

They Are Animals

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Illustrated by ELIZABETH WEBBE

Mayorie "E.W." Cooper

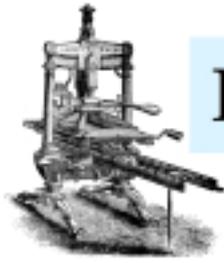
To the memory of David Bankier, a man who treated me with extraordinary kindness for no reason that I could see.

The other day I happened to be reading the story of the terrible ordeal the children of Israel endured in Egypt. For me the story is a familiar one, but as I was reading it, I noticed something I never had before, and it has been nagging at me ever since. When I first noticed it my stomach turned summersaults because what I read put the whole story in a new and dreadful light.

In order to explain what it was that so shocked me in the opening chapter of Exodus, it will be necessary to briefly review the main points of the story. The Book of Exodus picks up the story of Israel some generations after the close of the Book of Genesis. At the end of Genesis the family of Jacob are in Egypt. They had come there as refugees, seeking relief from a seven-year famine. The Egyptians had a strong aversion for the likes of Jacob and his sons, regarding them as uncouth shepherds, but they had been permitted to stay in Egypt because of certain favors Joseph had done for pharaoh. By the time the story of Exodus begins the pharaoh who had given Israel permission to stay in Egypt had died and the favors Joseph had done for Egypt had been forgotten. The descendants of Jacob were now looked upon as unwelcome strangers who were using up too many of the country's resources, taking up too much space, and becoming too numerous to be controlled.

The Egyptians feared that Hebrew customs might begin to change their way of life and that they might even pose a security threat. So the new pharaoh came up with a plan. The Hebrews would be forced to perform uncompensated manual labor as a way of paying back the Egyptians for using up their limited resources. But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Hebrew slaves the more they multiplied. A more drastic solution would be necessary. So pharaoh instructed the midwives who delivered the Hebrew babies to kill off any and all male offspring born to the slaves. But the midwives feared God, and refused to obey pharaoh's order. (The names of the midwives, by the way, were Shiphrah and Puah, and it is no accident that throughout the entire Book of Exodus pharaoh remains nameless, whereas the names of the two lowly midwives are immortalized in Scripture.) Whenever Hebrew babies

were born the midwives let them live.



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When pharaoh realized that his plan was not being implemented he sent for Shiphrah and Puah and interrogated them: “Why have you done this thing and let the children live?” And it was their answer that I found to be so arresting. What they said to pharaoh was this: “Because the female Hebrews are not like Egyptian women, for they are animals, and before a midwife can get to them they give birth on their own.” That, at least, is how I read the Hebrew text of Exod. 1:19.

A peculiar feature of the Hebrew language is that most of the vowels are not written. A reader is supposed to know from context or tradition how the consonants are to be pronounced. Centuries after the time of Jesus a system was invented for writing down how Scripture was to be vocalized by adding little dots above and below the letters that represent vowel sounds. The scribes who developed this system are called Masoretes, a name that comes from the Hebrew term *masorah* (“tradition”), which refers to the traditional pronunciation of the Hebrew text. But the vowel signs do not have the status or authority of the consonantal text, and to this day the Torah scrolls that are read in the synagogue are written without the Masoretic vowel signs.

A great deal of rabbinic interpretation of Scripture concerns the different ways the consonants might be pronounced and the different meanings the verses would then produce. In Exod. 1:19 the word I read as “animals” is חיות and would be pointed as חַיֹּת (*ḥayōt*) if my reading were correct. According to the Masoretic text the pointing is חַיֹּת (*ḥāyōt*, “living”) and the midwives’ response might be translated as, “they are vivacious, so before a midwife can get to them they give birth on their own.” Nevertheless the ancient Jewish sages were aware that the Hebrew text of Exod. 1:19 could be understood the

way I read it, and paraphrased the midwives' response as: "This ethnic group, they are like wild animals, which do not need midwives" (Exod. Rab. 1:16).

This alternate reading of Exod. 1:19 has got me to thinking about the consequences of the way we think and talk about our fellow human beings. In order to carry out the atrocities of genocide which pharaoh was plotting it was first necessary to deny the basic humanity of his victims. And the same has been true of every genocide, every massacre, every crime against humanity that has ever been perpetrated down through the annals of history. The perpetrator must believe—or convince himself or herself that he or she believes—that the intended victim is either a dangerous animal or a diabolical monster, for deep in our hearts we know that there can be no justification for killing fellow human beings.

The dehumanization or demonization of the other, whether it is of a stranger or of an enemy or of a political adversary, is the first precondition for the inhumane treatment of others. In order to enslave or kill or otherwise violate a fellow man, woman, or child we must first convince ourselves that they are either sub-human, and therefore not deserving of humane treatment, or possessed of sinister super-human abilities that make them deserving of the harshest punishments we can devise. Or, because hatred *always* entails some degree of doublethink, we may convince ourselves that the other is simultaneously sub-human and super-human. Only then can we build gas chambers and construct crematoria and drop atomic bombs.

