

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
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**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. To quote the CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington: May "... the first phase of this agreement ... pave the way for the remaining hostages to come home, for hostilities to end, and for an era of security and rebuilding for both Israel and its neighbors."**

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**Remembering Olga: A Warrior for Israel \***

**On January 6, Israel lost a brave warrior who devoted her life to defending Israel and the Jewish people: Olga Meshoe-Washington (1981-2025). A dynamic young South African native and devout Christian, she placed Israel's defense second only to her family. Baruch Dayan HaEmet.**

\* Israel365 News, Newsletter, January 16, 2025).

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Safer Shemot opens after Yaakov and all his sons have died. The last to die is Levi in the year 2332. (The chronology comes from Chabad.) B'Nai Yisrael descend into Egypt in 2238 and leave with Moshe and Aharon in 2448. These figures imply that B'Nai Yisrael stay in Egypt for 210 years and that their period of slavery is no more than 116 years. Parshat Shemot covers Moshe's early years, from his birth to his youth, until he leaves for Midian (see below).

Moshe's early life is a perfect prelude to lead B'Nai Yisrael out of slavery. Moshe's mother keeps him for some time, "until weaning him" before turning him over to Paro's daughter (Bayta). Batya raises Moshe to know that he is a Jew, even though she adopts him and raises him as Paro's grandson (and therefore a prince of Egypt). (Moshe would certainly realize at some time that he is circumcised while no other man in the palace is.) Moshe considers the Jews to be his "brothers," even though they are slaves and he is a prince. He goes out one day to see how "his brothers" are doing. He sees an Egyptian beating a Jewish man and kills the man while trying to stop the abuse. He stops one Jewish man from abusing another and discovers that the man had already revealed that he had killed an Egyptian – so Moshe is likely to be arrested and killed if he stays near the palace.

Moshe runs away to Midian and helps the daughters of the priest of Midian draw water from a trough from which shepherds drive them away. Moshe meets the women's father, the priest of Midian (Reuel, or Yitro) and marries

Zipporah, one of the daughters. Some time later, Moshe decides to return to Egypt to see how his family and people are doing. On the way, he encounters a miracle.

Moshe could see what others miss. How long would a person need to observe a burning bush (not unusual in a desert) before realizing that the fire is not consuming the bush? Moshe realizes that the burning bush is a miracle. Hashem calls to Moshe from the bush. Why does Hashem select Moshe to be His agent to take B'Nai Yisrael out of Egypt?

Moshe embodies chesed in an Egyptian society where prejudice, brutality, and slavery are the norm – and chesed is nearly absent. Who are the prime examples of chesed in the Torah? Avraham, Rivka, and Rachel are the most obvious examples – but Moshe would not have had direct contact with any of them. Batya, however, embodies chesed when she rescues and raises a Jewish baby boy in her home – despite her father, Paro, ruling that all Egyptians are to kill every Jewish baby boy they encounter. Moshe's adopted mother embodies chesed and teaches this quality to Moshe. Chesed and leadership are two of the most obvious qualities in which Moshe resembles Avraham. (A deeper analysis would develop the parallels between Avraham and Moshe to a greater extent.)

By the time that Hashem appoints Moshe to be His agent to free the Jews, there are approximately two million Jews in Egypt. Could the leader of the Jews come from among people who have been slaves for 116 years? Where would any of the Jews in Goshen learn leadership skills? Moshe, however, has lived virtually his entire life as a prince in Paro's palace. Having lived in Paro's household, Moshe could have absorbed leadership qualities – skills not directly available to any of the other Jews of his generation.

When God finally orders Moshe to be His agent to free the Jews, Moshe asks what name he should use to identify God to Paro and his fellow Jews. Hashem says *eheyah asher eheyta* – *I will be that which I will be*. Hashem tells Moshe that He has always been with the Jews, is with them now, and always will be with them. Hashem's love for the Jews is beyond the comprehension of humans. All we can observe and understand is His empathy and promise always to be with us. Moshe has empathy for his people and therefore is an excellent example to help B'Nai Yisrael understand.

As we start reading the story of Hashem freeing our people from Paro's slavery, we are also watching and hoping that the initial steps of an agreement between Israel and Hamas will finally lead to freeing our people from Gaza, returning the bodies of our dead, and hopefully leading to a period of what passes for peace in the Middle East. May the current negotiations permit Israel to meet our goals in Gaza, and may conditions also improve markedly for our people in other danger spots. May Israel also be able to prevent our enemies from turning the negotiations into future danger.

During this time of hope and uncertainty for Israel, my thoughts turn to two special people. My beloved Rebbe, Leonard Cahan, z"l, visited Israel as often as possible to see family but also because Eretz Yisrael was so special to him. Dov Pluznik, Dov Ben Meir, z"l, was eight years old and remembered the day when Israel became a country. He brought those memories to Potomac, MD every year. We remember him fondly and send a special bracha to his widow Judy on his ninth yahrzeit this coming Monday, 20 Tevet.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shleimah for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben**

Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.  
Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

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### **Haftarat Parshat Shemot: A More Commonplace Redemption**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \* © 5785 (2025)  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.*

The Egypt of the haftarah isn't the Egypt we remember.

When we think of our time in Egypt, we picture the familiar narrative: Yaakov and his family sojourned from the land of Israel to Egypt to reunite with Yosef, and no one was left behind. The entire clan, seventy souls strong, lived together in the area of Goshen strong and unified, despite finding themselves on foreign soil.

This unity is what allowed them to maintain their collective identity – as the Midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 32:5( teaches: they did not change their names, they did not change their language, did not speak lashon hara [slander], and not even one of them was found to be promiscuous during their time in Egypt. Holding onto shared ways of living and identity was crucial to carrying the Jews through their centuries of Egyptian enslavement, and in the merit of their doing so, they were redeemed.

But the Egypt described by Yeshayahu in our haftarah tells a very different story. While the context is cryptic, Rav Yaaqov Medan argues that during the First Temple period, small numbers of Jews were exiled to Egypt. Unlike their ancestors who remained united, these Jews found themselves isolated and lost.

*"And on that day, God will beat out [the peoples like grain] from the channel of the Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt; and you shall be picked up one by one, O children of Israel. And on that day, a great ram's horn shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come and worship God on the holy mount, in Jerusalem." )Yeshayahu 27:12-13(*

These Jews didn't have the benefit their ancestors had in Egypt, to be surrounded by a large community to support them during times of trouble. They, the *'strayed and exiled,'* must be picked up one by one to be brought back to Jerusalem. The experience of exile, the prophet highlights, is all the more challenging when the center of the Jewish world is in the homeland. Yet even so, God assures them that they, too, will be returned, gathered into Jerusalem and reunited with their people.

Year after year, we recall the original Egyptian exile, when we suffered enslavement, yet we did so together. But much of our history in exile has aligned more with this other Egyptian exile, mentioned in the haftarah with a deep sense of feeling lost, lonely and anchorless. Yet we have always been reminded not to lose our faith or sense of direction.

When our sages chose the text for our haftarah, they deliberately didn't end with the prophecy describing Jews who are too lost to even find the words to make sense of their situation. Rather, they reached forward thirty-seven verses to add two more lines, taken from Chapter 29. These closing lines assure us that our forebear Yaakov, the one who descended with his children to Egypt, will not be ashamed of us, but will be proud in the knowledge that we continue to glorify God's name and to live in God's ways.

While this isn't the Egypt we remember, perhaps that's precisely the point. **The message of our haftarah is one that speaks to each generation – not just of surviving together, but of maintaining hope even when scattered and exiled.** In the dark days of the haftarah and in the dark days of our time, we are reminded to believe in Yaakov's optimistic legacy, not to give up, but to share the blessed reality of being part of the Jewish people helping to change society for the better. The insistence of our rabbis never lose sight of our capacity for transformational optimism, comes to the fore in the reading of our haftarah. ]emphasis added[

**Even as the Jewish people continue to face serious challenges, we are reminded that our strength lies not in our numbers, but in our unwavering ability to hold onto hope – whether we stand together or must be gathered “one by one.” This resilience continues to light our path forward.** ]emphasis added[

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org) or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

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## Shemos: Genesis of Exodus

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2010 (5771)

*And it happened during those many days that the King of Egypt died and the Children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to G-d.. G-d heard their moaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchok, and with Yakov. G-d saw the Children of Israel and G-d knew. )Shemos 2:23-25(*

Here the Children of Israel find themselves in the depth of a long and brutal exile. Because of the pain and suffering, they groan and cry. Suddenly they attract the attention of The Almighty and wake up His promises to patriarchs. This precise point signals the the beginning of the end of the exile, and therefore we need to know, “*What happened here? How did they do it?*”

Why does the verse tell us that “G-d saw...”? HASHEM sees everything. Why are we told that HASHEM knew if HASHEM already knows everything? Rashi comments, that “*HASHEM focused on them, and He did not hide his eyes from them.*” That helps somewhat to explain the not knowing.

The Sefas Emes references a most fascinating Midrash on the verse that supplies some new information, “*G-d knew that they had done Teshuvah )repentance(. Only they did not know, this one about this that one. Only G-d knew!*” The new simple explanation is that only G-d knew that all of them had done Teshuvah privately, independently, and simultaneously. The Sefas Emes adds, “*Maybe they themselves were not able to express their thoughts articulately...there are incomplete thought fragments that no one else is able understand except for The Creator Blessed is He, because He inspects the heart and the kidneys.*”

What had G-d come to know? He had deciphered a hidden language of the heart and kidneys that even the person himself does not understand clearly what he is saying. Like a parent that hears distress in a child's cry and knows that this is no ordinary formalistic attention getting whimper. Here too we have on open display a certain type of wordless cry, a groan that is included amongst the thirteen expressions of prayer. Not only is it included in prayer but it may be a superior

form of prayer. As the Talmud states, *“That person that prays with crying and weeping until he is not able to express verbally. This is a complete prayer that comes from the heart and it does not go unanswered.”*

The original spark that triggered the grand exodus from Egypt was a very private, and, to the human mind, an inarticulate cry. There are many who cry for whatever reason. Are all those emotional moments also a form of Tefilla too? There may be one extra point that makes this cry so effective.

I once heard a story about a young boy who came running into his house all upset and crying hysterically. He was sobbing uncontrollably. He was barely able to explain to his father what he was so upset about. Someone had taken his toy or excluded him from a game. He could hardly control his grief. His father listened carefully and then handed him a Sefer Tehillim. The child still quite upset looked at his father with wonderment, as if to say, *“What’s this for?”* The wise father explained to him, *“As long as you’re already crying, you might as well pray!”*

The Talmud says that there are tears that are compared to smoke and tears that are like seeds. Tears that are like smoke dissipate and disappear without a trace. Tears that are like seeds fall to the ground and create everlasting results. One can write the most articulate and brilliantly crafted letter in the universe, put it into an envelope, put a stamp on it and a return address and still it will never hit the mark unless there is an address. Crying is one thing. Crying to HASHEM is a potent form of prayer that may be the **genesis of exodus!**

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5771-shemos/>

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## **Moshe and His Brothers**

By Rabbi Dov Linzer \* © 2015, 2018

The beginning of the book of Shemot serves as a mirror image to the end of the book of Breishit. Breishit ends with Yosef’s promise to his brothers: *“Behold, I will die; and God will surely remember – pakod yifkod – you, and bring you out of this land”* (Breishit, 50:24). So it is when God gives Moshe his charge that it is these words that Moshe is told to bring to the people: *“Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, the Lord, God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Yaakov, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely remembered – pakod pakaditi – you and seen that which is done to you in Egypt”* (Shemot, 3:16). The redemption that Moshe ushered in, then, is the fulfillment of the promise made centuries earlier by Yosef to his brothers. The story of the descent and entrenchment will find its reversal in the story of the exodus and return.

This mirror imaging plays out not only in terms of the story of the nation, but also in terms of Yosef and Moshe themselves. These two characters are not often compared, but when one looks closely, one sees many interesting parallels. Yosef, remember, leads the entire people – if only for a short period of time – out of Egypt to bury Yaakov in Canaan. And what is Moshe doing at the climax of the exodus, when the people begin their march toward the land of Canaan? *“And Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him; for he had straightly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely remember you; and you shall carry up my bones away from here with you”* (13:19). Moshe is doing on the national level what Yosef did on a smaller scale when he led his immediate family out to bury Yaakov.

This act of Moshe momentarily turns our gaze away from the national narrative and restores it to the story of a person and a family; it brings us out of the book of Shemot and back into the book of Breishit. It reminds us that the story of the exodus is also the end of the story of Yosef. It is restoring Yosef to the land from which he had been estranged and to the family with which he had never regained a true sense of peace and wholeness.

This focus on the personal allows us to see more parallels between the lives of Moshe and Yosef. Yosef’s life story began with being the favored son of his father, with his reporting the evil deeds of his brothers to his father, with special clothing

that marked his privileged status, and with dreams of future greatness. All of this resulted in the jealousy and enmity of his brothers and to his being sold to Midianites and brought down to Egypt. Moshe's life story began in parallel, but also in opposing, ways. Moshe grew up outside his birth family, without a true father or mother at all. He undoubtedly had special clothing, royal Egyptian garments that marked his privileged status and his status as an outsider at the same time )consider how he was identified by Reuel's daughters: "*An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds*"(. Whereas Yosef's actions estrange him to his brothers, Moshe's first act is to create and strengthen the bond with his brothers: "*And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens*" )2:11(. Yosef was the insider moving out; Moshe was the outsider moving in.

When Yosef saw his brothers' misdeeds, he reported them to his father with the possible consequence of their being punished or made to suffer. Moshe, however, did not initially see his brothers' misdeeds but the misdeeds of an Egyptian overlord, and his reaction was to stand up and defend his brothers, to save them from their suffering. Even on the following day, when one Hebrew was unjustly beating another, he did not report the guilty party to Pharaoh but acted to resolve it on his own. Rather than exacerbating sibling rivalry as Yosef had, Moshe was attempting to end this rivalry and infighting. His attempt was met not only with resistance but hostility, and far from succeeding in fostering greater family unity, Moshe was forced to flee his family and the land. The goal of restoring true bonds of brotherhood was not to be easily accomplished.

Moshe thus runs to Midyan to escape Egypt, much as a similar enmity caused Yosef to be sold to the Midianites and brought down to Egypt. There Moshe marries the daughter of the kohen Midyan, the priest of this foreign country, just as Yosef had married the daughter of kohen On, the priest of his foreign country. Moshe has two sons just as Yosef had two sons. Here, however, the parallels diverge. For while Yosef called his first son Menashe, "*for God has made me forget all my travails and all my father's house*" )Breishit, 41:51(. Moshe calls his first son Gershon, saying, "*I was a stranger in a foreign land*" )Shemot, 2:22(. Yosef had been pushed out of his family and was trying to forget his travails, set down roots, and make a home for himself in his adopted country. Moshe, in contrast, is not rebuffed. He feels estranged not from his family but from the land where he is currently forced to live away from his family. And so it is with the names of the second sons. The name of Yosef's second son reflects a certain degree of success, perhaps presaging further entrenchment in the land. The name of Moshe's second son, however, reflects God's saving power: "*And the second son he called Eliezer, for the God of my father was mine help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh,*" )18:4(. presaging the redemption that was soon to come.

The reversal of the descent to Egypt – the redemption of the Exodus – would come through the reversal of the estrangement from family and one's ancestral land. It would come from Moshe's refusal to settle down, from forcing his way back to be with his people to protect and defend them. Thus, when the time comes to return to Egypt, Moshe says to Yitro, "*let me go now and return to my brothers who are in Egypt and see ha'odam chayim, if they are still alive.*" It is this, his connection to his brothers, his people – in addition, of course, to the divine charge – which compels him to return. Moshe's request to Yitro echoes a verse from the Yosef story: "*Is it well with your elderly father of whom you spoke,*" he asks them, "*ha'odenu chai, is he still alive?*" )Breishit, 43:27(. Yosef's concern is primarily with his father and this concern, for whatever reason, never led to any proactive action on his part. Moshe's concern is different – it is a concern for his brothers, for his entire family, and it is his acting on this and returning to them that ultimately brings about the redemption.

There is one final point that bears noting. Moshe started his adult life with a drive to connect to and protect his brothers. What he resisted was becoming God's representative, the person through whom the divine redemption would come. Yosef never had a problem with this role. He readily saw God as working through him as the conveyor of the divine interpretation of dreams, or as the vehicle for bringing the people down to Egypt so that they would survive the famine. Yosef's life started with the dreams, with the divine vision. It was a vision was built just on his relationship to God, not to his family, and it brought in its wake much grief. Moshe's vision of God came only later in life. But when it came, and when he finally accepted it, it emerged from the bonds of family and of brotherhood, from a willingness to risk one's own safety and security for the welfare of the people.

Shabbat Shalom!

\* Rosh HaYeshiva and President, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

From my archives

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## **A New King? Thoughts for Parashat Shemot**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

*“A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Shemot 1:8).*

Rashi records the Talmudic comments of Rav and Shemuel. One said that an actual new king arose; the other suggested that it was the same king who made new decrees, behaving as though he did not know Joseph.

Neither Rav nor Shemuel offered evidence for their statements; they were not debating about a historical fact. Rather, they were offering keen insight into human psychology. From a historical standpoint, one of them was correct and one was incorrect. From a psychological viewpoint, they both were perceptive students of the human condition.

An actual new king arose: this is the most likely meaning of the verse. Joseph was 56 years old when Jacob died, and at that time he was still in a position of power in Egypt. But the Torah tells us nothing about Joseph's career from then until his death at age 110. During those fifty-four years, was Joseph still a government official? Did he become “*emeritus*” at some point? Did the Pharaoh who had originally appointed him continue in power for all those fifty four years or did he die and leave his position to a successor? It is certainly plausible that a new Pharaoh arose who may not have known or worked with Joseph.

But why did the new Pharaoh ignore the earlier achievements of Joseph? How could the new Pharaoh “*not know*” — not appreciate and respect — Joseph's accomplishments? The answer: people remember what they want to remember and “*forget*” what they want to suppress. The new Pharaoh was interested in consolidating his own power; he ignored Joseph's achievements because he was interested in undermining the status of the Israelites.

That “*new Pharaoh*” was like many people. They enjoy benefits of others but are quick to turn on them; they “*don't know*” — don't want to be reminded — about the gratitude they owe. They are interested in promoting themselves and enhancing their own power.

What about opinion that the same Pharaoh ruled, but feigned not to know Joseph? This is an example of particular ruthlessness. After all that Joseph had done for him, Pharaoh had the audacity to pretend that he didn't even know Joseph. Whereas a “*new Pharaoh*” might justify his misdeeds since he didn't actually know Joseph, the “*same Pharaoh*” had no such justification. He knew Joseph; he worked with Joseph; he benefitted immensely from Joseph. Nevertheless, he hard-heartedly cut Joseph off.

Rav and Shemuel were not debating a historical point: they were commenting on human perfidy and betrayal. They were echoing the teaching of Rabban Gamliel (Pirkei Avot 2:3): “*Be wary of your dealings with the ruling power, for they only befriend a person when it serves their needs. When it is to their advantage they appear as friends, but they do not stand by a person in their hour of need.*”

The problem, though, doesn't only relate to ruling powers. Ingratitude and betrayal manifest themselves in many situations. Self-serving people in all walks of life use others but “*don't know them*” once they are no longer needed.

“*A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph.*” Do we know people like that? Are we ourselves like that, even sometimes?



\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3310> .

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**THE EVER GROWING TORAH MODEL:  
A portrait of Moses as a young man, national leader, and teaching model**  
By Rabbi Alan Yuter \*

[note: Book Review by Rabbi Alan Yuter of a monograph by Rabbi Zvi Grumet.]

This engaging monograph is a deceptively simple read. Written in a disciplined, clear diction, Rabbi Zvi Grumet writes and teaches like a High School Yeshiva rebbe. He unflinchingly focuses on the received Torah's text and message[s], as lucidly and probingly as he can, so that his student/reader may understand his content and internalize the Torah's normative message. The superficially scholarly reader will likely be disappointed because Grumet avoids all jargon, esotericisms, and technical terms that might confuse, distract, or otherwise disturb the targeted "non-academic" Orthodox reader. He is not writing to, or for, the secular scholarly community, at least as his first audience. As such, Grumet's *Moses and the Path to Leadership's* literary genre is Talmud Torah, not Academic Bible scholarship.

