh, little one." Kebi called Miriam over with open arms. "It's all right. Abba can find them—"

"No!" she shouted, pulling away. "Shifra's husband said the king's guards took them as the sun rose. Carried them to the villa in chariots."

Another contraction stole Kebi's voice, but her mind whirred with dreadful possibilities.

Creeping dread began in her arms, prickly and spreading. First, up her arms. Then her legs. The birth pain subsided, but the trembling increased. Barely maintaining composure, she spoke quietly to her daughter. "Go back to the roof, Miriam. Stay with your brother until he wakes."

"But I—"

“Go!” She didn’t mean to shout. Her daughter looked as if she’d been slapped. “I’m sorry. I need you to go upstairs now.” Another pain gripped her, and she bowed her head, biting her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

“Yes, Imma.” The sound of Miriam’s retreating sandals released Kebi’s tears, and panic came in a whisper. “Amram, what if they do not return?”

His arms, like an impenetrable shield, wrapped her in strength, and he pressed his lips against her ear. “You’ve given birth before. Remember how easy Aaron’s birth was?”

Another contraction began. She squeezed her husband’s hands, letting out a low groan. Her legs were shaking now, uncontrollably.

Amram brushed hair from her forehead, wiping away sweat with it.

Exhaling a long breath after the torturous contraction, Jochebed twisted to face her husband. “This one is different. I haven’t told you. I fear something is wrong.”

Panic shone in Amram’s eyes. “Why would you keep this from me?”

Another contraction rendered Jochebed silent, saving her from offering a less than suitable explanation. A sudden gush of water soaked the reed mat beneath them.

A look of horror on his face, he grabbed her shoulders. “Are you all right? What’s happening?” Having always been shooed out of the room, he had no idea what this meant.

She would need to subdue her fear. It would do them no good if they both panicked. She waited for the pain to ebb and framed his face with her hands. “You are going to deliver our child, ahuvi. We’ll do it together. All will be well.”

Time passed like a desert tortoise—slow but steady.

Miriam tiptoed down the stairs and to the corner of the large common room where the cookware and the dishes waited. She scooped up some of the barley porridge into two bowls for her and Aaron’s morning meal and scurried back upstairs. By the time she returned and hastily cleaned the dishes, Kebi felt the overwhelming urge to push. “Get the children out,” she said to Amram. “I don’t want them to be frightened.”

He could only nod, his eyes round as camels’ hooves. He called up to his daughter. “Miriam, I want you to get Aaron, take the water jar, and fill it at the river. Then check again to see if the midwives have returned.”

As the words were uttered, their doorway curtain stirred, and Shifra appeared—then Puah. Kebi blinked to be sure she wasn’t dreaming.

“Praise El Shaddai!” Amram nearly leapt to his feet, hurrying to relieve Puah of the birthing bricks. “You’re just in time.”

Both women’s eyes were swollen and red-rimmed. They nudged Amram out of the way but avoided Jochebed’s gaze. “Amram, take the children to my house,” Shifra said. “We’ll send word when—” Her voice broke, and she covered a sob.

Puah’s face twisted into uncontrolled grief. She tried to turn away, but Kebi grabbed her wrist, pulling her close. “Tell me what’s wrong, Puah. Why did they carry you away to the palace?”

Puah avoided Kebi’s gaze. “The king called to give us a new order.”

Kebi exchanged an anxious glance with Amram. “What kind of order?”

Shifra exhaled a deep sigh and stood, meeting Amram’s concerned stare. “King Tutankhamun is increasingly under the influence of Vizier Ay—”

“Shifra!” Puah glared at her mentor, fire and fear in her eyes. “You should guard your tongue.”

“What more can they do to us?” Shifra’s gaze took in Kebi, then Amram, and then her young friend. “Ay is a wicked, evil man, and he has convinced the king there are far too many Hebrew males, that we

are a dangerous people, and will one day overthrow him. So the king has ordered us . . .” Her lips trembled, her voice broke. She looked down at her hands. They were shaking.

Kebi’s urge to push overtook her need to hear more, and she cried out. Puah hurried to set up the birthing bricks, while Shifra brought in some of the fresh straw they always carried, arranging a thick layer of the dry, tawny stalks around the bricks. “Take the children, Amram.” Puah shooed him away, leaning down to hold Jochebed’s hand. “We’ll care for your wife.”

But he stood like a stone in the doorway. “I’m not leaving until you tell me what the king ordered you to do.”

Kebi’s pain ebbed enough to plead with her friends. “What could the king possibly expect *you* to do to keep him safe?”

The midwives exchanged an uneasy glance, and finally, Puah eyes met Jochebed’s. “King Tut ordered us to kill all male Hebrew babies the moment they are born.”