What is astonishing about the story of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah is that they escaped punishment. Having convinced himself that the Hebrew slaves were masterminds capable of toppling his empire, the pharaoh easily swallowed the outrageous explanation that Hebrew females are not human beings like Egyptian women, they are merely wild animals who give birth in the fields and the woods. The pharaoh was duped by his own lies!

We have people coming into the country—or trying to come in, we're stopping a lot of them—but we're taking people out of the country, you

wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people. These are animals.

—Donald Trump, president of the United States of America*

What concerns me about the present time is that demonization and dehumanization are on the rise. If we disagree with someone's politics we call them "idiots." If someone has overstayed his visa or if she has crossed the borders of our country to request asylum we call them "illegals." If we want to discredit the grievances and fears of certain groups we call them "deplorables." Our elected leaders eschew respect and civility, dismissing these virtues as "political correctness," and so many of our religious leaders are cheering them on. We hurl insults and heap abuse on one another, and we forget or deny that words matter and that thoughts matter, too.



Anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda depicting Jews as sub-human monsters. Image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

How we think about our fellow human beings, how we talk about them, how we allow them to be spoken about, these things make a difference. The language we use and the thoughts that we entertain create an environment in which certain actions become possible or inconceivable.

Depending on our thoughts and our words either love or hatred will be able to flourish in our hearts, in our communities, and in our society as a whole.

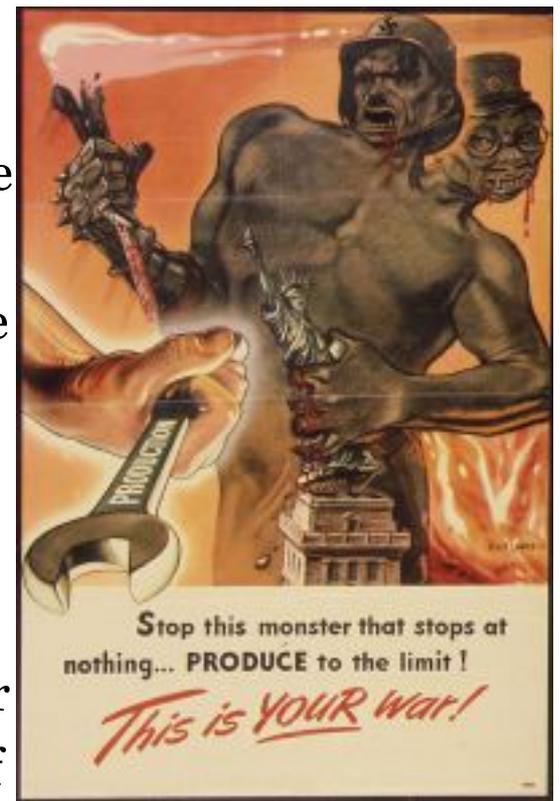
If we create an environment in which hate flourishes it will be impossible for us obey the highest and most difficult of Jesus' instructions, the command to love our enemies, though I am convinced that it is upon this commandment that the salvation of human kind and of all life on this

planet depends. Only love for our enemies will stop us from destroying ourselves.

But our success or our failure to obey the command to love our enemies will

be determined by our thoughts and our words about others. If we succumb to the rhetoric of dehumanization and demonization we will never succeed in loving our enemy, because our imagination will have atrophied. We will not be able to conceive of our enemy as truly belonging to the human race.

Jesus connected the commandment to love our enemies to our being and becoming sons and daughters of God. We will truly know ourselves to be sons and daughters of our heavenly Father when we come recognize as our own siblings people whom we fear, people with whom we disagree, and even people who have hurt us. The hurt, the fear, the disagreement notwithstanding, they too are God's own daughters and sons. Our language, our nationality, our particular grievance, the color of our skin, our goodness, the justice of our cause—none of these make us more a son or daughter of God than any other human being on the face of the earth. He created all of us. He created each one of us. He made each of us in his image. And he loves each one of us now, today, just as we are. Neither our goodness nor our wickedness conditions his unconditional love.



Anti-German and anti-Japanese propaganda published by the United States government during the Second World War. Image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Nothing we can do or say or think or believe can confer upon us a special status before our heavenly Father, and no crime we can commit, no emotion we can feel, no abhorrent notion we can espouse can ever take that status away. He can be grieved at what we do to ourselves or to others, but that cannot make us any less his children. He can rejoice in who we are and the way we love one another, but this will not make us any more his daughters or sons. But knowing that we are—that we all are—children of God makes all the difference. Knowing that we are all children of God makes hatred and the ensuing atrocities we might commit against one another impossible. Knowing that we are all children of God makes reconciliation and brother-and-

sisterhood a possibility rather than a fantasy. Knowing that we are all children of God makes even loving our enemies something you and I can actually attain.

Notes

The illustration of the infant Moses in the bulrushes was by my great-grand aunt [Marjorie Cooper](#), also known as Elizabeth Webbe.

* On the president's remark, see Scott Neuman, "[During Roundtable, Trump Calls Some Unauthorized Immigrants 'Animals,'](#)" *National Public Radio* (May 17, 2018).