Grumet's monograph presents Moses not as a human superhero, but as a great person, with flaws and limits, struggling to master himself as he is commissioned to lead God's people, Israel. Moses the prophet evolves into Moses the teacher; over his career, Moses struggles with, and eventually overcomes, his propensity to rage. We initially find Moses the moral agent as a young man who leaves the Pharaonic palace to join his enslaved Israelite brethren, and whose first act is to kill, in righteous indignation, an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite. But he also intervenes when an Israelite bully beats/is about to beat a fellow Israelite, and he saves Midianite women from Midianite male shepherds. Moses is the man of morality, courage, and strength. God calls on Moses because of these prior dispositions, as well as the "management" skill that Moses acquires during his years as a Midianite shepherd.

The monograph precisely — and convincingly traces how Moses grows and falters, directs his zeal to and for God as well as to and for Israel, and concludes with showing how Moses negotiates with the two tribes who wish to possess Transjordan land for their heritage. By the end of his career, Moses has developed an emotional as well as intellectual intelligence; he is able to hear the words and peer into the heart of the "other," and to respond appropriately. In his Deuteronomic valedictory, Moses reviews his own career, but from a human rather than Divine perspective, providing the first instance of a retold Bible, a genre that will become more popular in Second Commonwealth Judaism. By stressing the difference between Moses' human memory and God's divine record, Grumet documents and legitimates the propriety of the Midrashic method that he expertly applies.

Because he is writing to/for an intelligent, informed modern Orthodox lay audience, Grumet assumes zero Academic training on the part of his readers, but he does focus on the religious, existential questions that confront his target population: (a) what does it mean to be a good human being, (b) how do we confront ourselves and our weaknesses, (c) what should we expect from our leaders — and followers, (d) how do we continue to learn, grow, and mature in the course of our adult lives, and (e) how does the modern Orthodox Jewish reader confront the Jewish sacred canon?



Unlike the Academic Biblicist, Grumet starts with a priori assumptions. For Grumet, the Torah is a literary whole. It reveals a literary, and ideological coherence, and has a critically important message, from God, to proclaim. In this regard, Grumet's *Moses and the Path to Leadership* is foremost an exemplar of Orthodox Jewish Bible scholarship, called "Talmud Torah."

But unlike the conventional approach to Bible common to many Orthodox synagogues and schools, where the Bible text is read and revered, but subtly actually rejected because it is too "holy" to be understood or to be applied in everyday life, Grumet believes that the Torah text is readable, approachable, understandable, and applicable to everyday life. He dares to subject Moses to Torah review. In most Orthodox settings, the student is forbidden to dare to assess those who are greater than oneself on the Political-Theological socially accepted Orthodox food chain. Failing to find this restraining norm, that elites are immune to assessment, in Israel's sacred canon, Grumet the educator subjects each Jew to mutual self-evaluation, with the "hidden curricular" aim to mold and nurture better Torah informed human beings. Like the great medieval Jewish scholars whose words are memorialized in the "Rabbinic Bible," Grumet asserts the very same intellectual freedom that his medieval forbearers exercised, and refuses to allow the Torah to be reduced to an oracle understandable only to a self-select, theologically correct clique. After all, the Torah was given to all Israel, i.e. the collective "us," and not to any self-selecting elite. Because Grumet correctly, astutely, and courageously asserts his right to read and offer his own reasoned judgment, a right not forbidden in and therefore implicitly authorized by the Torah, Grumet's *Moses and the Path to Leadership* is also a modern as well as Orthodox book.

*Moses and the Path to Leadership* is however much more than an Orthodox reading of Torah. The untrained lay eye will miss the monograph's academic depth because it is written in the idiom of Talmud Torah and not *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Grumet is nevertheless keenly aware of Academic Bible scholarship. He uses its tools and cites its findings very well. Like Drs. Yael Ziegler, Meir Weiss, Gavriel Cohen, Ernst Simon, and Nehama Leibowitz, Grumet reads the Torah as a literary critic. In Grumet's case, the American New Criticism is the "Bible Criticism" he applies adeptly, appropriately, and insightfully. This academic approach assumes that the given text creates a world, and that every word in the document is a datum waiting to be decoded, which then serves as a window into the mind and world of the author. By comparing different Biblical narratives synoptically, one beside the other as opposed to a superficial linear reading, the critic need not and indeed dare not posit different sources, but instead discovers, by dint of juxtaposition, different moods, contending points of view, and conflicting insights into the art and ethic presented by the writer.

By finding literary, and therefore theological coherence in the Torah in general, and from this reviewer's perspective, the book of Numbers in particular, Zvi Grumet has offered a very important secondary source of Bible exegesis and an even more significantly, a primary source proclaiming what it means to be "modern Orthodox." An aspiring Bible scholar who never finished his Ph.D., who taught me in Hebrew High School [c.a. 1960], failed to find meaningful coherence in his research on "The Redaction of Numbers." Another leading contemporary Jewish Bible critic told me that "Numbers is where the stories that have no other place in the Torah were placed." If one reads Torah (a) with philology and (b) the academic culture's dogma that inconsistencies and discrepancies testify to a haphazard composition that is by definition bereft of coherency, one is not programmed to entertain the possibility of coherency or literary unity. But Grumet has found coherency in the Torah, with this coherency expressing itself with the moral message of *Bildung*, that sees education as a life-long enterprise that, if engaged, sanctifies those who partake in and of it. Unlike Nehama Leibowitz, Grumet never criticizes Bible Criticism. He merely avoids discussing its concerns in his Orthodox context because, since he is doing Talmud Torah and not secular research, such conversation is, by dint of genre and audience, epistemologically inappropriate.

Grumet is however suggesting a radical re-consideration of Bible Criticism's findings. Rather than dismiss the Academic Bible study enterprise as a "heresy," a concern that entered Judaism in response to the Christian critique of Judaism, he suggests that aspects of Academic Bible study are incompatible with his enterprise, Talmud Torah, because it denies the possibility of textual Torah coherency. Those familiar with Academic Bible study will discover that Grumet is not unaware of their writings and findings, but that he actually employs many of its tools, albeit selectively. Grumet does summon the critical literature on psychology and education in order to explicate Moses' development as a round and developing character.

Thus, there is much more than meets the untrained lay modern Orthodox eye in this intellectually engaging work. Grumet addresses, with respect and with acuity, the challenge of Academic Bible study. Like R. Joseph Soloveitchik, who in "Confrontation" finds two alternative, inconsistent, and juxtaposed Creation Narratives, and who views these narratives as complimentary literary typologies rather than as two historically verifiable records, Grumet's Moses is a typological ideal who has become "the" Jewish hero. In "Confrontation," R. Soloveitchik offers an alternative to the Academic Biblicist consensus that Genesis' first creation narrative is a late P(riestly) composition that was placed before an earlier JE creation, without raising eyebrows and theological doubts, of his believing, Orthodox target audience. And like R. Soloveitchik, Grumet is religiously responsible to his audience community because Jewish scholarship is not intellectually neutral; one does not study Torah with scholarly disinterest. The Orthodox Jew studies Torah "to hear the word of the Lord," and not to merely satisfy one's curiosity.

While written with footnotes and academic rigor, *Moses and the Path to Leadership* remains an Orthodox exercise in Talmud Torah. And by daring to probe, explore, question, and search, working within the epistemological constraints of historically accepted Jewish definitions, Grumet's modesty, simplicity, and pedagogically sensitive narrative commentary is a masked polemic couched in strategic, unmistakable understatement. Following his teacher R. Soloveitchik, he filters information, academically processed, so that it is presented in a pedagogic and pastoral format that his audience community is conditioned to accept. But following his own conscience, professional skills, academic proclivities, and intellectual curiosity, Grumet affirms his God-given right to learn Torah on his own, to make up his mind, and to arrive at his own reasoned conclusions. For Grumet, Torah is not merely a political franchise of institutionally endorsed great rabbis; it is, after all, the "possession of the Congregation of Jacob." He, and his reader, share the right to an informed opinion, and their own finite portion in that infinite enterprise called Torah.

It is this mindset that marks Rabbi Zvi Grumet as a worthy link in the Mosaic chain, who not only carries the courage to be both modern and Orthodox, but who shares and teaches this mindset to others.

\* Rabbi Alan Yuter, a highly respected American Orthodox rabbi, went on Aliyah with his wife upon his retirement. They currently reside in Jerusalem. Rabbi Yuter is associated with the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding, affiliated with Ohr Torah Stone, Efrat, Israel.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/ever-growing-torah-model-portrait-moses-young-man-national-leader-and-teaching-model>

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## Shimos -- Jewish Bedtime Stories

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.*

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

Moshe was concerned. As he stood at the mountain that would soon become famous as "*Mount Sinai – The place where the Torah was given*," he was engaged in debate with Hashem whether he, Moshe, should be the messenger to redeem the Jewish People. Hashem insisted that Moshe was the person for the task. Yet, Moshe was reluctant. After days of debate, Moshe finally explained a significant concern: He was worried that his older brother Aharon would be offended if

he, Moshe, the younger brother would be chosen. Moshe said, *"Send the message of redemption in the hands of the other messenger,"* Aharon. This way there will be no hard feelings.

Hashem assured Moshe that Aharon would rejoice in Moshe's appointment. There would be no jealousy between them. Aharon would respect Moshe and assist him as a spokesperson. In fact, Aharon earned the position of Kohein Gadol and the honor of wearing the Choshen (Breastplate) over his heart because he did not harbor ill will or jealousy to his younger brother. The partnership of Moshe and Aharon would live on as the classic healthy partnership for us to admire, treasure, and emulate.

At one point I had the privilege of attending a weekly meeting with Rav Matisyahu Salomon zt'l in which he shared what he considered the most important lessons and themes in Torah, Mitzvos, and relationships. At one of the meetings Rav Salomon related the following:

*"I was once visiting with the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Shach, when a question was presented regarding a great leader who had passed, away leaving two sons. The supporters of the older son claimed that since he was older, he should inherit the mantle of leadership, while it was widely recognized that the younger son had the leadership qualities needed for the position. The Board of Trustees was deadlocked as to how to proceed, so they presented the question for Rav Shach to rule.*

*"Apparently, Rav Shach was familiar with the situation, because they barely completed explaining the claims and counterclaims, and Rav Shach replied with great confidence that the younger son, known to be more qualified, should be appointed as the new leader.*

*"One of the Board members was disturbed by the ruling and questioned Rav Shach based on this week's Parsha. He said, 'We see that Aharon was praised so greatly as an older brother not being jealous of his younger brother. Apparently, that is a very significant challenge and consideration. How could the Rosh Yeshiva appoint the younger brother in front of his older brother?'"*

Rav Salomon paused for us to appreciate the drama of the moment, and then said, *"I do not recall ever seeing Rav Shach so animated as he was at that moment. He rose from his chair and thundered, 'Is that how you learn a story from the Torah?!' That Aharon was great and therefore you prove that anyone else would harbor jealousy and ill will. No! Aharon did greatness, and we are expected to learn from him to behave with greatness. Aharon paved the way, that the older brother should yield as Aharon did, so that the more qualified younger brother should be appointed."*

Rav Salomon went on to explain that he considered this lesson a most important lesson in understanding Torah and relationships. If we look at Torah as a collection of Jewish bedtime stories that are distant from us and have no connection to us, then Torah would not be the Toras Chayim, the Torah of Life. When we hear stories of great people the appropriate attitude is to strive to emulate their great ways.

In a similar vein we can look back at the story of Chanuka, which we just recently celebrated, as a remarkable story with no connection to us. Or we can recognize ourselves in the story, urging us to take initiative and meet the unique challenges of our times.

Likewise, we ask ourselves: Do we view Yosef and the other heroes of the Torah and Jewish history as nothing more than nice Jewish bedtime stories? Or do we see them as lessons for generations, to remain connected and moral even under adverse circumstances.

To the Jew, bedtime stories are treasured opportunities to bond with our children, to reflect on the day, and to transmit the values of the Jewish people.

Returning to the story of Moshe and Aharon: Sibling rivalry and jealousy in families is natural. But how we handle those feelings is up to us. When we understand the stories of Torah as setting standards for us to live by, then we have the inspiration we need to live by. These are our heroes, and the standards of kindness and integrity by which we live our lives.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos,

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

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### **Shemot: Notable Nobility** by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \*

As we begin the book of Shemos, we are quickly introduced to Moshe Rabbeinu. Most of this week's Parsha focuses on Moshe's life. We learn of his family, his upbringing and his adult life, his first prophecy, his being charged with the mission of leading the Jewish people, and Moshe's initial contact with the Jewish people and with Pharaoh upon his return to Egypt. There is much to be learned about why Moshe was chosen, about where he came from, who he was and what made him whom he became.

These lessons about Moshe can be seen most clearly in the center of the parsha, the third chapter of Shemos. The Torah tells us of a week-long discussion G-d had with Moshe, where Moshe continually expressed his thoughts and concerns that he was not worthy of the task. Until the last day, Hashem accepted and approved of Moshe's responses and resistance, and addressed each concern that Moshe raised.

The first concern that Moshe raises is, *"Who am I to go to Pharaoh?"* G-d responds to Moshe and says, *"For I will be with you. And this is the sign that I have sent you – when you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain."* (Shemos 3:11-12) G-d's response does not seem to address Moshe's concern. Moshe was saying that he is not worthy of the mission. He never questioned G-d's involvement.

The Ohr Hachaim (ibid.) explains that Moshe's concern was more than simple humility. Moshe was saying that he is not worthy of being an emissary to Pharaoh because he is not a noble figure and has no political standing. Pharaoh therefore would not believe that he could possibly be a messenger of G-d. As such, Moshe was putting himself in mortal danger as Pharaoh would accuse him of being a commoner who had come into the Royal Throne Room on false pretenses.

Based on this, the Ohr Hachaim explains that Hashem's response to Moshe was giving Moshe a dynamic paradigm shift. By saying, *"I will be with you,"* Hashem was telling Moshe that he had no need to fear Pharaoh, nor to prove himself to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is simply a mortal king. Moshe would be coming as an emissary of G-d. Pharaoh was the one who would need to prove himself to Moshe. Moshe's nobility and greatness would far outweigh Pharaoh's. He would be coming with the nobility of G-d.

Hashem then explained that in His system of nobility, Moshe indeed had great standing. This was the sign that Hashem was giving Moshe – a sign that Moshe was indeed worthy of the greatest nobility of all – to be a representative of G-d. The Ohr Hachaim explains that the sign Hashem was giving Moshe was the famous lesson that the Torah would be given on Mount Sinai. Although there were great and powerful mountains around, it was specifically Mount Sinai that was chosen because Mount Sinai was a small and simple mountain. G-d always chooses those who are humble and have

developed their personal character traits. G-d's nobility is based on personal character, not on social status or external accomplishments. Moshe was, therefore, most certainly worthy of the role and was a proper emissary of G-d.

When we consider the discussion, this Ohr Hachaim teaches us an even more profound lesson than whom G-d finds honorable. Moshe's concern was that power would not see him as a worthy emissary of G-d and that he would therefore be in mortal danger. Even though, Moshe was worthy in G-d's eyes, Pharaoh would not see it that way. Pharaoh initially even denies that G-d exists. How would Pharaoh see that Moshe was worthy?

Deep down every human being knows G-dliness when we see it. When Moshe appeared with a saintly and self-possessed, noble character, Pharaoh recognized that Moshe was a man that was worthy of representing the true spiritual purpose and meaning of life and of the true G-d. Character development is a nobility that cannot be denied. Even as Pharaoh denied G-d, he could not deny the G-dliness he saw in Moshe.

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and associated with the Savannah Kollel.

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## **Shemot – Exodus in the Dark Ages: Rashi on Shemot**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

Genesis and Exodus both have their own personalities. The former starts with cosmic events and segues into the details of the first Hebrew families, while the latter focuses on the nation as whole, and the journey of the nation from slavery to freedom and nationhood. Rashi's commentary, accordingly, wears a unique mantle in the Book of Exodus. The story of Exodus is one with which Jews can easily identify, unfortunately, as it opens with persecution and oppression. Rashi uses the Biblical texts and their Midrashic interpretation to talk to his own people, the Jews of Germany and France in the Dark Ages, at the eve of the Crusades. Let us look at some of Rashi's commentaries on Parashat Shemot:

*1:1: These are the names... even though the Children of Israel were counted when they were alive [at the end of Genesis], they are counted again here to show how much God loves them.*

The opening statement of Rashi is a message to encourage his community. He knows that they went through many wanderings and persecutions, and that they sometimes feel abandoned by God. Indeed, the idea that the Jews were rejected by God was an essential feature in the teachings of the Catholic church, whose theologians explained that the Jews were no longer called Israel and that the prophecies of redemption and consolation in the bible do not speak of them. They claimed that the Christians were now the true Israelites – Verus Israel, whereas the Jews became Israel in the Flesh – Carnal Israel. The Jews were constantly reminded of that belief by the visual depiction on the external walls of gothic churches of the pair of women known as Ecclesia and Synagoga – Church and Synagogue. One of the most famous examples is that of the Strasbourg Cathedral, in which the Ecclesia stands tall with a crown, a chalice, and a cross-topped staff, while the Synagoga is drooping, carries a broken lance, and the Tablets of the Law are slipping from her hand. Rashi, well aware of the assault on his people's self esteem and trust in God, seeks to instill confidence in their hearts that God loves them and that He will redeem them, just as He did in Egypt.

*1:5: Yosef was in Egypt – it teaches you Yosef's righteousness. He was the same Yosef as a king in Egypt as he was when he tended to his father's flocks.*

Rashi promotes Yosef from viceroy to king, because Yosef is a role model for Jews in exile. Imprisoned and enslaved in a foreign land, he rises to power and saves his people. Rashi reminds his readers that the secret of Yosef's success was that he remained loyal to his heritage and tradition. The halakhic literature of that period contains many references to cases of conversion to Christianity, some forced and some voluntary, and one of the most famous cases was that of the son of Rabbenu Gershom )960-1028(. Rabbenu Gershom passed away twelve years before Rashi was born, and Rashi

was in essence his spiritual disciple. The incident is recorded by R. Yitzhak of Vienna )1180-1250( in his Ohr Zarua )2:428(:

*I heard from my master, R. Shimshon, that Rabbenu Gershom sat Shiva twice for his son when he converted...*

*2:5: Her maidens were going with her ]Pharaoh's daughter[ – going to die, because they tried to prevent her ]from taking Moshe in[. She sent her אמה – maiden, but the rabbis explain that it means hand, and that ]after her maidens refused to fetch the basket, they all died, and[ her hand stretched many feet until she was able to fetch it herself.*

This fantastic Midrash is music to the ears of exiled Jews. Here is the daughter of the king, a member of the royal family, who is willing to help the Jews. True, her counselors and closest helpers might not agree with her, but they are immediately punished by God and she is able to help the Jews with no less than saving their future redeemer from death.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

**Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.**

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## Shavuon: Remembering Our Legacy

By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

*Our hearts, prayers and thoughts are with our people in Israel and their families and friends throughout the world.*

This Shabbat we begin the book of Exodus, which showcases the growth and formation of the Jewish people from a group of individuals to an entire nation. Our individual Patriarchs sowed the seed for an entire covenantal community to take shape.

It gives us something to think about as we return from our holidays to a new year of possibilities. What kind of seeds will we plant? How will our families and community look in the future? What do we want our contributions to be?

One answer comes when we consider this point. Although the Patriarchs couldn't stop the challenges their progeny would face, they did give their children the story of their lives, and the memory of their legacy gave the Jews strength to face adversity. The greatest gift we can give our families and our community is our presence and our story, the hope that our examples will inspire them through whatever they might face.

Our community this Shabbat celebrates Arnold Treister turning a remarkable 100 years old. His presence and extraordinary accomplishments in our community have inspired us for many decades, and we look forward to many more services, holidays and celebrations with him and Sylvia.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera )Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel )Birmingham, AL(.

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## **Rav Kook Torah Shemot: Moses Hid His Face**

During Moses' first prophetic revelation, he covered his face, afraid to look directly at this holy sight. Was his response an appropriate display of awe and reverence? Or did it reflect a flaw in Moses' personality, a sign of unwarranted timidity?

This question is the subject of a Talmudic disagreement in *Berachot* 7a. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha noted that, later on, God would inform Moses, "*You will not see My face*" )Exod. 33:23(. In effect, God told Moses: "*When I wanted [at the burning bush], you did not want. Now that you want, I do not want.*" Moses had missed an extraordinary opportunity when he turned away from the burning bush. Because of his failure to strive for greater enlightenment, at Mount Sinai he would only merit a lesser prophetic vision.

