

Maggie Anton. The Midwives' Escape: From Egypt to Jericho.
Banot Press, 2025

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Maggie Anton. *The Midwives' Escape: From Egypt to Jericho*. Banot Press, 2025.

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People know the basic outline. The Jews – the Israelites/Hebrews – were living in Egypt. They were enslaved by Pharaoh. Then Moses came, and God sent terrible plagues. Blood. Frogs. Locusts. Darkness. The slaves escaped. Some non-Israelites went with them. Forty years in the desert. Some battles. Moses and the Ten Commandments. Joshua. The walls at Jericho. Entering the Promised Land.

Others even know additional details. Crossing the Sea of Reeds (not the Red Sea !!!). Miriam and the women dancing with their timbrels. Aaron the High Priest. The people frequently complain. Manna. Quails. The apostasy of the Golden Calf. Amalek. Korah's rebellion. King Balak and the prophet Balaam. *Ma tovu ohalekha Ya'aqov, mish-k'no-tekha Yisrael* – How good are you tents Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel.

Few individuals, however, stop and ask some salient, some relevant questions. How did all these persons live in the desert? How did the community sustain itself? How did they deal with the myriad issues of daily life: providing fare for animals; herding sheep; growing food; birth and death; basic transportation; sanitation; housing; marriage; gravesites; building up a group of individuals who could become warriors; normal familial stress; fighting off enemies; intergroup tensions; health issues.

Maggie Anton, the author of the successful trilogy set in 11th/12th century France, *Rashi's Daughters (Joheved, Miriam, Rachel)* takes a similar tack of providing day-to-day information in *The Midwives' Escape: From Egypt to Jericho*. She provides a coherent storyline by focusing in on various made-up characters, and traces their “real-life” experiences that are part of the day-to-day existence of normal life. The narrative is told through the ears and eyes, the thoughts of these imaginary characters. While Anton includes some well-known biblically-based personalities, Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Joshua, she focuses on a number of made-up figures who address the details of daily living. Most prominent among them are the midwives/nurses Asenat, and her daughter Shifrah, as well as Aunt Pua. Midwifery and related subjects are a subtheme of the book. Anton adds a variety of other characters, many of them men who are both Hebrews/Israelites and part of the “mixed multitude” actually mentioned in Exodus 12:38 (“Moreover, a mixed multitude

went with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.”). There is a sense of authenticity with these names, for the Bible mentions characters living in Egypt with those exact names. Asenat is Joseph’s wife (Gen. 41:50) and Shifra and Pua are midwives (Exod. 1:15). Although they are minor characters in the novel, mention is also made of Moses’ family, his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro, and his sons Gershom and Eliezer.

In several places Anton integrates or paraphrases quotations from the Torah into her narrative. For example, when the people successfully traverse the Sea of Reeds, Miriam leads her companions in a joyful celebration. The novel reads: “Sing to GOD, Who has triumphed gloriously/ Horse and driver hurled into the sea/ Pharaoh’s chariots and his army cast into the sea; The pick of his officers drowned in the Sea of Reeds./ You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them; They sank like lead in the majestic waters./ Who is like You, GOD, among the celestials? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, /Awesome in splendor, working wonders!” (*Midwives*, p. 38), words which are taken from the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15.

Anton offers wonderful insights into what could well have been the case during the period of the Exodus. For example, she offers this observation about Moses and his difficult relationship with Aaron, and infers that Aaron is very jealous of Moses’ position of leadership. A character explains to Shifra that “Moses is a profoundly unhappy and lonely man. He was content to remain a shepherd in Midian with his wife and sons. He never wanted to return to Egypt, and he wanted even less to lead the Hebrews out of slavery to freedom in another land. Except perhaps for Joshua, he has no friends. The other Levites resent him, especially Aaron.” Shifra then protests, “But Aaron is his brother.” The character then points out that Aaron is his *older* brother. “Hebrews privilege the eldest son. Among other perquisites, they inherit twice what other sons do. Yet Elohim has chosen Moses as his favorite and speaks through him. It is a heavy burden.” (*Midwives*, p. 110).

In a number of places Anton successfully and seamlessly integrates rabbinic midrashim or rabbinic explanations into the text. An example is the figure of Serach bat Asher [Serach bat Asher]. According to the rabbis, Serach, who was the granddaughter of Jacob, lived an exceedingly long life. She was one of the seventy family members at the time of Jacob and Joseph who entered into Egypt. When, centuries later, at the time of the Exodus, Moses wanted to take the bones of Joseph back to the Promised Land (Exod. 13:19), it was Serach who knew where Joseph was buried

(*Genesis Rabbah* 20.19; Babylonian Talmud *Sotah* 13a; *Midwives* pp. 38, 282). Another example is that in Rashi's commentary to the Babylonian Talmud (comment on *Ta'anit* 30), during the period of the Exodus at the time of *Tisha b'Av*, men would dig graves for themselves and sleep there overnight (see *Midwives* p. 188; <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/250159?lang=bi>).

While many people know that the Torah explains that the period of the Exodus was forty years, a common error is that people assume incorrectly that there was constant traveling from one site to another. The fact is that Exodus-Leviticus-and most of Numbers take place in the first two years of the Exodus. From Numbers 20 through nearly the end of Deuteronomy, the people are at Kadesh Barnea, an oasis in the northern Negev. They will be settled there for close to thirty-eight years. Anton notes at one point that the community has been living at Kadesh for twenty-five years (*Midwives*, p. 217).

In real life Maggie Anton is Maggie Parkhurst (Antonofsky was her maiden name). The many interesting illustrations in the book, including a helpful map are by Anton's husband David Parkhurst.