Horror strangled Jochebed, and the urge to push silenced her reply. Her body demanded she give life to this child, and searing pain nearly split her in two. For months she’d protected this child within. How could she now deliver it to hands that might harm?

Please, El Shaddai, let this baby be a girl.

#

Through the open roof of the main room’s middle section, Kebi fixed her gaze on the unmoving clouds. This birth had not been as easy as Aaron’s, and the sun had traveled more than three-quarters of its way across the sky. Squatting on the bricks, her chest heaving, Kebi closed her eyes and leaned back against Puah, who knelt behind her.

Kebi hadn’t thought it possible to be this exhausted. It wasn’t this hard the other times. It couldn’t have been.

Piercing pain started low in her belly and snaked through her arms and legs.

Shifra looked up. “All right, Kebi. One more huge push, and your baby will be delivered.”

Kebi sucked in a breath and bore down, clinging to the image of a baby girl’s sweet face.

“The head is out. Keep going! Don’t stop now.”

Kebi let her breath escape and drew in one more. She leaned forward, fisted her hands, and holding her breath, pushed with all her might until she felt the infant slide from her body.

“There! You can relax a moment.”

Kebi again fell back against Puah, and the young girl dabbed soft cloths on her forehead and neck, wiping away the sweat that had built up over the hours.

“Boy or girl?” Kebi silently ran through the girls’ names she and Amram had talked about these last months. Rebekah, Rachel, Netanya, Sarai . . .

Shifra remained silent. The sharp scent of salted olive oil filled the small space. The sounds of gentle rubbing, small whimpers, and Puah’s soft voice swirled into a soft but anxious noise.

“Boy or girl?” Kebi repeated.

“Shush, little one.” Shifra ignored the question, focusing only on the babe as she wound strips of fabric around the tiny body.

The tension in the room grew. Maybe they planned to let her discover for herself that Shaddai had blessed them with another girl, allowing relief and joy to flood over her as she held her daughter for the first time.

Miriam would be happy for a sister.

Even as the thought entered her head she knew it was a lie. The child must be a boy, or someone would gladly have told her by now, destroyed the fear that engulfed her.

El Shaddai had given them another son.

But for how long?

Her eyes shot open as Shifra placed the babe in her arms. The precious bundle, wrapped securely in wide strips of old tunic from neck to tiny toes, blinked once at her and slipped into sleep.

He was perfect. So utterly beautiful. A soft pink to his cheeks. Dark, wet curls plastered to his forehead. Red lips, slightly parted, the top one in the shape of a bow.

She untucked the swaddling the midwife had so carefully wrapped him in to expose tiny hands, clasped at his chest.

She pried open his fingers, counting them. Ten.

She unwrapped further.

Five toes on one foot, five on the other.

And yes, he was a boy.

Vision blurred, she wrapped him again.

He squirmed, a small cry escaping his lungs.

Keeping one arm under him, with her free hand she gently grasped his head, turning it toward her breast.

He squirmed more. She pressed his mouth against her skin. After several attempts, he found his place and began suckling.

Kebi had always loved feeding her babies. For those moments, nothing else existed but her and her infant. She had to stop cleaning, cooking, grinding grain—there was no more important job on earth than providing nourishment to one so utterly dependent on others. El Shaddai must have designed it this way so mothers would stop and focus on nothing else, giving their children the love that was as essential to their survival as milk.

A slight pain in her breast brought to mind the pain she endured before...when Benjamin, born before Aaron, did not survive past a quarter year. The pain as her milk slowly dried up...as her breasts became engorged with milk no child would ever drink.

Surely Shaddai would not take another child from her.

He wouldn't, would He?

The baby suckled, soothing not only himself but her as well. *The baby*. He needed a name.

But would it be harder or easier to deal with his absence if she had a name to cling to?

Without a name, would it be simpler to forget him, let him slip into obscurity? Forget the devastating loss?

Even without a name she would never forget him.

He needed a name—or rather, she needed one—that would remind her to trust in the Almighty in the face of death. “We will call him Tovyah.”

Shifra smiled. “*God is good*. I like it.”

“What are you going to do?” Puah’s soft voice drifted over her shoulder.

“I don’t know yet.” Her voice broke.

“Let’s concentrate on keeping this one safe for now, all right?” Shifra drew a damp cloth over Kebi’s face, wiping away the sweat and tears. “*We* certainly aren’t going to hurt him. Let’s get a fresh tunic on you.”

Kebi allowed him to nestle into Shifra’s arms, then relaxed a bit while Puah changed her garment and gently but thoroughly cleaned her from head to toe with cloths dipped into a large bowl of water.

“Feel better now?” Shifra forced a smile.

“Not really.”

“I know,” Shifra whispered, as she returned the infant to his mother.

Kebi pushed the king and his edict from her mind. Only Shaddai knew for certain what would happen. Worrying about it wouldn't change anything.  
For now, there was only her son.