Rabbi Yonatan, on the other hand, argued that Moses' action was praiseworthy. As reward for humbly hiding his face, Moses merited that his face would shine with a brilliant light as he descended from Mount Sinai )Exod. 34:29(.

### **Human Perfection**

Rav Kook explained that this Talmudic discussion revolves around a fundamental question regarding our principal aim in life. In what way do we fulfill our potential? How do we achieve perfection?

According to Maimonides, human perfection is attained through the faculties of reason and intellect. Our goal is to gain enlightenment and knowledge of the Divine, through the study of Torah and metaphysics. This is also the viewpoint of Rabbi Yehoshua. By hiding his face at the burning bush, Moses lost a golden opportunity to further his understanding of the spiritual realm. If our fundamental purpose in life is to seek enlightenment, Moses' demonstration of humility was out of place.

The author of *Duties of the Heart*, however, wrote that our true objective is the perfection of character traits and ethical behavior. This concurs with the opinion of Rabbi Yonatan. What Moses gained in sincere humility and genuine awe of Heaven at the burning bush outweighed any loss of knowledge. Since the overall goal is ethical perfection, Moses' action was proper, and he was justly rewarded with a radiant aura of brilliant light, a reflection of his inner nobility.

)*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 101-102. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. I, p. 32.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/SHMOT58.htm>

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## **Shemot: On Not Obeying Immoral Orders (5775, 5782) By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\***

The opening chapters of Exodus plunge us into the midst of epic events. Almost at a stroke, the Israelites are transformed from protected minority to slaves. Moses passes from prince of Egypt to Midianite shepherd to leader of the Israelites through a history-changing encounter at the Burning Bush. Yet it is one small, often overlooked episode that deserves to be seen as a turning-point in the history of humanity. Its heroines are two remarkable women, Shifra and Puah.

We do not know who they were. The Torah gives us no further information about them other than that they were midwives, instructed by Pharaoh:



*'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.'* Ex. 1:16

The Hebrew description of the two women as *hameyaldot ha'ivriyot* is ambiguous. It could mean "*the Hebrew midwives*"; so most translations and commentaries read it. But it could equally mean, "*the midwives to the Hebrews*," in which case they may have been Egyptian. That is how Josephus,<sup>[1]</sup> Abarbanel and Samuel David Luzzatto understand it, arguing that it is simply implausible to suppose that Hebrew women would have been party to an act of genocide against their own people.

What we do know, however, is that they refused to carry out the order:

*"The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the King of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live."* Ex. 1:17

This is the first recorded instance in history of civil disobedience: refusing to obey an order, given by the most powerful man in the most powerful empire of the ancient world, simply because it was immoral, unethical, inhuman.

The Torah suggests that they did so without fuss or drama. Summoned by Pharaoh to explain their behaviour, they simply replied:

*"Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."* Ex. 1:19

To this, Pharaoh had no reply. The matter-of-factness of the entire incident reminds us of **one of the most salient findings about the courage of those who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. They had little in common except for the fact that they saw nothing remarkable in what they did.**<sup>[2]</sup> **Often the mark of real moral heroes is that they do not see themselves as moral heroes. They do what they do because that is what a human being is supposed to do.** That is probably the meaning of the statement that they "*feared God*." It is the Torah's generic description of those who have a moral sense.<sup>[3]</sup> [emphasis added]

It took more than three thousand years for what the midwives did to become enshrined in international law. In 1946, the Nazi war criminals on trial at Nuremberg all offered the defence that they were merely obeying orders, given by a duly constituted and democratically elected government. Under the doctrine of national sovereignty, every government has the right to issue its own laws and order its own affairs. It took a new legal concept, namely a '*crime against humanity*,' to establish the guilt of the architects and administrators of genocide.

The Nuremberg principle gave legal substance to what the midwives instinctively understood: that there are some orders that should not be obeyed, because they are immoral. Moral law transcends and may override the law of the state. As the Talmud puts it:

*"If there is a conflict between the words of the Master ]God[ and the words of a disciple ]a human being[, the words of the Master must prevail."* Kiddushin 42b

The Nuremberg trials were not the first occasion on which the story of the midwives had a significant impact on history. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church, knowing that knowledge is power and therefore preferring to keep it exclusively in the hands of the priesthood, had forbidden vernacular translations of the Bible. In the course of the sixteenth century, three developments changed this irrevocably. First was the Reformation, with its maxim *Sola scriptura*, "*By Scripture alone*," placing the Bible centre-stage in the religious life.

Second was the invention, in the mid-fifteenth century, of printing. Lutherans were convinced that this was Divine Providence. God had sent the printing press so that the doctrines of the Reformed church could be spread worldwide.

Third was the fact that some people, regardless of the ban, had translated the Bible anyway. John Wycliffe and his followers had done so in the fourteenth century, but the most influential rebel was William Tyndale whose translation of the New Testament, begun in 1525, became the first printed Bible in English. He paid for this with his life.

When Queen Mary I took the Church of England back to Catholicism, many English Protestants fled to Calvin's Geneva, where they produced a new translation, based on Tyndale, called the Geneva Bible. Produced in a small, affordable edition, it was smuggled into England in large numbers. Able to read the Bible by themselves for the first time, people soon discovered that it was, as far as monarchy is concerned, a highly seditious document.

It tells of how God told Samuel that in seeking to appoint a King, the Israelites were rejecting Him as their only Sovereign. It describes graphically how the Prophets were unafraid to challenge Kings, which they did with the authority of God Himself. And it told the story of the midwives who refused to carry out Pharaoh's order. On this, in a marginal note, the Geneva Bible endorses their refusal, criticising only the fact that, in explaining their behaviour, they told a lie. The note says, *"Their disobedience herein was lawful, but their dissembling evil."*

King James understood clearly the dire implication of that one sentence. It meant that a King could be disobeyed on the authority of God Himself: a clear and categorical refutation of the idea of the Divine right of Kings.]4[ Eventually, unable to stop the spread of Bibles in translation, King James decided to commission his own version which appeared in 1611. But by then the damage had been done and the seeds of what became the English revolution had been planted. Throughout the seventeenth century, by far the most influential force in English politics was the Hebrew Bible as understood by the Puritans, and it was the Pilgrim Fathers who took this faith with them on their journey to what would eventually become the United States of America.

A century and a half later, it was the work of another English radical, Thomas Paine, that made a decisive impact on the American revolution. His pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was published in America in January 1776 and became an instant best seller, selling 100,000 copies almost immediately. Its impact was huge, and because of it he became known as *"the father of the American Revolution."* Despite the fact that Paine was an atheist, the opening pages of *Common Sense*, justifying rebellion against a tyrannical King, are entirely based on citations from the Hebrew Bible. In the same spirit, that summer Benjamin Franklin drew, as his design for the Great Seal of America, a picture of the Egyptians )i.e. the English( drowning in the Red Sea )i.e. the Atlantic(, with the caption, *"Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."* Thomas Jefferson was so struck by the sentence that he recommended it to be used on the Great Seal of Virginia, and later incorporated it in his personal seal.

The story of the midwives belongs to a larger vision implicit throughout the Torah and Tanach as a whole: that right is sovereign over might, and that even God Himself can be called to account in the name of justice, as He expressly mandates Abraham to do. Sovereignty ultimately belongs to God, so any human act or order that transgresses the will of God is by that fact alone *ultra vires*. These revolutionary ideas are intrinsic to the biblical vision of politics and the use of power.

In the end, though, it was the courage of two remarkable women that created the precedent later taken up by the American writer Thoreau]5[ in his classic essay *Civil Disobedience* )1849( that in turn inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in the twentieth century. Their story also ends with a lovely touch. The text says:

*"So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.  
And because the midwives feared God, He gave them houses."* Ex. 1:20-21

Luzzatto interpreted this last phrase to mean that He gave them families of their own. Often, he wrote, midwives are women who are unable to have children. In this case, God blessed Shifra and Puah by giving them children, as he had done for Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

This too is a not unimportant point. The closest Greek literature comes to the idea of civil disobedience is the story of Antigone who insisted on giving her brother Polynices a burial despite the fact that King Creon had refused to permit it, regarding him as a traitor to Thebes. Sophocles' Antigone is a tragedy: the heroine must die because of her loyalty to her brother and her disobedience to the King. By contrast, the Hebrew Bible is not a tragedy. In fact biblical Hebrew has no word meaning "*tragedy*" in the Greek sense. Good is rewarded, not punished, because the universe, God's work of art, is a world in which moral behaviour is blessed and evil, briefly in the ascendant, is ultimately defeated.

Shifra and Puah are two of the great heroines of world literature, the first to teach humanity the moral limits of power.

#### FOOTNOTES:

]1[ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, II.9.2.

]2[ See James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, New York, Free Press, 1993, pp. 35-39, and the literature cited there.

]3[ See, for example, Gen. 20:11.

]4[ See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, London: Allen Lane, 1993.

]5[ See Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, Boston: David R. Godine, 1969, first published in 1849.

#### Around the Shabbat Table:

]1[ Why do we think of Shifra and Puah as heroic? Weren't they just doing what was right?

]2[ What do you think you would have done if you were in their situation?

]3[ How are we supposed to decide whether a law is immoral and should be disobeyed?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/on-not-obeying-immoral-orders/>

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### Life Lessons From the Parshah: The Real Answer to Antisemitism

By Yehoshua B. Gordon \* © Chabad 5785

The portion of Shemot begins by enumerating the children of Jacob that descended into Egypt with him, and then curtly states, "*Now Joseph died, as well as all his brothers, and all that generation.*"<sup>1</sup>

This narrative always reminds me of an adorable story from the Old Country about a man who was both incredibly hospitable and miserly. He relished having guests at his table but didn't want them to eat anything. He would put a spread of delicious dishes before them, and then, to prevent them from eating, he would bombard them with questions: "*Where are you from? How are things in your town?*"

Remarkably, he seemed to know everyone. "*How is Moshe the butcher? How is Dovid the tailor? How's the rabbi? How's the shamash? How's the banker?*"

He skillfully kept his guests engaged in conversation while he savored his meal, ensuring that once he was done, the table was cleared, leaving no opportunity for his guests to eat.

One day, a poor man arrived in town and heard about this wealthy man who set out a lavish spread but prohibited his guests from indulging. This newcomer was astute. Sitting down at the table adorned with delectable food, the host promptly interrupted and asked him where he was from. As the guest mentioned his hometown, the wealthy man launched into his usual barrage of questions:

*"How's Moshe the tailor?"* asked the host.

*"He's dead,"* replied the guest.

*"Oy! How's Rueven the butcher?"* asked the host.

*"Dead,"* replied the guest.

*"Terrible! How's Chaim the rabbi?"* asked the host.

*"Dead,"* replied the guest.

Upon hearing this news, the host was visibly shaken. It seemed that everyone he knew in the town had passed away. He couldn't fathom it. As he sat there digesting the news and mourning for his departed friends and acquaintances, the guest indulged in course after course, relishing a meal unlike any he had experienced before.

Finally, the host mustered some strength. *"My friend,"* he said, regaining his composure, *"I must ask. How is it possible that everybody from your town is dead?"*

The poor man, taking a sip of wine and clearing his throat, responded with a grin, *"When I'm eating, the whole world is dead!"*

## **Forgetting Joseph**

Back to our parshah: After informing us that Joseph and his entire generation died, the next verse states, *"The children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and increased and became very very strong, and the land became filled with them."*<sup>2</sup> According to Rashi, citing the Midrash, they were giving birth to sextuplets — six babies at a time.

But then a strange thing happened. A new king ascended the throne of Egypt, and this new Pharaoh *"did not know Joseph."*<sup>3</sup>

How could he not know Joseph? Joseph ruled Egypt for 80 years and saved the entire country from famine!

There is a debate between the two great Talmudic sages, Rav and Shmuel, on this matter. One argues that the new Pharaoh was indeed a new king, while the other contends that it was the same Pharaoh as before, but he acted as if he didn't know Joseph.

How did this lack of recognition manifest? Pharaoh and his cabinet proceeded to deliberate on what to do about *"the Jewish Problem."*

What Jewish problem? Did the Jewish people offend the Egyptians? Were the Jews disloyal in some way?

Certainly not. On the contrary, they contributed positively to Egypt's success. Joseph, in particular, literally saved the country. The Jews were exemplary citizens — kind, considerate, and educated.

So, what was *"the Jewish Problem"*? It was simply that the Jewish people existed. This marks the first recorded instance of antisemitism in the Torah — hatred toward the Jews purely because of their Jewish identity.

As we know, the Egyptians then proceeded to enslave the Jewish People and subject them to severe persecution.

Fast forward a couple of hundred years, and G d appeared to Moses at the burning bush, instructing him, echoing the famous lyrics, *“Go down Moses, way down to Egypt-land, tell old Pharaoh, let my people go!”*

Moses responded by asking G d, *“When the Jewish people ask, ‘Who is G d? What is His name?’ What should I tell them?”* G d's response to Moses was to tell the Jewish People, *“I will be what I will be.”*<sup>4</sup> Rashi explains that G d was saying He will be with the Jewish people not only in their current exile in Egypt, but also in the future exiles.

Our sages taught that the Jewish people experienced four exiles throughout the ages: the Babylonian exile, the Greek exile, the Median exile, and the Roman exile — which has lasted nearly 2,000 years. G d told Moses to tell the Jewish people, *“I have never abandoned you, and I will never abandon you. I am with you in Egypt; I will be with you forever.”*

### The Antidote to Antisemitism

I've always asked the age-old question: Why don't they like the Jews? What have we done? We're nice people. Wherever we go, we contribute. Wherever we go, we help. Wherever we go, we're loyal.

We didn't harm Egypt, or Persia, Media, Greece, or Rome. On the contrary, we always contributed. The same goes for Spain, Germany, Poland, Russia, and sadly the list goes on and on. So why the antisemitism?

The Rebbe<sup>5</sup> shared a profound insight on this topic, drawing a connection to the Purim story. The wicked Haman, that evil prime minister, approached King Ahasuerus, and said, *“Your majesty, the Jewish people are bad people. They don't contribute to your country. I will pay you ten thousand silver pieces if you let me destroy them.”* Surprisingly, Ahasuerus responds, *“You can keep your money and you can take the Jews.”*

He didn't even accept the payment.

The Talmud,<sup>6</sup> quoting this episode, delves into a discussion about who hated the Jewish People more, Haman or Ahasuerus. The question is then answered with a parable about two farmers. The first farmer had a large mound of dirt in his field, and the second farmer had a deep pit. The first farmer proposed, *“Let me put my extra dirt in your field, and I will pay you.”* The second farmer responded, *“I have a pit in my field, and your dirt will help me. You don't have to pay me.”*

The Rebbe posed the question: what new insight do we gain from this parable? It seems to be the same story, adding nothing we didn't already know. But, the Rebbe points out, it's not just the same story — it's a lesson in the two paradigms of antisemitism.

One approach is to say the Jewish people are a *“mound,”* elevated above everyone else: the Jews have all the money; the Jews control the media; the Jews control Wall Street. The Jews control everything.

Then there's the second approach, asserting that Jews are a *“pit,”* living off everyone else. They don't work; they just collect welfare. They're derelict. All they do all day is study. They are a drain on the economy and don't contribute.

The Rebbe explains that the parable teaches us an important lesson. **The problem is not that the Jews are a mound, and the problem is not that the Jews are a pit. The problem is that they hate the Jews.** [emphasis added]

And antisemitism cannot be fixed by trying to solve the supposed problem. Some argue: *“If they hate us because we're successful, maybe we should lie low and act poorer?”* Others suggest: *“If they hate us because we lie low, maybe we should act wealthier and be better citizens?”*

**The only proper response to antisemitism is to be who you are, walk with your head held high, and be proud of your Judaism.** [emphasis added]

This is what G d told Moses to tell the Jews: Before the Final Redemption, there will be more exile, and there will be more antisemitism. But I will be there with you; I will never abandon you. Wherever you go, walk with your head held high! Continue to contribute, continue to be hardworking, and continue to be the wonderful person you are. This is how you earn the respect of G d and man, and this is how you face antisemitism.

### **The King's Name**

Two businessmen once approached the Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad, whose yahrtzeit we observe around this time of year. *"We are in deep trouble,"* they began, and explained: *"We supply uniforms to the Tsar's army and have been unjustly accused of supplying inferior-quality uniforms by our competition. We're being accused of treason. We are about to go to St. Petersburg for our trial, and although we have hired the best lawyers, it's not looking good!"*

*"I want to ask you a question,"* said the Alter Rebbe. *"The Talmud says that kingship here on earth mirrors kingship in heaven. How do we see that?"* The two businessmen did not know the answer, nor could they understand what this had to do with their problem. *"I will tell you the answer,"* continued the Alter Rebbe. *"Just as G d's name is written one way, yet we read it differently out of respect, the king has his given name, yet, out of respect, we call him 'Your Majesty, the Tsar.'"* With that, the Alter Rebbe blessed them, and they left his presence.

The businessmen were disappointed. They had come to the Rebbe for advice, or even better, a miracle, and all they got was a speech. With no choice, they traveled to St. Petersburg. There, their attorney informed them that the situation looked bleak, and his only advice at that point was to approach the Minister of Justice and beg for mercy. *"The Minister of Justice is a relatively nice guy,"* said their lawyer, *"and every day, he takes a ride in his horse and carriage through the park. I suggest you stop him, throw yourself at his feet, and beg him to have mercy on you."*

Reluctantly, the two followed his advice and went to the park. Upon seeing the minister's horse and carriage, they fell to the ground, begging for mercy. *"Your honor,"* they exclaimed, *"we didn't do it! We are innocent people! Please, have compassion upon us and our children!"*

*"Stand up,"* the minister instructed them, *"You seem to have made a mistake. You probably think that I am the Minister of Justice. However, I am the Minister of Culture. So, I cannot help you with your legal issues."*

*"However,"* he continued, *"you seem to be learned people, and perhaps you can help me with something. If you do, I promise to put in a good word for you with my friend, the Minister of Justice."*

The minister went on, *"The Tsar has given me three days to come up with the answer to a question he has about a Jewish teaching. The Talmud says that kingship here on earth mirrors kingship in heaven, and the Tsar wants to know how is that so. I've been researching and looking and I cannot find an answer."*

The two businessmen were shocked! *"We do know the answer!"* they told him excitedly. *"Just as G d's name is written one way in the Torah and is pronounced differently out of respect, so, too, the king has a given name, yet we call him 'His Majesty, the Tsar' out of respect."* The Minister of Culture was very pleased with their explanation, and needless to say the story had a happy ending.

*"I will be what I will be,"* declared G d to Moses when antisemitism first emerged nearly three-and-a-half thousand years ago. This name of G d, resonating through every era of exile and persecution, served as the beacon by which the Jewish people recognized their Divine connection. True to His unwavering promise, G d stood by us then, and throughout every subsequent exile.

Let us walk confidently with heads held high, proudly demonstrating our identity as the children of Israel — those who once descended into Egypt, endured slavery and persecution, were redeemed by G-d, and gifted His Torah. Despite all of the baseless and cruel hatred directed at us, we persevered, over and over again, and we will continue to persevere, until the Final Redemption, may it be speedily in our days! Amen.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 1:6.
2. Exodus 1:7.
3. Exodus 1:8.
4. Exodus 3:13-14.
5. *Sichot Kodesh*, 5725 Pg. 444.
6. *Talmud Megilah* 14a.

\* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/6260240/jewish/The-Real-Answer-to-Antisemitism.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6260240/jewish/The-Real-Answer-to-Antisemitism.htm)

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## Shemot: Raising Greatness

by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky \*

### SHEMOT

Pharaoh enslaved the Jews. When Moses was born to Amram and Yocheved, Pharaoh was informed by his astrologers that the Jews' redeemer had been born, so he ordered that all newborn boys be thrown into the Nile River to die. In order to save Moses' life, Yocheved placed him in a basket, which she hid among the reeds in the Nile River. He was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, Bitya, who adopted him. Bitya employed Moses' mother as his wet nurse; Yocheved kept Moses at her home until he was about 12 years old.

### Raising Greatness

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became like a son to her. She named him Moses, "*for*" – she said – "*I drew him out of the water.*" )Ex. 2:10(

Pharaoh and his court knew that Moses was Jewish, but they assumed that if they raised him like an Egyptian, he would become one of them. In fact, however, since he spent his early, formative years in his parents' home, the education he received from his people enabled him to remain aloof both from the enticements of Egyptian culture and the social status offered him after he was brought to Pharaoh's household.

Moreover, his clarity of values enabled him to imbibe whatever positive lessons could be learned in the Egyptian court – the techniques of leadership, organization, regal bearing, and so forth – while remaining true to G-d and His people.



We see here how crucial is the early education of children, particularly their moral education, and how the values we impart to them prepare them for moral and spiritual greatness.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3

\* An insight by **the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the "Tzemach Tzedek,"** on parshat Shemot from our *Daily Wisdom* by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

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## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### The Challenge of Jewish Leadership

I used to say, only half in jest, that the proof that Moses was the greatest of the prophets was that when God asked him to lead the Jewish people, he refused four times: Who am I to lead? They will not believe in me. I am not a man of words. Please send someone else.

It is as if Moses knew with uncanny precision what he would be letting himself in for. Somehow he sensed in advance that it may be hard to be a Jew, but to be a leader of Jews is almost impossible.

How did Moses know this? The answer lies many years back in his youth. It was then when, having grown up, he went out to see his people for the first time. He saw them enslaved, being forced into heavy labour.

He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He intervened and saved his life. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting, and again he intervened. This time the man he stopped said to him, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?"

Note that Moses had not yet even thought of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged. And these are the first recorded words spoken to Moses by a fellow Jew. That was his reward for saving the life of an Israelite the day before.

And though God persuaded Moses, or ordered him, to lead, it never ceased to be difficult, and often demoralising. Moses was faced with over forty years spent leading a group of people who were prone to criticise their situations, sin and rebel, and argue among themselves.

In an appalling show of ingratitude, the Israelites complain several times in the book of Shemot, after witnessing miraculous acts from God and his appointed leader. At Marah they complain that the water is bitter. Then, in more aggressive terms, they protest at the lack of food ('If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death'). Later, at Refidim, they grumble at the absence of water,

prompting Moses to say to God, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!'

In Devarim, Moses recalls the time when he said to God: "How can I myself bear Your problems, Your burdens and Your disputes all by myself" (Deut. 1:12). And then in Beha'alotecha, Moses suffers what I have often called an emotional breakdown:

He asked the Lord, "Why have You brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do You tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land You promised on oath to their ancestors? . . . I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favour in Your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." Num. 11:11-15

And this was said, don't forget, by the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Why are Jews almost impossible to lead?

The answer was given by the greatest rebel against Moses' leadership, Korach. Listen carefully to what he and his associates say: They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord assembly?" Num. 16:3

Korach's motives were wrong. He spoke like a democrat but what he wanted was to be an autocrat. He wanted to be a leader himself. But there is a hint in his words of what is at stake.

Jews are a nation of strong individuals. "The whole community is holy, every one of them." They always were. They still are. That is their strength and their weakness. There were times when they found it difficult to serve God. But they certainly would not serve anyone less. They were the "stiff-necked" people, and people with stiff necks find it hard to bow down.

The Prophets would not bow down to Kings. Mordechai would not bow down to Haman. The Maccabees would not bow down to the Greeks. Their successors would not bow down

to the Romans. Jews are fiercely individualistic. At times this makes them unconquerable. It also makes them almost ungovernable, almost impossible to lead.

That is what Moses discovered in his youth when, trying to help his people, their first response was to say, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?" That is why he was so hesitant to take on the challenge of leadership, and why he refused four times.

There has been much debate in British and American Jewry recently[1] about whether there should be an agreed collective stance of unconditional support for the state and government of Israel, or whether our public position should reflect the deep differences that exist among Jews today, within Israel or outside.

My view is that Israel needs our support at this critical time. But the debate that has taken place is superfluous. Jews are a nation of strong individuals who, with rare historic exceptions, never agreed about anything. That makes them unleadable; it also makes them unconquerable. The good news and the bad go hand in hand. And if, as we believe, God loved and still loves this people despite all its faults, may we do less?

[1] It should be noted for context that this essay was written by Rabbi Sacks in November 2010, amidst a widespread communal debate regarding Israel.

## Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

### Women and the Exodus

"And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; each individual and his house came." (Exodus 1:1)

The book of Exodus opens with a throwback to that which we already know from the last portions of the book of Genesis: the names of Jacob's children and the seventy Israelite souls – the Jewish households – who came to Egypt. Why the repetition?

The great commentator Rashi attempts to explain that "even though Jacob's progeny

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were counted by name previously, the names are here repeated to show us how beloved they were..." (Rashi ad loc.). However, these first few verses of the book of Exodus are actually a prelude to the enslavement in Egypt, the tragedy of the first Jewish exile. I understand a loving recount when times are joyous but I find such mention superfluous when we are facing suffering and tragedy.

What is more, Pharaoh makes a striking distinction between males and females when he orders Jewish destruction: "And Pharaoh commanded his entire nation saying, every male baby born must be thrown into the Nile and every female baby shall be allowed to live." (Exodus 1:22)

Pharaoh was apparently afraid to keep the Israelite men alive, lest they wage a rebellion against him; he seems to be fairly certain that the women will marry Egyptian men and assimilate into Egyptian society. However, logic dictates a totally opposite plan. Fathers often love and leave without having had any influence upon their progeny; indeed, many individuals don't even know who their biological fathers are! Offspring are far more deeply attached to the mother in whose womb they developed and from whose milk they derive nourishment. Genocide might have been much easier for Pharaoh had he killed off the women and allowed the men to continue to live.

I would argue that although our Bible understands the critical importance of women – we have already seen how Abraham is the first Jew because he is the first individual who is introduced together with his wife who has her own name and identity – Pharaoh is totally oblivious to the pivotal role women play in the development of a nation. The Midrash on the first verse of Exodus – that we thought superfluous – provides an original meaning to the words "individual and his house": "When Israel descended to Egypt, Jacob stood up and said, 'These Egyptians are steeped in debauchery. He rose up and immediately married all of his sons to women.'"

The Midrash is intensifying an oft-quoted statement in the Talmud, "I always call my wife 'my house'" – since the bulwark of the home is the woman of the house. As the Jewish nation emerged from a family and family units are the bedrock of every society, it is clearly the women who are of extreme importance.

Pharaoh was blind to this. Apparently, he had no tradition of matriarchs like Sarah and Rebecca who directed the destiny of a national mission. For him, women were the weaker sex who were there to be used and taken advantage of. Hence Pharaoh attempts to utilize the Hebrew midwives as his "kapos" to do his

dirty work of actually murdering the male babies on the birthstools. To his surprise, the women rebelled: "And the midwives feared the Lord, so they did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do; they kept the male babies alive" (Exodus 1:17).

It goes much further than that. The Midrash identifies the Hebrew midwives as Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses and Aaron. The Midrash goes on to teach us that their husband and father Amram was the head of the Israelite court, and when he heard Pharaoh's decree to destroy all male babies, he ruled that Israelite couples refrain from bearing children. After all, why should men impregnate their wives only to have their baby sons killed!? Miriam chided her father: "Pharaoh was better than you are, my father. He only made a decree against male babies and you are making a decree against female babies as well."

Amram was convinced by his daughters' words – and the result was the birth of Moses, savior of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Perhaps the importance of women protectors of the household and guardians of the future of Israel is hinted at in the "anonymous" verse, "And a man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi" (Exodus 2:1). Why are the two individuals – Amram and Yocheved – not named? You will remember from the book of Genesis that it was Levi together with his brother Shimon who saved the honor of the family of Jacob by killing off the residents of Shechem, a gentile people who stood silently by while their leader raped and held captive Dina, daughter of Jacob. When Jacob criticizes them on tactical grounds, they reply, "Can we allow them to make a harlot of our sister?" With these words Chapter 34 of the book of Genesis ends; Levi and Shimon have the last word.

Moreover, we know from Jacob and his family that it is the wife who gave names to the children. Even more than Amram and Yocheved, true credit must go to the mother of Amram and the mother of Yocheved. Each of these women gave birth to children in the midst of black bleak days of Jewish oppression. Despite the slavery and carnage all around one mother gives her son the name Amram, which means "exalted nation"; the other mother gives her daughter the name Yocheved, which means "glory to God." These two women were seemingly oblivious to the low estate to which Judaism had fallen in Egypt; their sights were held high, upon the stars of the heavens which God promised Abraham would symbolize his progeny and the Covenant of the Pieces which guaranteed the Hebrews a glorious future in the Land of Israel. These two proud grandmothers from the

## Likutei Divrei Torah

tribe of Levi merited grandchildren like Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Pharaoh begins to learn his lesson when Moses asks for a three-day journey in the desert; Pharaoh wants to know who will go. Moses insists: "Our youth and our old people will go, our sons and our daughters will go – our entire households will go, our women as well as our men." (Exodus 10:8)

A wiser Pharaoh will only allow the men to leave; he now understands that he has most to fear from the women. And so Judaism establishes Passover, the festival of our freedom, as being celebrated by "a lamb for each house," with the women included in the paschal sacrificial meal by name no less than the men. And so the women celebrate together with the men – the four cups, the matza and the Haggadah – the Passover Seder of freedom.

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### Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

#### Remove Your Shoes: The Place You Stand Upon Is Holy Ground

I would like to begin my remarks by sharing a true story that I experienced. Some time ago, I was in Europe for the summer as a scholar in residence on a tour of different European cities. One of the countries we visited was Hungary. The tour arrived at the banks of the Danube River in Budapest, at what is called "The Shoe Memorial." A very famous sculptor created a formation of metal shoes secured to the ground along the Danube.

Up until 1944, Adolph Hitler had a peace treaty with Hungary. That is why the Hungarian Jews were not directly affected by the Holocaust until 1944. Jews in Poland and Germany and all over Europe were already rounded up for execution several years earlier, but Hungarian Jews initially escaped exportation because of Hitler's peace treaty with Hungary.

In 1944, Hitler broke the peace treaty, and it became open season on Hungarian Jews, who were deported to concentration camps in 1944 and 1945. Adolph Eichman was in charge of exporting and exterminating Hungarian Jewry. When the treaty was originally broken, there was a Fascist group in Hungary called the Arrow-Cross, which could not wait for Germany's exportations, and they started killing Jews themselves in Hungary itself.

They would line up Jews on the banks of the Danube River and mow them down. The Jews fell backwards into the river giving rise to the famous quote – the Blue Danube literally turned red! But before the Arrow-Cross murderers did that, they made the Jews take off their shoes. Shoes were precious in those

days, and they wanted to salvage the Jews' shoes for themselves.

To commemorate this horrible genocide, the above-mentioned sculptor went ahead and fashioned a twenty-foot section of the embankment with various shoes – of men, women, and children.

Our group went to this very moving site. I pointed out the irony that even though this was not the intention of the Arrow-Cross, "The place where we are standing is a makom kadosh (holy place)." Why did I call it a holy place? It is because any Jew who is killed simply because he is a Jew is a kadosh. He has died al pi Kiddush Hashem (as a martyr who sanctifies G-d's Name).

In this week's parsha, regarding a holy place, the pasuk says "Do not draw near, remove your shoes from your feet for the place which you stand upon is holy ground." (Shemos 3:5). It is ironic. In this particular place, by the banks of the Danube River, the Jews took off their shoes. I was not suggesting to our group that they should take off their shoes. But I made the comment that there is something else that we can learn from that incident where Moshe Rabbeinu was told to take off his shoes at the Burning Bush:

We all know the story. Moshe Rabbeinu saw a burning bush – one of the iconic images of the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim. The pasuk says, "And Hashem saw that Moshe turned to draw near and investigate..." (Shemos 3:4) Both the pasuk and Chazal make a big deal of the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu went to check it out. But let us ask: What is the big deal here? Wouldn't anyone seeing a burning bush that was not being consumed try to get a better look and check out what was happening? Of course they would! People run to view a burning building which defies no laws of nature. Here, a miraculous event was transpiring. Certainly, any person would want to go and investigate the matter!

The Sforno on that pasuk makes the following comment: "He went to see what was happening – l'his'bonen ba'davar (to contemplate upon the matter). Moshe was not just interested in the sight. L'his'bonen ba'davar means he wanted to comprehend "What does this mean? What is the significance of the phenomenon I am witnessing?" Moshe understood that he was being sent a message. The Ribono shel Olam was making an open miracle, which He does not do on a daily basis. "What is the Ribono shel Olam telling me?"

That was the greatness of Moshe Rabbeinu. He saw something noteworthy and it immediately prompted him to ask himself – What is the Ribono shel Olam trying to tell me?

The Ribono shel Olam was trying to tell Moshe that this burning bush, which was not being consumed, was going to represent the history of Klal Yisrael. We went down to Mitzrayim and the Egyptians tried to eradicate us, but we survived. This is something that has been going on for the last three thousand years. Whether it was the Egyptian exile, the Babylonian exile, the Greek exile, or the Roman exile; whether it was the destruction of the batei mikdash, whether it was the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the decrees of Tac'h v'Ta't (1648/1649), or whether it was the Holocaust, they have tried to eradicate us just like in Mitzrayim. BUT THE BUSH WAS NOT CONSUMED. That is the defining visual icon of Klal Yisrael. They can keep trying to burn us, but the bush will not be consumed. This is the message that Moshe Rabbeinu took out of this incident.

This tour in Hungary that I accompanied took place in July 2014. The previous March, there was a conference of European rabbis, who held a ceremony at the site of this Shoe Memorial, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the start of the deportation of Hungarian Jewry. The Kalover Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Taub, 1923-2018) was present at that ceremony. The Kalover Rebbe was a Hungarian rav, who was deported to Auschwitz. He survived the war and then became a Rebbe of Kalover Chassidim in Yerushalayim. He spoke at that ceremony commemorating what had happened there seventy years earlier!

The Kalover Chassidim have a niggun which many people may have heard. It is actually a Hungarian tune, without Jewish origin, but it has been adopted by Kalover Chassidim. The Kalover Rebbe got up at this anniversary commemoration and sang this niggun. It was incredibly moving that there were a group of young boys, ten- or eleven-year-old Hungarian boys, cheder boys with long payos, singing this song together with their Rebbe.

If there was ever an embodiment of "the bush could not be consumed," this was it! Seventy years earlier, the Fascists tried to eradicate Hungarian Jewry, along with the rest of world Jewry. And here we were, seventy years later. The old Kalover Rebbe sang that song with a local choir made up of the sweetest looking boys. At the end of this Hungarian song, the Kalover Rebbe and these little cheder boys launched into a soulful rendition of "Yibaneh haMikdash bim'hera b'yamenu" (May the Temple be rebuilt, speedily in our days).

It was so moving that even some of the Gentiles present broke into tears. The significance of that site is the pasuk in this week's parsha: "Remove your shoes from upon your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy ground." Here, after everything we

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experienced, kinderlach are learning Torah in Budapest. That is what the pasuk means "And the bush was not consumed."

### Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

In Parshat Shemot we are told how Moshe emerged from the palace of Pharaoh in search of his brethren.

What he saw was a tragic scene. An Egyptian task master was beating an Israelite and would have killed him if not for Moshe's heroic intervention.

On the second day, Moshe again went out and this time he saw Shnei Anashim Ivrim Nitzim, two Hebrews who were fighting against each other.

Again, Moshe intervened, and he said to the protagonist 'Why are you doing this?' and the answer was 'What? Are you going to kill me in the way that you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'

What Moshe saw was a tragic scene which sadly has repeated itself time and again in Jewish history at the very time when, our oppressors from without have threatened us, we have been divided within.

This is what happened in the run up to the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 when civil war was raging in Jerusalem at the very time when the Romans laid siege to our capital city.

And most recently, prior to the outbreak of war on the 7th of October 2023, there was so much tragic division in Israel which spilled over into the diaspora.

But since the commencement of this war, we are blessed with Jewish unity. In the midst of these dark clouds, it is a precious silver lining.

Let us guarantee that we preserve it well beyond the war.

In our Shabbat service for the Mincha afternoon prayer we say, 'Ata Echad V'Shimcha Echad' 'You God are One and Your name is one'.

'UmiK'Amcha Yisrael Goy Echad B'Aretz' – And who is like Your people Israel? One single united people on earth.'

Let us indeed guarantee that we remain a 'Goy Echad', a single united people for all time.

### Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

#### From Family to Nation - Omer Zilber

The transition from the Book of Bereishit to the Book of Shemot is profound and captivating. Bereishit can be seen as an

introduction to the four books that follow it. Structurally, it resembles a cone or a camera lens, starting with a broad, universal perspective and gradually narrowing its focus until it centers on one family. It begins with the universal mythos of Chaos and Creation—Adam, the emergence of humanity, and archetypal stories like the Tower of Babel and the Flood. From there, the focus shifts to Avraham, the father of many nations, whose descendants' destiny is already hinted at during Brit Bein HaBetarim, the Covenant Between the Pieces: "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years (Bereishit 15:13).

From Avraham, the story continues to Yitzchak, and finally, it settles on the family of Yaakov.

We know little about Adam, even less about Noach, but as the narrative progresses, the details multiply, culminating in six Torah portions dedicated to Yaakov's life—half of the Book of Bereishit. In the Book of Shemot, we encounter the emergence of a new central figure—Moshe—whose life story will weave through the remaining four books of the Torah.

This shift is not only a contrast between the life of Moshe and the chronicles of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. The Torah's lens moves from focusing on a single family to addressing an entire people—600,000 individuals.

The Torah serves as both the history and the legal code of the Jewish people. It speaks two languages: narrative and instructional. It masterfully combines a mythological, dramatic and foundational story with a detailed and structured legal system.

In Bereishit, the narrative genre dominates. In Vayikra and Devarim, the instructional genre prevails. Yet, all the books contain elements of both.

Bereishit introduces the reader to the key figures of the nation—the Patriarchs, the founders, the very foundation of the story. Shemot, in contrast, revolves around the formative narrative of the Jewish people—the Exodus from Egypt. This event is not only the cornerstone of Divine authority but also the moment of collective faith: "And they believed in God." Following this, the Torah begins to establish laws: what is permitted and what is forbidden; the Jewish calendar; core values, and moral principles.

The role of Parashat Shemot is transitional. It marks a sharp shift—both stylistically and substantively—from the chronicles of Avraham and Yaakov's family to the story of the Jewish people and the ethical framework that will define them.

Chapter 1 of Shemot sets the stage for the enslavement of the Israelites, describing their suffering and the breaking point that compels them to cry out to their God: "And their cry rose up to God." This highlights the human need for Divine salvation. Chapter 2 plants the seeds of leadership, introducing us to Moshe, the central figure of this unfolding drama. Chapters 3–5 move into the heart of the story: Moshe's rise to leadership, his confrontation with the people, and his resolute demand before Pharaoh: "Let My people go!"

The literary role of Parashat Shemot is pivotal. It shifts the reader's perspective from a familial to a national viewpoint, from the individual to the collective. It introduces us to structured political and judicial leadership, complete with rules and laws. Gone are the familial intrigues and sibling rivalries—although we may still encounter hints of them later. Instead, we see the emergence of a new order: a leader and prophet delivering the word of God to a vast and growing nation of 600,000 people making their historic journey from slavery to freedom and, ultimately, to the Promised Land.

The transition from a family of twelve brothers to a nation of 600,000 necessitates a narrative shift. The story becomes less detailed, more concise, and skips over significant periods—for example, the 38 years of wandering in the desert receive almost no elaboration. Yet, at certain points, the narrative pauses to reintroduce the family tree.

This occurs in Parashat Vayigash, just after the descent to Egypt; once again at the beginning of Parashat Shemot; in more detail in Parashat Va'era, and in other instances throughout the Torah. Phrases like "These are the names of the sons of Israel" or "These are the heads of their fathers' houses" anchor us back to the familial roots.

It seems as though the Narrator Himself felt a certain discomfort with the shift from family to nation. As the scope becomes grander and more impersonal, there is a need to remind us that this immense story of Moshe, the Ten Plagues, the Exodus, the splitting of the sea, and the giving of the Torah—all began with a family: "All the souls that came from the loins of Yaakov."

Do you remember Reuven with the mandrakes? Yehuda with the signet and the cords? Yosef, the dreamer turned viceroy of Egypt? These are their children and grandchildren. Soon, we will read mostly about Moshe. Occasionally, other individuals will appear—Yitro, Korach, Betzalel ben Uri, the spies, the tribal leaders—but the central narrative will speak in broad terms like "the children of Israel" or "the people."

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Before we delve into the thick of the Exodus story, we are reminded of the names of the children of Israel and the tales we recently read in Bereishit. These names and stories are the roots of the legendary group that will leave Egypt, receive the Torah, and eventually enter Canaan to establish a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In many ways, a people or a nation is an organic unit, a single entity. Yet it is also a collection of individuals. Much like a military unit, whose strength lies in its cohesion and teamwork, its success ultimately depends on the individual and mutual capabilities of each of its soldiers.

It has been more than 460 days since our brothers and sisters were kidnapped by Hamas. We have lost hundreds of siblings, and thousands more are in the process of recovering from physical and emotional injuries. Each one of them—and each one of us—is a person with a story, a family, his personal "mandrakes" or "signet and cords," his dreams...

The movement in Parashat Shemot—from the individual to the collective, from a family to a people—is a transition we are called upon to make even more keenly in our times. May we remember every face and name, every gaze, story, and legacy of each individual, even as we stand steadfast against enemies and challenges from within and without. [These words are written as Chanukah ends, with a heartfelt prayer that by the time they are published on the eve of Parashat Shemot, the hostages will have returned home.]

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### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

#### Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky

#### Goy Mikerev Goy: Becoming Ourselves

The redemption of the Jewish nation from Egypt is the bedrock of the Jewish faith. The more visible part of the process includes the incredible miracles associated with the redemption; miracles such as the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea, that would never be repeated again in history. These miracles serve as a foundation for the core beliefs of the Jewish people: i.e. Divine providence and Hashem's omnipotence. We therefore understand why these are a core part of the geulah process.

But the passuk describing the great and magnificent event of the Jewish people being taken out of Egypt adds another crucial point and states (Devarim 4:34), "Has G-d ever taken out a nation from within a nation through such great and astounding miracles...?" The phrase "a nation from within a nation" is a bit redundant. Obviously, redemption means to be freed from your enslaver, exploiter, etc. Chazal (Midrash Tehillim 107) give us two different

analogies illuminating the meaning of "a nation within a nation": 1) R' Avuha says, it is comparable to a calf in the mother's womb, that at the time of birth needs to be eased out. 2) R' Ibo says, it is like a goldsmith extracting the gold from the ore. Both of these descriptions, however, are not really conveying the extraordinary difficulty of the event. There is no mention of how strong and tough the Egyptians were; nor how great a miracle it was. Just what are we adding to the description of the great miracles and wonders when we say, "like a calf from the mother's womb" and "like gold from its ore"?

The Maharal (in Gevuros Hashem) describes another dimension of the geulas Mitzraim: when we think of the miracles associated with taking the Jewish people out of Egypt, we tend to focus on the difficulty of combating the Egyptians, the most powerful nation at that time. But there is a much deeper difficulty in the redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt. The Jewish people themselves had been subjugated and acculturated into the Egyptian society for two centuries. Two hundred years of being buried deep in Egyptian society had almost entirely erased any trace of a sense of being Jewish. As the Rambam (Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:3) says, "the roots planted by the Avraham had just about been uprooted". In order to have the process of redemption, there needed first to be an awakening of this sense of being Jewish.

"A nation within a nation" describes that conflicting duality of identity. When a fetus is in its mother's womb, it is in some sense part and parcel of the mother, while in some sense it is its own being. Its identity is a tug of war between these two identities. Therefore, Hashem had to take out "a nation from a nation".

This perspective helps us understand the two examples cited by the midrash - the fetus from the cow, and the gold from the ore. The gold locked into the ore is much harder to extract than the fetus from the mother. It requires breaking the ore to pieces and applying a tremendous amount of heat. But the gold is of an entirely different nature than the stone that it is bonded to, no matter how difficult to process it is to separate it out. On the other hand, the fetus in the mother's womb it is easier to separate out, but it is inherently of the same flesh and blood as is the mother. It takes a tremendous amount of self-awareness to perceive oneself as being an independent entity despite the fact that the fetus is identical in substance to the mother.

One can now understand the hardship of the Jews' suffering in Egypt, and the process of enslavement and labor imposed on them, as leading to this goal. They needed to come to the painful awareness that they are not, and

never will be, Egyptian. The real Egyptians see them as an alien insertion, and even after years of being such productive members of society they were being rejected. In the rejection of the Egyptians, the Jewish people found their own identity. It is almost identical to the birthing process where it is the powerful contraction of the mother that pushes the fetus out, many times unwillingly. Only then can the calf stand on its own feet and begin to realize who it is and what it is.

This is a timeless understanding of the relationship of the Jewish people with the nations that they find refuge in, and in whose societies they become enmeshed. At almost every junction we began to feel at home, and slowly became or tried to become absorbed in the host society. Whether it was Spain or Russia or Germany or any other country that we were hosted by, we slowly began to become integrated, or at least wanted to become integrated. And then inevitably, Hakadosh Boruch Hu arouses powerful forces in our host country, rejecting us.

These rejections are harsh and traumatic, beginning with the psychological aspect of being considered the outsider, to the horrendous sufferings visited upon us by many of these host countries. And it almost always ended in expulsion. As painful as they are they are, these are the forces that shape us as a nation.

Wandering for millennia in other countries, and being as talented and as easily adapting as we are, the danger of becoming absorbed in another culture is great. And once absorbed, we would chas v'shalom lose our own identity, eternally. But Hashem has promised that we will never disappear. Therefore, in golus after golus, Hashem begins a process of "goy mikerev goy", extracting "a nation from within a nation". The first step of geulah is to sense that indeed we are a nation apart from our host. Sometimes we are intensely cognizant of it, and sometimes Hashem needs to employ our host remind us that this is so.

Once we come out and recognize ourselves as being unique and an independent entity, the geulah has begun!

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### **Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam**

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#### **Never Lose a Holy Curiosity**

Moshe was pasturing the flocks of Yisro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flocks after the free pastureland, and he came to the mountain of G-d, to Horeb. An angel of HASHEM appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thorn bush, and behold, the thorn bush was burning with fire, but the thorn bush was not being consumed. So, Moshe said, "Let me turn now and see this

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great spectacle why does the thorn bush not burn up?" HASHEM saw that he had turned to see, and G-d called to him from within the thorn bush, and He said, "Moshe, Moshe!" And he said, "Here I am!" And He said, "Do not draw near here. Take your shoes off your feet, because the place upon which you stand is holy soil." (Shemos 3:1-5)

Why does the Holy Torah begin with the letter Beis and not Alef which is the first letter? Right from the very beginning the Torah and life is riddled with essential questions. Why is that so? Is this world and is the Torah an answer book or a question book?

Pardon the "secular" reference but I remember there used to be a game show, called "Jeopardy". The format, if I remember correctly, was a little odd. One would be given a piece of information and that needed to be assigned to the correct question. Fact: "Elizabeth!" Question: "Who was the last Queen of England?" That's how it goes!

Learning Rashi can be like that very often. He provides some important information and we are left to figure out: "What burning question is Rashi coming to answer?" The assumption is that if everything was clear then he would say nothing.

A simple case is the burning bush. Moshe is told to remove his shoes and the reason that is given is because, "the place upon which you stand is holy soil". Rashi adds here to the words "is holy soil (adama)": "The place". Now why is that necessary? The Sifsei Chachamim explains that there seems to be a confusion in the verse. The word for ground – "Adama" is feminine and yet it is referred to with a masculine pronoun "–Hu". Rashi clarifies that "Hu" is in reference to the "place" and not specifically to the earth in that place.

So, it goes with all the phenomena of this world. The universe is filled with myriads of facts and answers. What questions are they coming to answer? Who made this? What does it teach us? What is its purpose? An anonymous philosopher once stated, "There is nothing more irrelevant than the answer to a question that was never asked? Maybe now we can understand why the game was called "Jeopardy". If we fail to ask the right question then everything in the world is at risk of being rendered irrelevant! If we ask the right questions with enough genuine curiosity then everything has the possibility of becoming ultimately meaningful!

It is no mistake, therefore, that the beginning of the exodus, the initiation of the one who would lead the Jewish Nation not just out of Egypt but to Mount Sinai where we would receive the Torah, begins with a test of his



inquisitiveness. Moshe notices a burning bush that is blazing with fire but not being consumed by that fire. He is busy with his flock but he pauses to study this phenomenon and asks a simple question, "why does the thorn bush not burn up?" Only when HASHEM sees that his interest is piqued by this visage does He call out to Moshe.

The Ramchal writes in *Derech Etz Chaim*: "A man, most of his years are spent in thinking thoughts on his businesses, business of this temporary world. Why does he not put to heart even one hour also on thinking these other things "What is he? Why did he come to this world? Or what does the King of kings seek from him? What will be the end of his matter? ... "What did the early ones, the fathers of the world do that G-d desired in them? What did Moshe Rabeinu do? What did David, the Moshiaich Hashem do, and all the Gedolim who lived before us?"

Albert Einstein, the icon of secular Jewish genius, said, "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity."

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### Mizrachi Dvar Torah

**Rav Doron Perez**

#### Proactive, Not Passive

Moshe's name should have been 'Mashui – 'it was Pharaoh's daughter who took him out of the water and called him Moshe, but the word "Moshe" is from the active verb, even though he was passive and didn't do anything himself. Why does his name not reflect that?

So many times people say there is nothing they can do, that they are victims of circumstances. In the midst of the great murderer of Jews, Pharaoh, his own daughter defies him with wisdom and decides she will not allow Moshe to die in the bulrushes and draws him out. She makes a proactive decision not to be a victim of circumstances to draw him out and raise him like a son.

So too every one of us, as Daniel Shimon ben Sharon has been in captivity for many days, are going through difficult circumstances, and the question is: what do we do with what we are given. We are called upon to make a personal choice: are we going to be a victim of circumstances, inactive, complaining, or are we going to be protagonists and do everything in our power to be proactive and to make a difference?

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### Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn - Signs**

**I. Signs Regarding the Past and the Future** - In various places in Tanakh, we come across prophets and leaders who ask God for a sign, or *ot*. For instance, Gidon, in the book of *Shoftim*, asks: And he said to him: If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign [*ot*] that it is You that talks with me. (*Shoftim* 6:17)

Gidon is answered with a fire that goes up out of the rock and consumes the meat and the *matzot* that he had prepared as an offering. Afterwards, Gidon asks again, for signs via dew on a fleece of wool and then on the ground (*ibid.* 36-40).

Shaul, after having been anointed as king by Shmuel, also receives a series of signs to prove that God is indeed with him:

And let it be, when these signs [*otot*] come to you, that you do as your hand shall find; for God is with you. (*I Shmuel* 10:7)

So too in our *parasha*, Moshe receives three signs to demonstrate his trustworthiness to the people of Israel. He experiences two of them at the burning bush – his staff turning into a serpent and his hand becoming leprous. In contrast, God describes the third sign, turning the water of the river into blood, but Moshe does not actually experience it.

Indeed, when Moshe meets the people, the signs help his words to be accepted by them:

And Aharon spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moshe, and he did the signs [*otot*] in the sight of the people. And the people believed. (*Shemot* 4:30-31)

The word *ot* is also often used in the Torah to describe physical actions that show the connection between man or Israel and God. Thus it is stated about the rainbow:

I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign [*ot*] of a covenant between Me and the earth. (*Bereishit* 9:13)

So too regarding circumcision: And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a sign [*ot*] of a covenant between Me and you. (*Bereishit* 17:11)

The word "*ot*" is also used regarding *tefillin*: And it shall be for a sign [*ot*] to you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand has the Lord brought you out of Egypt. (*Shemot* 13:9)

So too in many other places.<sup>[1]</sup> These signs are not random; rather, there is a close connection between them and the messages they signify. Thus, the rainbow in the cloud expresses in precise fashion the meaning of peace (both through the form of the rainbow, and its appearance after the rain in a context reminiscent of the flood); circumcision symbolizes a sacrifice offered to God; and in the *tefillin*, the ideas that must be remembered are written explicitly, black on white.

In contrast, the signs given to Moshe in our *parasha* come to testify about the future. On the face of it, we are dealing with a completely different type of "sign" – not a sign that serves as a reminder about the past, but one that serves as proof about the future.

**II. Arbitrary or essential?** - Regarding the signs given to Moshe and others like them, the question may be raised: Does the content of the sign itself come to teach something to the prophet

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or the people? Or is there no particular significance to the content of the sign, and its entire importance lies in the fact that it proves the superiority of the prophet and his supernatural ability?

With regard to the leprosy that appeared on Moshe's hand, various commentators demonstrated that there is indeed meaning in the content of the sign. *Pesikta Zutarta* offers two explanations, one of which conveys a message to Moshe himself and the other to the people of Israel:

"And the Lord said furthermore to him: Put now your hand into your bosom... behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow" (*Shemot* 4:6). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You said: "But, behold, they will not believe me" (*Shemot* 4:1), but I know that they are believers, descendants of believers. For it is written: "And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (*Bereishit* 15:6). By your life, you will be afflicted with leprosy, for whoever slanders his fellow is afflicted with it, as it is stated: "This shall be the law of the leper [*metzora*]" (*Vayikra* 14:2) – he who slanders [*motzi ra*]. Therefore, "Behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow."

Another explanation: Because Israel was under the hand of the impure in Egypt, and in the future they will be purified. (*Pesikta Zutarta* 4:6)

The content of the sign can indeed be explained as relating to Moshe or to the people, for both of them were to see it.

It is certainly possible to suggest that the signs that Moshe was commanded to experience at the time of the burning bush contain a message directed to Moshe, for he performs them on his own, before entering the presence of the people. It is possible that Moshe as well needed persuasion and therefore he had to perform the signs. However, even then, one must ask whether it is the very power and greatness of God (which Moshe had already witnessed when he saw the bush burning without being consumed) that convinces Moshe to set off on the Divine mission, or whether it is something in the content of the signs that causes him to do so.

**III. "And everything is Yours"** - Rabbi S. R. Hirsch explains that the two signs come to show that all of nature, even things that seem to be entirely subject to human control, are also, in fact, subject to God's control:

What is a staff? The most natural emblem of man's mastery over nature. A stick, a staff has a double function (which has a corresponding double meaning in the root *nata* which means incline, to lean, and also to stretch over something). A staff is (a) an elongation of the hand by which a man supports himself on the ground and (b) an elongation and extension of the sphere of his power, and sign of his mastery. So the people are to be shown by Moshe: that, on which man leans and supports himself, and by which he commands, will, if and when God wishes it, change to the very opposite, to a snake. All animals attach themselves more or less to man, but the snake has enmity hidden within him towards man. Man runs away from the serpent. Hence: that One has sent you, who when He so wills, makes the very thing on which man



reckons he supports himself, and which serves him as a means of his mastery, rise up against him; and the reverse: that which now stands against him as a fearsome enemy force, changes at His will to an accommodating support and to an obedient tool in his hand. But just this proclaims your sender as God, as the one on whose will depends every coming moment, every moment of the future. (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, commentary to *Shemot* 4:5)

Rabbi Hirsch sees the serpent as an animal that is clearly not under man's control and the staff as a symbol of things that are under his control. In this way, God comes to show Moshe that even the most human things are subject to Him.

This message is sharpened by the sign of the leprous hand:

To place one's hand in one's bosom and thereby make it leprous, and to place it there again and thereby make it healthy, is by itself a sign that one is sent by God. It teaches, that not only the staff, but also the hand that holds and guides it, is in God's power. (Ibid., v. 7)

Rabbi Hirsch's words correspond well with the plain meaning of the words uttered to Moshe at the burning bush:

And the Lord said to him: Who has made man's mouth? or who makes a man dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak. (*Shemot* 4:11-12)

God is not subject to the laws of nature because it is He who created them. Thus, He is capable of bringing salvation even in a situation that seems to be lost, such as Israel's situation in Egypt.

According to Rabbi Hirsch, the essence of the sign performed with the staff is turning the staff, which represents man's control over the world, into a snake. According to this understanding, the signs are directed toward Moshe, who has qualms about God's mission on the grounds that he is not fit for it, as well as toward the people who may not believe in God's ability to take them out from such a great affliction.

**IV. "But you may rule over it" -** The *Or Ha-Chaim*, on the other hand, explains the sign of the staff in an almost opposite manner. According to him, the emphasis is not only on turning the staff into a serpent, but also on the opposite process – turning the serpent back into a staff. As usual, the *Or Ha-Chaim's* explanation, apart from its great originality, is also a practical and important guide in the service of God. He writes as follows: "And it became a serpent." This sign comes to hint that the forces of the *kelipa* ["husk"] relate to the serpent. Go out and learn from the primeval serpent that it represents "*sam*," something potentially poisonous. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 4:3)

The serpent was understood by the *Or Ha-Chaim* as symbolizing the evil inclination and the *sitra achra* ["the other side," i.e., the aspect of impurity] already in *Parashat Bereishit* [see [shiur there](#)]. Indeed, the serpent has been associated with the world of sin from the time of creation. He is the first to tempt and incite man to sin (*Bereishit*, chapter 3), thus symbolizing the root of the lust for sin.

This symbolism of the serpent appears in the *Or Ha-Chaim* in other places as well,<sup>[4]</sup> and plays a

central role in the understanding of our passage, as stated later in the *Or Ha-Chaim*:

God hinted to Moshe that his hands possessed the enormous power to neutralize the power of the serpent and turn it into a dry piece of wood. But when he lets go of it and casts it away, it turns back into a serpent, causing Moshe to flee from it. (Ibid.)

God demonstrates to Moshe that it is his grip on the staff that prevents the dry and harmless piece of wood from turning into the evil inclination. What does this mean? In contrast to Rabbi Hirsch, who interpreted the signs as coming to diminish man's actions in relationship to God's, the *Or Ha-Chaim* seems to see matters in a completely opposite way: *the signs come to magnify the significance of man's actions*.

When Moshe holds the staff, he does not pay attention to the potential inherent in it to serve as a serpent. The same is true about man in general. When he grasps the good, he does not notice that the very same good can turn into evil. The evil inclination is not something that acts on a person haphazardly and without discrimination.

However, man has the power to rule over it:

If you do well, shall it not be lifted up? and if you do not well, sin crouches at the door; and to you is its desire, but you may rule over it. (*Bereishit* 4:7)

As long as a person wages war against his evil inclination and holds it close and tight, he can use it as a staff that helps him in his ways and actions. But the moment he weakens his hold, the staff suddenly turns into an unbearable serpent:

"And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent." In a single moment it became a serpent. The words "on the ground" intimate that in the eyes of the serpent, the earth assumes great significance, as it is the source of its food and it is important to it. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

At this moment, the most mundane and physical things, like the dust of the earth, become precious and important – this is one of the evil inclination's modes of operation.

As stated, while for Rabbi Hirsch the essence of the sign lies in the staff's being turned into a serpent, for the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the message in the second half of the sign is no less significant, and perhaps even more so:

When God instructed Moshe: "Put forth your hand," He wished to show him that even though he had already lost control of what had been his staff, he still had the power to regain control over it and remove its power. (Ibid.)

Even if a person let go of the good and the evil inclination already reached its serpentine form, it is still within the person's power to go back and seize control of it. The *Or Ha-Chaim* spells out how this should be done, and finds important symbolism in the precise wording of Scripture:

When God instructed Moshe: "And take it by its tail," and not "And take it," he meant to say that the danger of a snake is when one grabs it by the tail. For if he wisely grabs it by the head and crushes it, there is no longer any danger from the tail. Therefore, God said to him: Grab it even by the tail without fear. And so it says: "And he laid hold of it," that is, he took hold of the nearest part of the snake without fear. And it became a staff when he took it into his hand. That is to say,

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when it touched Moshe's hand, it immediately lost its power, and became void of vitality. This is what is meant by: "And it became a staff in his hand." (Ibid.)

Grabbing a serpent by its head is scary and difficult, because the serpent bites; it has teeth and perhaps venom. In parallel fashion, confronting the evil inclination face to face is not always an easy task, and this can sometimes cast a person into great despair. For this reason, God gives Moshe a simple piece of advice, which we can also apply to ourselves – to grab the evil inclination by its tail. Not to start battling it face to face, but to come at it with guile and strategies.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* adds that just as the evil inclination immediately turns into difficult and complicated desires when one loosens his grip and loses control over it, the opposite is also true: as soon as one takes hold of it, it immediately turns back into a staff and is once again subject to his control.

The ability to control the evil inclination and to impose one's rational faculties over one's emotions and desires is a basic quality in the service of God in general, and in the work of building one's character and fighting the evil inclination in particular. And that is what God is teaching here through this sign that was given to Moshe and the people of Israel:

God taught Moshe many things with this, also that he should perform the sign itself for Israel. (Ibid.)

Moshe needs to understand that the decision to muster his mental faculties and stand before Pharaoh and Israel depends not on God, but on him. As long as he remains steadfast in his refusal, he will indeed have a hard time and will not be able to stand before Pharaoh. But when he fully believes and grabs hold of the evil inclination that prevents him from going on God's mission, he will enjoy success.

**V. Tanin or nachash?** - This interpretation of the *Or Ha-Chaim* can explain an interesting point regarding the similar, but subtly different, sign that Moshe and Aharon perform before Pharaoh in *Parashat Va'era*:

When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying: Show a wonder for you; then you shall say to Aharon: Take your staff, and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it become a *tanin*. (*Shemot* 7:9)

The signs in our *parasha* are performed by Moshe, and the staff turns into a *nachash*, "serpent." In the meeting with Pharaoh, Aharon performs the sign instead of Moshe, and the staff turns into a *tanin* rather than a *nachash*. The commentators struggle to explain the difference between a *tanin* and a *nachash*, with the majority (and there is a source for this already in the *midrashim*<sup>[5]</sup>) explaining that a *tanin* and a *nachash* are essentially the same thing, in one form or another.

If we follow the path of the *Or Ha-Chaim*, however, the explanation of this difference is simple. The essence of turning the staff into a serpent was to demonstrate man's ability to overcome his evil inclination. With Pharaoh, the exact opposite takes place – his evil inclination becomes part of him. At first he hardens his heart, but ultimately, God makes it happen from above. Moshe and Aharon have no interest in teaching

Pharaoh how to take control of his evil inclination, and therefore it is clear and simple why the staff turns into a different creature.

If we wish to take the matter one step further, we can try to explain the "sign" performed for Pharaoh based on the same principle. This is related to another difference between the two signs: In *Parashat Shemot*, Moshe is commanded to turn the serpent back into a staff, whereas with Aharon and Pharaoh, this stage is not mentioned. Apparently, there is little importance in turning the *tanin* back into a staff, and it is not part of the lesson God wishes to teach us by way of the sign. It seems that we can suggest that the *tanin* comes to symbolize Pharaoh – who is described in the book of *Yechezkel* as a great *tanin* in the river:

Speak, and say: Thus says the Lord God: behold, I am against you, Pharaoh King of Egypt, the great monster [*tanin*] that lies in the midst of his rivers, that has said: My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself. (*Yechezkel* 29:3)

Presumably, the great *tanin* is a big and scary creature. Perhaps, this is why the Torah explicitly states in *Parashat Bereishit* that even it, with all its majesty and greatness, was created by God:

And God created the great sea monsters [*taninim*]. (*Bereishit* 1:21)

The sign here comes to show Pharaoh that God created him and not the other way around – that is why the *tanin* was chosen, the creature to which Pharaoh likens himself. Thus, the purpose of the sign is to show that it is the Creator of the world who created Pharaoh. Now it is clear why turning the staff into a *tanin* suffices, without regard to turning it back.

Of course, Pharaoh does not understand the sign, and shows that he too has the power to create *taninim* – but God emphasizes that His *tanin* has the power to swallow up and destroy Pharaoh.

In this week's *shiur*, we explored the meaning of signs in general, and in particular we tried to understand the lesson we can learn from Moshe's sign of the serpent. (*Translated by David Strauss*)

<sup>[1]</sup> See *Shemot* 31:13; *Bamidbar* 17:3; 17:25; *Devarim* 28:46; *Yeshayahu* 19:20; *Yechezkel* 20:12; *Tehillim* 135:9; *Nechemia* 9:10.

<sup>[2]</sup> See, for example, *Bamidbar* 23:22.

<sup>[3]</sup> See *Pesikta Zutarta*, *Shemot* 7:9.

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The Jewish people are about to experience centuries of exile and eventual slavery in Egypt. They are certainly in danger of being destroyed both physically and spiritually. The rabbis taught us that by not forgetting their original names, by not completely becoming Egyptian in deed as well, the hope of the Jewish people to be redeemed and freed never died out. The names of their ancestors reminded them of their past and of the commitment of God to redeem them from their bondage and afflictions.

This experience of Egyptian exile imbedded within the Jewish world the importance of remembering our original names. For it was the existence and use of those names that prevented their extinction as a special and eternal people. Thus, in the introduction to the book of Shmot, the book of bondage and redemption, is the list of names of the sons of Yaakov, an eternal reminder of who the Jewish people really are.

Over the centuries, the Jewish people have continually struggled to retain their identity and sense of continuity through their names. In the Ashkenazic world it became customary to name children after deceased ancestors. This became a deeply emotional bond in families, ultimately leading to children being given multiple names to commemorate more than one ancestor. In the Sephardic tradition names are given to honor living grandparents and relatives. But, there also the sense of continuity and purpose is stressed in the granting of those names.

In more modern times Jews were given secular names as well to be used in general society. However, over the last few decades the use of exclusively Jewish or Hebrew names has become in vogue once again. So apparently there is a great deal involved in a name. Even in the non-Jewish world, the use of biblical names remains quite popular and widespread. People hunger for a connection to their past and such traditional, biblical, family names seem to provide a sense of immortality and continuity that flashy "cool" names cannot provide.

Names can therefore be an anchor to one's own self-worth and purpose in life. The Torah's insistence on recording the names of the sons of Yaakov – the eventual tribes of Israel – highlights this important fact of life and family to us. Perhaps this is what Midrash meant when it taught us that one of the causes of the redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage was "that they [the Jewish people] did not change their names [from Hebrew ones to Egyptian ones.]"

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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[CS – late breaking dvar torah]

[from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org>

to: ravfrand@torah.org

date: Jan 16, 2025, 9:43 PM

**Parshas Shemos**

**Dissension and Lashon Harah Undermine the Zechus of the Klal**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: # 1320 – Sitting Next to Someone Who is Davening Sh'moneh Esria –Is it Permitted? Good Shabbos!

**1. Dissension and Lashon Harah Undermine the Zechus of the Klal**

The Medrash says in the beginning of Sefer Shemos that Moshe saw the tremendous suffering that Klal Yisrael was experiencing. Moshe asked: What is the aveira (sin) of the Jewish people – more than any of the seventy nations – that they should need to endure such back-breaking labor? In effect, he asked a question which was a form of the age-old mystery of tzadik v'rah lo. (Why do the righteous suffer?)

Later, the pasuk relates that Moshe went out amidst his brethren and saw the fight between the Egyptian and the Jew: "He looked here and there and saw there was no man, and he smote the Egyptian." (Shemos 2:12) Subsequently, Moshe went out on the second day and saw two Jews fighting. He asked the attacker: "Why are you hitting your fellow man?"

to which the accused asked, "Who made you officer and judge over us? Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian?" The pasuk then says: "Moshe was very fearful and he said, "So now the matter is known." (Shemos 2:13-14)

The simple interpretation is that Moshe's statement "So now the matter is known" is that Moshe was alarmed that his killing of the Egyptian, which he thought was done in total secrecy, had become public knowledge, and the matter would eventually get back to Pharaoh, who would take punitive action against Moshe. However, Rashi brings a Medrash that Moshe's statement "So now the matter is known" is an answer to his earlier question. Moshe said that he now understood why the Jews in Mitzrayim were experiencing such a terrible exile and suffering: I now realize that there are "dilturin" (talebearers and squealers) amongst the Jewish people.

The Sefas Emes raises a question: Yesterday, Moshe had a question for which he had no answer: How could it be that Klal Yisrael is worse than all the seventy nations of the world? Why do they need to suffer so much? The next day he sees that they speak lashon harah and he claims, "Now I understand their exile and suffering! The Sefas Emes asks: How does this simple observation answer Moshe's incomprehensible theological problem?

The Sefas Emes answers that the point of the Medrash is to emphasize the tremendous severity of the aveira of lashon harah. Perhaps the Sefas Emes is saying that when Klal Yisrael functions as a tzibbur (united people), then, Moshe could not understand why they should be worse than any other nation. However, Moshe observed, "When I see that they speak lashon harah, then something happens – they no longer have unity and they cease to function as a tzibbur."

Initially, Moshe was looking at the phenomenon of the Jews' suffering from the perspective of the concept of "Kol Yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh." He could not understand the suffering because Klal Yisrael as a nation has so much zechus (merit) – why would they be suffering so much? But once Moshe realized that they spoke lashon harah – that destroys the unity of Klal Yisrael. Once that happens, the Heavenly decree is not directed at a tzibbur anymore. Hashem sees a bunch of individuals rather than a unified and holy people.

Dissension forfeits the status of a klal (community), which in turn forfeits the zechusim (merits) of the klal, such that the question "Why is Klal Yisrael suffering so much?" cannot be asked. They become just a bunch of individuals. Anything can happen to an individual. Once they are reduced to the status of individuals, the principle of 'tzadik v'rah lo' – as incomprehensible as it may seem – can be invoked to 'explain' suffering that we cannot quite understand. However, the principle of 'tzadik v'rah lo' does not apply to a tzibbur. The Torah promises "And it will be if you will hearken to the mitzvos that I command you... you will have rain, everything will be good, you will gather in your crops, etc., etc." As a nation, if you do the mitzvos, I am going to take care of you! Righteous individuals may suffer but not the nation as a whole, when it is righteous!

**2. The Zechus of Na'aseh V'nishma**

In Parshas Shemos, Hashem says: "And now, behold! The outcry of the Children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. And now, go and I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall take My people, the Children of Israel, out of Egypt." (Shemos 3:9-10). What is Moshe's reaction? "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11). When we hear that expression "Who am I to go before Pharaoh?" How do we understand it? Simply, we interpret it as "I am not up to the job. I am not worthy for this job. I don't have the skills for the job." In other words, Moshe is saying "Mi Anochi? — The problem is ME." However, Rashi interprets differently. Rashi explains Moshe's question as Mah zachu Yisrael she'ya'aseh lahem nes? "What zechus do THEY have that a miracle shall be done for THEM?"

The Sefas Emes comments on this apparent "switch." "Mi anochi?" implies that the problem is with 'me'. I am not worthy. But then Chazal

come along and say that Moshe is really saying that THEY are not worthy! What kind of zechus do THEY have that I should be able to take them out? So whose problem is it? Is it the problem of Moshe Rabbeinu or is the problem of the meritless nation? This is the question raised by the Sefas Emes.

The Sefas Emes answers with a beautiful interpretation: Moshe Rabbeinu wanted his brother Aharon to take the Jews out of Mitzrayim. Besides the fact that Aharon was older and Moshe was concerned about giving proper respect to his older brother, the Sefas Emes adds that Moshe knew that he and Aharon had two different types of nefashos (souls). The shoresh haneshama (root of the soul) of Aharon was chessed (kindness). He was the ohev shalom v'rodef shalom – the person who always tried to make peace amongst quarreling parties. He was beloved by everyone. When Aharon died, he was mourned by kol Beis Yisrael (the entire House of Israel). For lack of a better term, he was the “nice guy” – therefore everybody loved him. That was his shoresh neshama.

Moshe's shoresh neshama was not chessed. It was Torah. It was mishpat. He is the law giver. “I am the judge. I am the dayan. My shoresh neshama is the principle of “Yikov hadin es hahar” (Let justice penetrate through the mountain). That is why Moshe Rabbeinu said “Listen, Klal Yisrael is not worthy to go out based on the principles of din (justice). But if You (Hashem) have someone who represents chessed – someone who treats everyone nicely even though they may not be worthy of it – in his zechus, he can be the leader qualified to take an undeserving Klal Yisrael out of Mitzrayim.

“I – the man of truth and justice – am not the appropriate one to take undeserving Jews out of Mitzrayim.” Mah zechus yesh lahem (What merit do they have)? as Rashi says. It is not going to work! However, Aharon – the man of kindness and mercy – is the appropriate leader for this task. He will be able to take them out even if they are not deserving of such!

How does Hashem answer this challenge from Moshe? “For I will be with you – and this is the sign for you that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Mitzrayim, you will worship G-d on this mountain.” (3:12) Hashem responds to Moshe: You are worried that they don't have the zechusim? You are worried that you are the man of justice and they don't have the zechusim? They DO have the zechusim: How do they have the zechusim? It is because they are going to leave Mitzrayim and accept the Torah, saying the words “Na'aseh v'nishmah.” That is their zechus. So even though you are the ish hamishpat and even though you are the ish hadin, nonetheless Klal Yisrael will have the needed zechusim, based on their future actions.

The obvious question is that it has not happened yet. Is Hashem extending credit for what will be but has not yet transpired? This is sequentially inappropriate!

The answer, says the Sefas Emes, is that with Klal Yisrael you do not need to worry about sequence because who on earth says “Na'aseh v'nishmah” (we will do and then we will hear)? Who on earth says “I will write the check and then you fill in the amount!”? Nobody does that! Since Klal Yisrael exhibits this attribute of doing things out of sequence, that itself is a zechus and midah k'neged midah – correspondingly – I can judge them, not by what is happening now but by what will be in the future. Such is the zechus of Na'aseh v'nishmah. With this zechus, I can pay them now and then they will earn that payment in the future.

The Sefas Emes references a beautiful Medrash. The pasuk says, “Like the fruitful fragrant apple among the barren trees of the forest, so is my Beloved among the gods...” (Shir HaShirim 2:3). The Medrash comments “Just as with the apple tree the fruit emerges before its leaves, so too Israel uttered first ‘we will do’ before ‘we will hear.’” Klal Yisrael is like the apple tree. Although usually a fruit tree gives out the blossom and then comes the fruit, an apple tree reverses that sequence. The Medrash notes that so too the Jewish nation reversed the normal sequence and committed themselves to action (na'aseh) before even hearing the instructions (nishma).

Apropos to this attribute, the Ribono shel Olam says “I am not judging them like they are now (while still in Mitzrayim). I am judging them like

they are going to be (at Har Sinai) and therefore they have that zechus already.

This is a tremendous lesson regarding how we need to view people. It is a lesson for parents, for teachers, for Rabbeim, and for any person who leads others: Don't judge people by how they are just now. Try to project how they can be in the future.

Last weekend (January 2017), I was at a convention for a wonderful organization called Partners in Torah. This organization makes ‘shiduchim’ between people who are frum and at least know somewhat how to learn and Jews who are in far off places who have some desire to pair up with a Torah learning partner. They have found such people in far-flung places like Whitefish, Montana and even in Saudi Arabia – ALL over the place! These phone or Zoom “Chavrusas” inspire both of these “partners in Torah” and certainly increase the religious observance of those who are being exposed to Torah study for the first time in their lives. Many even become Shomer Shabbos and more. Over 70% of such dispersed and often-unaffiliated Jews increase their mitzvah observance in some way by virtue of the fact that they have a once-a-week hourly Torah learning phone conversation with a religious Jew who lives in Boro Park, Baltimore, or Lakewood. It is an amazing thing – someone in Arkansas and someone in Monse are learning b'Chavrusa!

There were several hundred people at this convention. They were made up of heimeshe people; people with streimlach (worn by Chassidic Jews on special occasions), people with black hats and people with kipot serugot (knitted yarmulkas) – all of whom were F.F.B. – frum (Torah observant) from birth. Then there were also people there who had ‘become frum.’ They looked like the above-mentioned frum people but if you spent a little time with them, you could detect right away that these people were Baalei Teshuva. And then there were people there who were literally ‘right off the boat.’ These people may have had long hair. One fellow wore a yarmulka on Shabbos but on Motzai Shabbos he already took off his yarmulka. There were men with earrings, the whole gamut.

You might look at some of these people and ask yourself: What is going to be with this person? You think this fellow has no connection to the life of a Ben Torah. But this is the kind of person who may be wearing a black suit and be groomed like a typical Yeshiva bochur a year from now. This is the koach (strength) of Na'aseh v'nishma. That is the koach of “You shall serve Elokim upon this mountain.” (Shemos 3:12).

The Ribono shel Olam is telling Moshe Rabbeinu something that perhaps Moshe needs to know as a leader of the Jewish people: Don't look at them now. Look at what can be. Hashem says to already credit them with the zechusim.

Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld was one of the grandfathers of the Baal Teshuva movement. There is a beautiful book about him called Reb Shlomo: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld (Judaica Press; 2008) His koach – this was in the 1960s – was that he was able to look at a person (many of whom were hippies or high on drugs or whatever) and he would not see the person who was sitting in front of him but he would see what could be with this person. That is the koach of “You shall serve Elokim upon this mountain.” and that is what Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Moshe.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion...A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117 0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Permission is granted to redistribute, but please give proper attribution and copyright to the author and Torah.org. Both the author and Torah.org reserve certain rights. Email copyrights@torah.org for full information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/learn@torah.org> (410) 602-1350 ]

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**Who Am I?**  
**Shemot**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

Moses' second question to God at the Burning Bush was, 'Who are You?'. He asks God in the following way:

"So I will go to the Israelites and say, 'Your fathers' God sent me to you.' They will immediately ask me what His name is. What shall I say to them?"

Ex. 3:13

God's reply, Ehyeh asher ehyeh, wrongly translated in almost every Christian Bible as something like "I am that I am," deserves an essay in its own right.[1]

Moses' first question, though, was, *Mi anochi*, "Who am I?"

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" said Moses to God. "And how can I possibly get the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Ex. 3:11

On the surface the meaning is clear. Moses is asking two things. The first: who am I, to be worthy of so great a mission? The second: how can I possibly succeed?

God answers the second. "Because I will be with you." You will succeed because I am not asking you to do it alone. I am not really asking you to do it at all. I will be doing it for you. I want you to be My representative, My mouthpiece, My emissary and My voice.

God never answered the first question. Perhaps in a strange way Moses answered himself. In Tanach as a whole, the people who turn out to be the most worthy are the ones who deny they are worthy at all. The Prophet Isaiah, when charged with his mission, said, 'I am a man of unclean lips' (Is. 6:5). Jeremiah said, 'I cannot speak, for I am a child' (Jer. 1:6). David, Israel's greatest king, echoed Moses' words, 'Who am I?' (II Samuel 7:18). Jonah, sent on a mission by God, tried to run away. According to Rashbam, Jacob was about to run away when he found his way blocked by the man/angel with whom he wrestled at night (Rashbam to Gen. 32:23).

The heroes of the Bible are not figures from Greek or any other kind of myth. They are not people possessed of a sense of destiny, determined from an early age to achieve fame. They do not have what the Greeks called *megalopsychia*, a proper sense of their own worth, a gracious and lightly worn superiority. They did not go to Eton or Oxford. They were not born to rule. Instead, they were people who doubted their own abilities, who became heroes of the moral life against their will. There were times when they felt like giving up. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah reached points of such despair that they prayed to die. But there was work to be done – God told them so – and they did it. It is almost as if a sense of smallness is a sign of greatness. So God never answered Moses' question, "Why me?" but over time the answer revealed itself.

Still, there is another question within the question. "Who am I?" can be not just a question about worthiness. It can also be a question about identity. Moses, alone on the mountain, summoned by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, is not just speaking to God when he says those words. He is also speaking to himself. "Who am I?"

There are two possible answers. The first: Moses is a prince of Egypt. He had been adopted as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter. He had grown up in the royal palace. He dressed like an Egyptian, looked and spoke like an Egyptian. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from some rough shepherds, they went home and told their father, "An Egyptian saved us" (2:19). His very name, Moses, was given to him by Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:10). It was, presumably, an Egyptian name (in fact, 'Moses', as in 'Ramses', is the ancient Egyptian word for "child". The etymology given in the Torah, that Moses means "I drew him from the water," tells us what the word suggested to Hebrew speakers). So the first answer is that Moses was an Egyptian prince.

The second was that he was a Midianite. For although he was Egyptian by upbringing, he had been forced to leave. He had made his home in Midian, married a Midianite woman - Tziporah, daughter of a Midianite priest - and he had been "content to live" there, quietly as a shepherd. We tend to forget just how many years he spent there. He left Egypt as a young man and was already eighty years old at the start of his mission when he first stood before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:7). He must have spent the overwhelming majority of his adult life in Midian, far away

from the Israelites on the one hand and the Egyptians on the other. Moses was a Midianite.

So when Moses asks, "Who am I?" it is not just that he feels himself unworthy. He feels himself uninvolved. He may have been Jewish by birth, but he had not suffered the fate of his people. He had not grown up as a Jew. He had not lived among Jews. He had good reason to doubt that the Israelites would even recognise him as one of them. How, then, could he become their leader? More penetratingly, why should he even think of becoming their leader? Their fate was not his. He was not part of it. He was not responsible for it. He did not suffer from it. He was not implicated in it.

What is more, the one time he had actually tried to intervene in their affairs – he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who had killed an Israelite slave, and the next day tried to stop two Israelites from fighting one another – his intervention was not welcomed. "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" they said to him. These are the first recorded words of an Israelite to Moses. He had not yet dreamed of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged.

Consider, now, the choices Moses faced in his life. On the one hand he could have lived as a prince of Egypt, in luxury and at ease. That might have been his fate had he not intervened. Even afterward, having been forced to flee, he could have lived out his days quietly as a shepherd, at peace with the Midianite family into which he had married. It is not surprising that when God invited him to lead the Israelites to freedom, he resisted.

Why then did he accept? How did God know that he was the man for the task? One hint is contained in the name he gave his first son. He called him Gershom because, he said, "I am a stranger in a foreign land" (Ex. 2:22). He did not feel at home in Midian. That was where he was, but not who he was.

But the real clue is contained in an earlier verse, the prelude to his first intervention. "When Moses was grown, he began to go out to his own people, and he saw their hard labour" (Ex. 2:11).

These people were his people. He may have looked like an Egyptian but he knew that ultimately he was not. It was a transforming moment, not unlike when the Moabite Ruth said to her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth was un-Jewish by birth. Moses was un-Jewish by upbringing. But both knew that when they saw suffering and identified with the sufferer, they could not walk away.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called this a covenant of fate, *brit goral*. It lies at the heart of Jewish identity to this day. There are Jews who believe and those who don't. There are Jews who practise and those who don't. But there are few Jews indeed who, when their people are suffering, can walk away saying, This has nothing to do with me.

Maimonides, who defines this as "separating yourself from the community" (*poresh mi-darchai ha-tsibbur*, *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:11), says that it is one of the sins for which you are denied a share in the world to come. This is what the Haggadah means when it says of the wicked son that "because he excludes himself from the collective, he denies a fundamental principle of faith." What fundamental principle of faith? Faith in the collective fate and destiny of the Jewish people.

Who am I? asked Moses, but in his heart he knew the answer. I am not Moses the Egyptian or Moses the Midianite. When I see my people suffer I am, and cannot be other than, Moses the Jew. And if that imposes responsibilities on me, then I must shoulder them. For I am who I am because my people are who they are. That is Jewish identity, then and now.

[1] I expand on this within my books *Future Tense* and *The Great Partnership*.

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## The Power of Blessings and Curses

### Revivim Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The power of blessings is greater than the power of curses \* A parent's blessing for their child has a particularly strong impact \* Parents should strive to bless their children, especially before their death \* The Torah prohibits cursing someone, wishing for their death, illness, or other

misfortune \* In principle, it is allowed to curse a wicked person who has sinned against you \* However, due to the danger, it is preferable not to use curses \* Despite the fact that curses have the power to cause harm, it is better not to fear them

Q: We learned in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayechi, about Jacob's blessings to his sons, and to Ephraim and Manasseh. From this, we see that blessings have power. But one could ask: since all blessings come from God, if it is God's will to bless someone, they will be blessed, and if it is not His will, they will not be blessed. What, then, is the value of the blessings of the righteous, or the parents?

A: Since God created man in His image, He granted man's speech the power to influence events in this world, and in the higher realms. Therefore, a curse from a person can harm, and a blessing from a person can cause goodness.

When a person sins, their status is damaged, but their situation is often still undecided. When someone curses them, the curse targets the flaw within them, and may tip the balance. On the other hand, when a person performs mitzvot, they accumulate merits, but often, their situation remains in balance. When they are blessed, a path is opened for God's blessing to descend upon them. Blessing (in Hebrew, bracha) indicates 'adding' and 'abundance', while a curse (k'lalah) signifies 'reduction', and 'deficiency'.

The power of blessings is greater than the power of curses, as our Sages said: "A good measure is always greater than a measure of punishment" (Sotah 11a).

The Blessings of Noah, Isaac, and Jacob for Their Children

A parent's blessing for their children has a particularly powerful effect, and when the parents are righteous, their blessing has an even stronger influence. This is why the curse that Noah pronounced upon his son Ham and his grandson Canaan, as well as the blessing he gave to Shem and Japheth, had an effect on them, and their descendants. As it is written: "And he said, 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.' And he said, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.'" (Genesis 9:25-27).

Similarly, when Isaac, our father, was about to bless his eldest son Esau, his mother Rebecca feared that the blessing would be given to one who was not worthy of it, and she instructed Jacob to receive the blessing that was truly meant for him. Even after Isaac discovered that he had been tricked and blessed Jacob, he understood that his blessing had already taken effect on Jacob (Genesis 28:1-6).

Likewise, when Jacob, our father, blessed the sons of Joseph, he carefully placed his right hand upon Ephraim, as he had the divine insight that Ephraim, the younger one, would surpass Manasseh (Genesis 48:14-20). And just before his death, Jacob was careful to bless his sons in the appropriate and specific manner for each one, as it says: "And he blessed them, each according to the blessing he gave them." (Genesis 49:28).

Parents' Blessings

Not only do special righteous individuals have the power to bless their children, but all parents have a unique power to bless their children. Since parents raise their children with love and care, and with the intention to improve their lives, they act as a channel for the blessing to flow to their children. Therefore, their blessing carries significant weight. Furthermore, because they gave birth to their children, it was decreed from Heaven that they be the conduits of blessings for their children.

Because the blessings of parents have special power, many parents have the custom of blessing their children before significant events, such as weddings, entering school, military service, receiving a job, or traveling abroad. Many parents also bless their children on Friday night, as this is a special time for blessings, when the Shabbat enters with peace for Israel, and even the accusers are silenced, bringing joy and serenity, and blessing is added to the world.

Many parents also bless their children and grandchildren on the eve of Yom Kippur, when the heart is open to repentance, and in general, the

blessing they give their children and grandchildren encourages them to return to repentance, and strengthen their commitment to the Torah and mitzvot (Mateh Ephraim 589:2; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 143:16).

Blessing Parents before Their Death

It is also fitting for parents to strive to bless their children before their death, as before a person dies, their soul is freed from the bonds of the body and is purified, and therefore, they have additional strength to bless (Sforno, Genesis 27:2; Radal). Our Sages also said: "You find that the righteous bless their children at the time of their death, as Isaac said to Esau, 'I will bless you before the Lord, before I die.' Therefore, when Jacob fell ill, Joseph took his two sons and brought them to his father to be blessed" (Tanchuma Vayechi 5).

Since a blessing said before death has great influence, parents who bless their children before their death are showing kindness to them. Even the children who come to their parents to receive their blessing before their death are repaying their parents with kindness, as they demonstrate their desire to continue their parents' legacy (Ma'avar Yabok, Emerei No'am 28).

What Is a Blessing?

A blessing that a person gives to another in their presence, contains a prayer to God, along with preparing the recipient to receive the blessing. When the person being blessed hears the blessing, their heart opens to accept it, and the blessing they receive becomes a conduit through which Divine abundance can flow to them. Therefore, a blessing combines both prayer, and spiritual action, to determine the future (see, Sefer Ha'Ikarim 4:19).

A Blessing between People

Even a blessing from one person to another has influence. As our Sages said: "Never let the blessing of an ordinary person seem insignificant to you, for two great leaders of the generation blessed them, and it was fulfilled. These are David, and Daniel" (Megillah 15a).

The power of a blessing is so great, that it can save from destruction. As it is written: "And the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name be famous in Israel.'" (Ruth 4:14). Our Sages explained that, thanks to this blessing, many generations later, the descendants of David were saved when Athaliah arose to destroy them (Ruth Rabbah 7:15).

Likewise, our Sages instructed that all participants in a circumcision should bless the infant: "Just as he entered the covenant, so may he enter into Torah, marriage, and good deeds" (Shabbat 137b).

Prohibition of Cursing

It is prohibited by the Torah to curse someone, wishing for their death, illness, or other misfortune. Even if the person does not hear the curse, it is still forbidden to curse, as it is written: "You shall not curse the deaf" (Leviticus 19:14). Two reasons are given for this prohibition: First, a curse corrupts the soul of the one who curses, filling them with negative traits such as hatred, anger, and vengeance (Maimonides, Book of Commandments, Negative Commandment 248).

Second, a person is created in the image of God, and one of the main expressions of this image is the ability to speak. Thus, a person's speech has power in both this world, and the Heavenly realms. Therefore, when one curses another, they harm them in this world, and cause accusations to arise against them in the Heavenly realms (Sefer HaChinuch 431; Zohar, Section 3, 85:1).

The Harm of Cursing

Generally, a person is judged according to their actions, not according to the curses cast upon them. Therefore, usually, when someone acts righteously, curses do not harm them, as it is said: "A curse without cause, will not come to rest" (Proverbs 22:6). However, in times of danger, if a person has a flaw, even if they are righteous, the curse may target that flaw, and amplify negative judgments against them (see, Zohar, Section 1, 175:1; Menorat HaMaor 20; Ohr HaChaim BaMidbar 23:8).

Our Sages also explained in the Mishnah (Makkot 11:1) that those who kill accidentally and need to flee to a city of refuge, are only freed when the High Priest dies. The mothers of the High Priests would provide food and clothing to the accidental murderers, so they would not pray

for the death of their sons. Our Sages asked: “What does it matter if they pray, for a curse without cause will not come to rest?” Our Sages answered that even the High Priests had some measure of guilt, as they did not pray enough for their generation to avoid accidental murder. This shows that a curse can harm even those who have not sinned, particularly when their flaw is connected to the reason they were cursed.

#### Curses Generally Return to the One Who Curses

In principle, it is permitted for a person to curse a wicked person who has sinned against them (Sanhedrin 85a). We also find that Prophets and Sages cursed those who sinned against them. However, because of the danger, it is better to avoid using curses. When a curse is not fully justified, it may return to the one who uttered it. Our Sages said (Sanhedrin 48b) that it is better to be among the cursed, than among those who curse. This was demonstrated when King David cursed Joab, the son of Zeruiah, for killing Abner, the general of Israel’s army, and hindering the process of uniting the tribes of Israel under David’s rule. David said: “I am innocent, and my kingdom is innocent, before the Lord forever from the blood of Abner ben Ner. May the curse fall upon the head of Joab and all his family, and may there not be a man cut off from the house of Joab who is a leper, or who holds a weapon, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread.” (2 Samuel 3:28-29). Our Sages said: “All the curses that David placed upon Joab were fulfilled in the descendants of David.” This means that when his descendants sinned, the curse of David came back to haunt them, and caused them to be punished.

#### Should One Fear Curses?

Although curses have the power to cause harm, it is better for a person not to fear them, because the more one fears them, the greater their harmful effect will be. Rather, one should strengthen themselves to follow the ways of God, for this is the most beneficial thing for protection from curses. As God commanded Israel in the section where all forms of sorcery are prohibited: ‘You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 18:13), and through this, you will be attached to life, and saved from all sorcerers and their curses.

Furthermore, when a person knows that the curses directed at them are unjust, it is appropriate for them to strengthen their faith that these curses will turn into good, and will not harm them. The more they strengthen themselves in this belief, the more it will indeed be so. Not only that, but the curses themselves will fall back upon the head of the one who uttered them, as it is said: ‘A curse without cause will not come to rest’ (Proverbs 26:2). The commentators explain there that if the curse is unjust, it returns to the head of the one who cursed (Rashi, Rabbag, and Metzudat David).

And thus, the Meiri (on Proverbs 26:2) wrote that a wise person should not fear rebuking someone for fear of being cursed, because ‘God will turn the curse into a blessing for him,’ and the curse will return to the one who uttered it.”

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#### Parshat Shemot: Women and the Exodus

#### Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; each individual and his house came.” (Exodus 1:1)

The book of Exodus opens with a throwback to that which we already know from the last portions of the book of Genesis: the names of Jacob’s children and the seventy Israelite souls – the Jewish households – who came to Egypt. Why the repetition?

The great commentator Rashi attempts to explain that “even though Jacob’s progeny were counted by name previously, the names are here repeated to show us how beloved they were...” (Rashi ad loc.). However, these first few verses of the book of Exodus are actually a prelude to the enslavement in Egypt, the tragedy of the first Jewish exile. I understand a loving recount when times are joyous but I find such mention superfluous when we are facing suffering and tragedy.

What is more, Pharaoh makes a striking distinction between males and females when he orders Jewish destruction: “And Pharaoh commanded

his entire nation saying, every male baby born must be thrown into the Nile and every female baby shall be allowed to live.” (Exodus 1:22)

Pharaoh was apparently afraid to keep the Israelite men alive, lest they wage a rebellion against him; he seems to be fairly certain that the women will marry Egyptian men and assimilate into Egyptian society. However, logic dictates a totally opposite plan. Fathers often love and leave without having had any influence upon their progeny; indeed, many individuals don’t even know who their biological fathers are! Offspring are far more deeply attached to the mother in whose womb they developed and from whose milk they derive nourishment. Genocide might have been much easier for Pharaoh had he killed off the women and allowed the men to continue to live.

I would argue that although our Bible understands the critical importance of women – we have already seen how Abraham is the first Jew because he is the first individual who is introduced together with his wife who has her own name and identity – Pharaoh is totally oblivious to the pivotal role women play in the development of a nation. The Midrash on the first verse of Exodus – that we thought superfluous – provides an original meaning to the words “individual and his house”: “When Israel descended to Egypt, Jacob stood up and said, ‘These Egyptians are steeped in debauchery.’ He rose up and immediately married all of his sons to women.”

The Midrash is intensifying an oft-quoted statement in the Talmud, “I always call my wife ‘my house’” – since the bulwark of the home is the woman of the house. As the Jewish nation emerged from a family and family units are the bedrock of every society, it is clearly the women who are of extreme importance.

Pharaoh was blind to this. Apparently, he had no tradition of matriarchs like Sarah and Rebecca who directed the destiny of a national mission. For him, women were the weaker sex who were there to be used and taken advantage of. Hence Pharaoh attempts to utilize the Hebrew midwives as his “kapos” to do his dirty work of actually murdering the male babies on the birthstools. To his surprise, the women rebelled: “And the midwives feared the Lord, so they did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do; they kept the male babies alive” (Exodus 1:17).

It goes much further than that. The Midrash identifies the Hebrew midwives as Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses and Aaron. The Midrash goes on to teach us that their husband and father Amram was the head of the Israelite court, and when he heard Pharaoh’s decree to destroy all male babies, he ruled that Israelite couples refrain from bearing children. After all, why should men impregnate their wives only to have their baby sons killed!? Miriam chided her father: “Pharaoh was better than you are, my father. He only made a decree against male babies and you are making a decree against female babies as well.”

Amram was convinced by his daughters’ words – and the result was the birth of Moses, savior of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Perhaps the importance of women protectors of the household and guardians of the future of Israel is hinted at in the “anonymous” verse, “And a man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi” (Exodus 2:1). Why are the two individuals – Amram and Yocheved – not named? You will remember from the book of Genesis that it was Levi together with his brother Shimon who saved the honor of the family of Jacob by killing off the residents of Shechem, a gentile people who stood silently by while their leader raped and held captive Dina, daughter of Jacob. When Jacob criticizes them on tactical grounds, they reply, “Can we allow them to make a harlot of our sister?” With these words Chapter 34 of the book of Genesis ends; Levi and Shimon have the last word.

Moreover, we know from Jacob and his family that it is the wife who gave names to the children. Even more than Amram and Yocheved, true credit must go to the mother of Amram and the mother of Yocheved. Each of these women gave birth to children in the midst of black bleak days of Jewish oppression. Despite the slavery and carnage all around one mother gives her son the name Amram, which means “exalted nation”; the other mother gives her daughter the name Yocheved, which means “glory to God.” These two women were seemingly oblivious to the low estate to which Judaism had fallen in Egypt; their sights were



held high, upon the stars of the heavens which God promised Abraham would symbolize his progeny and the Covenant of the Pieces which guaranteed the Hebrews a glorious future in the Land of Israel. These two proud grandmothers from the tribe of Levi merited grandchildren like Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Pharaoh begins to learn his lesson when Moses asks for a three-day journey in the desert; Pharaoh wants to know who will go. Moses insists: "Our youth and our old people will go, our sons and our daughters will go – our entire households will go, our women as well as our men." (Exodus 10:8)

A wiser Pharaoh will only allow the men to leave; he now understands that he has most to fear from the women. And so Judaism establishes Passover, the festival of our freedom, as being celebrated by "a lamb for each house," with the women included in the paschal sacrificial meal by name no less than the men. And so the women celebrate together with the men – the four cups, the matza and the Haggadah – the Passover Seder of freedom.

Shabbat Shalom

While Moshe Rabbeinu attended to the sheep, what rules applied to his own meals?

### **Eating Before Feeding Your Animals**

**By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Question #1: Coffee and the concierge

"Was Noach permitted to have his morning coffee before he brought all the animals breakfast?"

Question #2: Dog's best friend

"I would like to eat an apple. Must I first feed Fido?"

Question #3: Fish on Shabbos

"On Shabbos, may I make kiddush before I feed the fish?"

Introduction

Considering Moshe Rabbeinu's responsibilities to his "flock" provides an opportunity to discuss the ruling of the Gemara (Berachos 40a; Gittin 62a) that one may not eat without first feeding his animals. This is based on the Torah's statement in the second paragraph of Shema, And I will provide grass in your field for your animals, and only subsequently does the Torah say, and you will eat and be satisfied (Devarim 11:15).

Analyzing the mitzvah

There are numerous questions about this mitzvah:

Is this required min hatorah or miderabbanan?

Are we forbidden to eat only a full meal, or even just a snack?

May I quench my thirst before I provide water or feed my animal? In other words, does the prohibition apply only to eating or also to drinking?

Does this mitzvah apply on Shabbos and Yom Tov?

These and other questions will be addressed in the course of this article.

Torah or rabbinic?

Let us start with a basic question: Is the obligation to feed my animals before I eat min hatorah or miderabbanan?

A prominent early acharon, Rav Yaakov Reischer (Shu"t Shevus Yaakov 3:13), rules that, although the Gemara cites a pasuk as the source for this halachah, it is required only as a rabbinic mitzvah, and the pasuk is an allusion, what Chazal call an *asmachta*. Although I have seen authorities quoted as holding that the requirement is min hatorah (see, for example, Sedei Chemed Volume I, page 40), I have not yet found anyone who rules this way clearly. Quite the contrary, the Rambam (Hilchos Avodim 9:8) states that feeding your animals before you eat is an exemplary way to act, but is not required.

Of course, this leads to another question: How can the Rambam rule that feeding your animals before you eat is merely an exemplary act, when the Gemara prohibits eating before you feed your animals? The Nishmas Adam (5:11) raises this question, answering that the Rambam, presumably, had a variant text of the Gemara, and suggests what he thinks that text was.

A full meal or a snack?

Are we forbidden to eat only a full meal before feeding our animals, or are we prohibited to eat even a snack?

This question is subject to a dispute among early authorities, which appears to be based on how one reads and understands the pertinent passage of Gemara. The two times the Gemara cites this mitzvah in our published editions, it quotes varying and conflicting passages. In Berachos, the Gemara reads, It is prohibited to eat before you provide food for your animals, whereas in Gittin the passage reads, It is prohibited to taste [food] before you provide food for your animals. In Chazal's lexicon, eating usually implies a full meal, whereas *te'imah*, tasting, implies a snack. Thus, the text in Berachos (eat) implies that the prohibition is limited to eating a full meal, but that one may eat a snack even though he has not yet fed his animals. On the other hand, the version in Gittin (taste) implies that even a snack is prohibited. However, I found variations on the Gemara texts, including versions in both places that prohibit tasting, and versions in both places that only prohibit eating. Most significantly, both the Rif and the Rosh, two of the most preeminent authorities, state in their comments to the passage in Berachos that tasting is prohibited. It seems that they prohibit even snacking prior to feeding one's animals, which is also implied by the Beis Yosef (Orach Chayim 167).

The two major commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch seem to dispute whether one may snack prior to feeding one's animals -- the Taz (167:7) expressly permits snacking before feeding your animal, whereas the Magen Avraham (167:18) implies that it is prohibited.

An in-between meals snack

Some authorities endeavor to resolve the inconsistency between the two Talmudic versions of the text. The Nishmas Adam suggests that the two versions are not contradictory. It is prohibited to eat a meal without feeding your animal first, and that one who is planning to sit down to a meal may not taste anything of the meal without first feeding his animals. However, it is permitted to eat only a small snack prior to feeding your animals, when that is all one intends to eat. This approach is how the Nishmas Adam concludes in his magnum opus, the Chayei Adam (5:11), where he implies that one may eat a snack before feeding one's animals.

The Nahar Shalom (167:4) answers the contradiction in the two texts in a similar fashion, ruling that when it is meal time, one may not eat even a snack, out of concern that he'll forget to feed his animals. If he starts eating between meals, one may eat a snack without feeding his animals first. This approach is also quoted by the Kaf Hachayim (167:52) as definitive halachah. However, the Shevus Yaakov, the Kesav Sofer (Shu"t Orach Chayim #32) and the Mishnah Berurah (167:40) all prohibit eating even a snack before feeding one's animals.

At this point, we can address one of our opening questions: "I would like to eat an apple. Must I first feed Fido?"

According to the Taz, the Chayei Adam, the Nahar Shalom and the Kaf Hachayim, one may eat an apple or some other snack before feeding his dog, although the Nahar Shalom and the Kaf Hachayim permit this only when it is not meal time. On the other hand, many other authorities prohibit eating even a snack without first feeding one's animals.

Is instructing enough?

The Nahar Shalom and the Kaf Hachayim also contend that if the owner commanded his servants to feed the animals, he may begin his meal. Since his instructions will be obeyed, he does not need to worry that his animals will go hungry. However, other authorities do not record this lenient ruling (see Mishnah Berurah).

Drinking before feeding

Is it permitted to drink before one feeds the animals, or is the prohibition limited to eating?

Based on the Torah's description of how Rivkah greeted Eliezer, the Sefer Chassidim (#531) makes a distinction between eating and drinking. The Torah teaches that Eliezer asked her for a little bit of water, and she answered him, I will serve you water and also your camels. The Sefer Chassidim asks how Eliezer could drink without first providing the camels with water. He concludes that although one may not eat without first feeding one's animals, it is permitted to drink. This conclusion is quoted by many later authorities (Magen Avraham 167:18; Birkei Yosef 167:6; Mishnah Berurah 167:40; Shu"t Har Tzvi 1:90),

although several others (Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 167:7; Shu"t Kesav Sofer, Orach Chayim #32) dispute it. The Pri Megadim rules that when the animals are thirsty, one is required to water them before one may drink. He contends that Rivkah offered the men to drink first, because the camels were not as thirsty. This was because the camels had been drinking roadside water that people would consider too dirty to drink. I will share with you that I also do not know how the Pri Megadim knows to make these assumptions.

Another approach is that of the Chasam Sofer, who contends that when someone is offered food by a host, he may eat without first feeding his animals, since the host has no obligation to feed the guest's animals. This explains why Eliezer drank before watering his camels.

Yet another approach to explain Rivkah's actions is that she assessed that it was dangerous for Eliezer and his men not to hydrate themselves immediately, and that pikuach nefesh certainly supersedes the requirement to feed or water the animals first (Or Hachayim, quoted by Yad Efrayim on Magen Avraham 167:18).

#### A drinking problem

Why should drinking be permitted before one feeds one's animals when it is forbidden to eat, and, according to many authorities, even have a small snack? Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (Shu"t Har Tzvi, Orach Chayim 1:90) provides two reasons for this distinction. First, suffering from thirst is far more uncomfortable than suffering from hunger, so the Torah did not require one to remain thirsty in order to make sure that the animals are fed. Second, the Torah forbade eating before feeding one's animals out of concern that once one gets involved in eating, he may forget to feed his animals. Drinking does not create this concern, since it takes less time and is not as involved as eating.

#### Is Shabbos different?

May one eat on Shabbos and Yom Tov before feeding one's animals? The Kesav Sofer rules that the prohibition of eating before one feeds one's animals applies only to eating a meal that does not fulfill a mitzvah, but that one may eat on Shabbos and Yom Tov before one has fed one's animals, since this eating fulfills a mitzvah. Not all authorities appear to accept this ruling.

#### Dog's best friend

Let us return to one of the questions we discussed above: "I would like to eat an apple. Must I first feed Fido?"

An anonymous questioner asked the great eighteenth-century halachic authority, Rav Yaakov Emden, whether one may eat before feeding his dog or cat. He responded that he does not know why his questioner thought that dogs and cats should be treated differently from any other of G-d's creatures. He suggests two reasons that might explain why the questioner thought that one may eat before feeding one's dog or cat. Each of these reasons requires an introduction.

#### Beheimah versus chayah

For certain laws, the Torah divides animals into two categories, beheimos and chayos. These two categories defy a clear translation in English, although often beheimos are called domesticated animal species and chayos are called wild species. Rav Yaakov Emden suggested that perhaps the questioner thought that the requirement to feed your animals before you eat applies only to species of animal that qualify as beheimah and not to those that are chayah, and that the questioner thought that both dogs and cats are categorized as chayos, thereby exempting the owner from the obligation of feeding his animals before eating. The Yaavetz does agree that both dogs and cats are categorized as chayos -- the Mishnah (Kelayim 8:6) quotes a dispute between Rabbi Meir and the Sages regarding whether a dog is considered a chayah or a beheimah. According to the Sages, the halachic conclusion, dogs are chayos, and the Yaavetz endeavors to demonstrate that cats also qualify as chayos.

However, the Yaavetz notes that the prohibition to eat before feeding your animals applies equally to beheimos and chayos. Although there are several areas of halachah in which there is a difference between kosher beheimos and kosher chayos, there is only one Talmudic source that discusses what halachic difference it makes whether a non-kosher animal is categorized as a chayah or as a beheimah. This source is a Tosefta (Kelayim 5:5) that discusses the above-mentioned dispute

between Rabbi Meir and the Sages whether a dog qualifies as a chayah or as a beheimah. The Tosefta asks, what difference does it make whether a dog is a chayah or a beheimah? The Tosefta explains that the difference applies to someone who gives all his chayos to his son, and we now need to know whether his dogs are included. According to the Sages, the dogs have now been given to the son, whereas, according to Rabbi Meir, they remain property of the father.

The Rash, one of the early Baalei Tosafos, adds another similar halachic difference that will result from the question as to whether a creature is a beheimah or a chayah. The case is where someone declared all his chayos to be kodesh, which means that they have all become property of the Beis Hamikdash. According to Rabbi Meir, since dogs are beheimos, in this situation his dogs will remain his property, whereas, according to the Sages, Fido and his buddies are now property of the Beis Hamikdash and require redemption.

Both the Tosefta and the Rash imply that the mitzvah of feeding your animals before you eat applies equally to beheimos and to chayos.

This Tosefta answers another question, which arises from a Mishnah (Kelayim 8:6) that states that a pig qualifies as a beheimah, whereas the elephant, the monkey and the arod, a type of wildass (very possibly the onager) are chayos. Since these are all non-kosher species, what difference does it make in halachah whether these species qualify as beheimah or as chayah? The answer is, what happens if Mr. Goldberg gave all the chayos in his personal zoo and petting farm to his son as a gift. Who owns the pigs, the elephants, the monkeys and the onagers? The halachah is that Mr. Goldberg still owns the pigs but he has given the elephants, the monkeys and the onagers to his son. (I will not delve into the question as to why Mr. Goldberg owned a pig, when this is forbidden. Perhaps a non-Jewish business contact gave him a present and he had not yet had the opportunity to sell it.)

#### Feed your workers!

Having established that the prohibition of eating before feeding one's animals applies equally to beheimos and chayos, the Yaavetz suggests another possibility why the questioner thought that dogs and cats might be excluded from the requirements of this mitzvah. Perhaps the requirement to feed your animal before you eat is because it is working for you, and the questioner thought that dogs and cats are not considered workers. According to this approach, one would be permitted to eat before feeding fish or canaries, since they are basically pension receivers, whereas one would be required to feed his carrier pigeons, cattle, sheep, goats, horses, donkeys and gaming falcons before eating.

However, the Yaavetz rejects both suppositions of this approach.

First, he contends that both dogs and cats qualify as workers, dogs because they serve as loyal watchmen and cats because they clear the house of mice.

Second, the requirement to feed your animal has nothing to do with whether the animal works for you; once you are responsible for the animal, the rules of tzaar baalei chayim, not to cause an animal to suffer, require you to provide it with food. Thus, even pension-receiving animals are entitled to be fed, and the owner must attend to them before he is permitted to eat.

#### Man's best friend

So, is there any reason to treat dogs and cats differently from other animals?

Notwithstanding the Yaavetz's rejection of both of his suggestions why dogs and cats might be treated differently from other animals, he concludes that, although one is required to make sure that one's dogs and cats are fed, one is not required to feed them prior to his own eating. He presents the following novel suggestion: Since both of these species do not have difficulty finding food on their own, the responsibility to feed them does not lie so heavily on the owner to feed them before eating. The prohibition to eat before feeding your animals is restricted to animals that, once domesticated, would not be able to find food without the owner feeding them. The Yaavetz contends that only animals that have difficulty finding their own meals create an onus to the extent that their owner must go hungry until he provides them with victuals.

By the way, I found very few later poskim who quote this position of the Yaavetz as the accepted halacha.

#### Conclusion

Why are we required to feed one's animals before we eat? The Yad Efrayim (on Orach Chayim, Magen Avraham 167:18) suggests the following: One should always look at himself as unworthy to receive Hashem's bounty. Perhaps one's only merit to be fed is that we feed the animals that are dependent upon us. Thus, this mitzvah has a secondary goal – not only to teach us to be concerned about Hashem's creatures, but also to teach us humility.

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**from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net>**

to: info@theyeshiva.net

date: Jan 16, 2025, 8:08 PM

subject: The Burning Bush and the Tanya - Essay by Rabbi YY

#### The Inaugural Vision

The inaugural vision in which Moses was appointed to become the leader of the Jewish Nation and its eternal teacher, we should assume, contains within it the essence of Judaism.

Moses, shepherding his father-in-law's sheep in the Sinai wilderness, suddenly sees a blazing thornbush. "G-d's angel appeared to Moses in a blaze of fire from amid a thorny-bush," we read in Shemos. "He saw and behold! The bush was burning in the fire but was not consumed. Moses said to himself, 'I must go over there and gaze at this great sight—why isn't the bush burning up from the flames'". When Moses approaches the scene, G-d reveals Himself to him, saying: "Don't approach here. Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy soil." He then speaks to Moses, identifying Himself as the G-d of your fathers," and charging him with the mission of leading the Jewish people to redemption.

It is a perplexing story. Firstly, what was the symbolism behind the vision of a burning bush? G-d has made numerous appearances in the Torah till this point. Yet never was it in a burning bush not being consumed.

Second, why did G-d tell Moses not to approach the bush? What would be wrong with him coming closer?

Third, what does G-d mean when He says, "The place upon which you stand is holy soil?" Why was the actual earth upon which he was standing holy? The burning bush was holy, for G-d was present in the flame, thus Moses was standing in a holy place. But why the emphasis on the actual sand and earth?

Interpretations abound. Today I will present a profoundly moving insight on the matter.[1]

#### The Thorns in the Fire

Since this revelation was the genesis of Moses's appointment as the leader of Israel who would transmit the Torah to Israel, this vision captures one of the common dilemmas in the life of the Jew and indeed of every searching human being.

One of the great challenges of any sincere person striving to grow spiritually is that even when he or she manages to ignite a fire in their soul, the fire never consumes the thorns present in the psyche. The passion is aglow, the heart is aflame, the ecstasy is ablaze, but the thorns refuse to be sublimated in the flame. Toxicity and anxiety take over. A person may be in the midst of sincere prayer to G-d, but suddenly a most ugly thought or craving will flare up in his brain. You may be experiencing a most happy moment in life, but suddenly the most obnoxious emotion surfaces in your heart. Even in our most potent fires, the thorns abound. Even in our most intimate, subtle, refined, joyous, spiritual experiences, we confront irrational fears, demons, and traumas. They often surface to the conscious in the most least expected moments. The story of the burning bush which would not consume the thorns embodies the duality in every heart. On one hand, we experience a desire to be good and moral. But then, at other times, we are mundane and careless, overtaken by beastly tendencies, selfish impulses, and ugly emotions. What is worse, these polarities are often experienced in such close proximities with each other. In the morning, I may be infused with a sense of awe, wonder, splendor, amazement. At those times, I am

inspired, motivated to serve G-d, to pray, to learn Torah, to engage in mitzvos, good and holy deeds. Barely several hours—sometimes minutes—pass, and boom! The sublime ecstasy withers away. This spiritual person suddenly has a hard time refusing a slice of pizza, a particular website, or a terrible angry impulse.

When my heart is idealistic, I say to myself, "I really love this. It's great. Life is beautiful. I wouldn't give this up for anything in the world." And then, it's all gone. The whole spiritual high is naught. I am reduced to a small, petty, ridiculous, fearful, depressed, and angry creature.

#### Doubt

This dichotomy is one of the main factors causing people to give up on living a meaningful and joyous life. The tension is too deep, and I can't be a hypocrite.

Moses, the first and greatest Jewish teacher, approaches the thorn bush. He has one question: "Why does it not get consumed?" If the fire is real, why does it not consume the thorns?! How is it possible, Moses wonders, that if a person's spirituality is authentic, it has no bearings on his or her thorns? Unless of course, the fire was a delusion.

G-d responds: "Remove your shoes from your feet because the place upon which you stand is sacred soil." These words revolutionize our approach to the enduring struggle. Holiness lies in the very place upon which you stand. Don't wait till you reach your own psychological utopia; rather, the very place where you stand is holy; a relationship with G-d does not mean that you are darkness-free, thorn-free, struggle-free. You must encounter the holiness in your present situation.

Then G-d continues to tell him: "I am the G-d of your father." I am present in the midst of this thorny bush. I am in this flame, even though the thorns have not been eliminated.

#### The Tanya

It took another three millennia for the message to be articulated lucidly. This notion, one that has brought comfort and healing to millions of soul-climbers, is one of the central themes of the Tanya—the magnum opus of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, known as the Alter Rebbe (1745-1812), whose passing 210 years ago, in 1812, will be marked on the 24th of Teves.

The theme is captured in the very name of the book.

The Alter Rebbe termed this work with a very original and beautiful name: Sefer shel Bananim, which means The Book of the Intermediate People, or the Guidebook for the Ordinary Person.

Who is the banuni? Who is this prototype the Alter Rebbe places in the vortex of his great work? The banuni is a person who possesses in a conscious way a duality—not like the tzadik, who has achieved moral perfection. The banuni operates on two levels of consciousness, his life dichotomized between two souls: The "reptilian brain," an insecure and self-centered consciousness, focusing on survival and fast comfort, and a Divine, transcendental soul, aligned with the infinite depth and purpose of existence. His life constitutes a struggle between these two perceptions of the self and the world.

Here is the Tanya's profound idea—all based on that vision of the burning bush: "Remove your shoes from your feet because the place upon which you stand is sacred soil." Never doubt the potency and authenticity of your inner holiness and Divinity, just because there are ugly thoughts still lingering in your brain. Never allow your external animal self to dictate and take control of the narrative of your life. The toxic voices are here to help you crystallize who you really are; each of them coming to make you grow and become the human being you are capable of becoming.

G-d does not want you necessarily to become the tzaddik, the toxic-free person, free of every last coping mechanism born the terror of feeling alone in a scary world. Not everyone can attain the spiritual perfection of the tzadik. But not everyone must achieve that state. The hero of the Tanya is the banuni: he opens up a door for every human being in every situation and on every level, to find his or her own place among those who are striving to soar on high—to connect and become true servants of G-d.

The banuni is not the individual who always wins, but he is also not the human being who is defeated. He is the individual who fights daily to

uncover the truth of his own infinite depth; the clamor of his efforts is exquisite music to the Divine ear.

The Alter Rebbe termed his work the *Sefer shel Banunim* because he was attempting to address who we are rather than who we are not. He was attempting to make Judaism, to make the Divine path, real; to make it intimately close ("karov elecha")—to you, to me, to us, people for whom the world seems no less real than G-d, maybe even more real. To human beings to whom materialism is as powerful as spirituality, maybe even more powerful.

Many previous books of Jewish ethics and spirituality aim to elevate and inspire man toward the ideal of the tzaddik, 'the perfectly righteous individual.' But there is a problem. Some people indeed can become truly righteous, the rest of us give up, or we become fake. Hence, the value and contribution of the Tanya. With it, the Alter Rebbe brought healing and hope to millions.

I would say that the entire Tanya is based on that single passage G-d told Moses: "for the place upon which you stand is holy." Wherever you are, you can find holiness and develop a real relationship with the Almighty. Even as your thorns do not disappear and do not forfeit their sting in the flame of your soul, never doubt the truth of your core identity, as a Divine ambassador in this world. Serving G-d does not mean becoming sacred; it means having the courage to fight for truth even amidst thorny foes that crave to undermine you.

Moses wants to approach the fire. We all want to transcend our conditions and become Divine. So G-d says, no! You must realize that holiness is where you stand today! You may have lots of earth and gravel—but that itself is holy. You were given the mission to light a candle of truth and hope in a space of darkness and hopelessness. Your inner darkness is waiting to be transformed. To be a Jew means to know that just as in math we have the Asymptote, a line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it at any finite distance, we may feel that we never reach the full truth. Yet, wherever you are in life, you can become a conduit for the infinite and bring heaven down to earth.

[1] Based on Degel Machane Ephraim Parshas Shemos. This Chassidic work was authored by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim, the Rabbi of Sedlikov, Ukraine (1748-1800). His mother was Udel, the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov. He is interred near his grandfather in Medzhebutzh, Ukraine. It is also interesting to note that the Alter Rebbe said, that the path of the Baal Shem Tov was based on this inaugural vision of Moses, cf. this essay: <https://www.theyeshiva.net/jewish/6126/essay-shemos-souls-on-fire>

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## **Shemot: The Inner Trait of Goodness**

### **Rav Kook Torah**

When Moses expressed his doubts as to whether the people would believe he was indeed God's messenger, God gave him a sign to prove his authenticity — but a sign which implied displeasure in Moses' lack of faith in his people.

What was the sign? Moses' hand temporarily became white with tzara'at (leprosy). A miraculous sign, to be sure, but tzara'at is an affliction that defiles — a clear indication that Moses was being chastised.

The Sages noted a subtle discrepancy between the Torah's description of Moses' hand turning leprosy and its subsequent return to normalcy. The first time, Moses took out his hand "and behold! his hand was leprosy like snow" (Ex. 4:6). Then Moses placed his hand inside his robes a second time, and when he had "removed it from his chest, his skin had [already] returned to normal" (Exod. 4:7).

A careful reading of the text indicates that the two transformations occurred differently. The leprosy took hold after Moses removed his hand from his robe; but his hand reverted to its normal color even before he had taken out his hand, while it was still inside his robe. Why should there be a difference between the two?

From here, the Sages concluded, "The Divine trait of tovah [goodness] comes more quickly than the trait of puranut [suffering or punishment]" (Shabbat 97a).

What does this mean? Why should one trait be faster or better than another?

### **Transcending the Limits of Time**

There is in fact an essential difference between these two facets of Divine providence. The attribute of tovah is the very foundation of the world. Divine goodness is the goal of all existence; it is united with the very source of life. For this reason, this trait transcends the restrictions of time and place. Even when it descends into our finite world, a reality bound by time and place, we may still sense its elevated, limitless source.

This is the meaning of the Talmudic statement, "The trait of goodness comes more quickly." The attribute of tovah reveals an inner light, free from the restrictions of time and place. Ezekiel described this phenomenon in his sublime vision of angelic creatures "running and returning, like rapid flashes of lightning" (Ezek. 1:14).

The trait of puranut is a different story. Puranut is not an intrinsic aspect of reality. It is ancillary and transitory. Its value is only to serve the good, to "refine the vessels" so that they will be able to receive the flow of Divine goodness in all of its abundance.

As a result, puranut is subject to the limitations of time and place, and its manifestation is delayed.

### **The True Nature of Israel**

While Divine goodness is integrally connected to the inner essence of life, puranut relates to its superficial aspects. The more we distance ourselves from the true reality, the more our worldview becomes filtered through the lens of puranut. Seeing the world as a place of judgment and suffering is a perception emanating from distortions of the imagination. It does not focus on the true nature of reality, but on its external appearance.

Precisely here — as God taught Moses the true inner nature of Israel, beneath the cloak of outer appearances — the superficiality of puranut was unveiled. Moses' arm only looked leprosy after it was exposed to the outside light. In the realm of true essence, there is no place for suffering and harsh punishments; this trait belongs to the realm of superficial appearances.

Moses' hand was restored to its original healthy state as soon as he placed it "inside his chest" indicating that the attribute of goodness reflects the inner essence of reality. It is connected to the root of creation, transcending all limitations of the finite universe. Therefore Divine beneficence is not restricted by the framework of time and "arrives quickly."

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## **Eating Garbage**

### **By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg**

Earlier this week, I was standing right next to a large trash can in a public area when something startling happened. A seemingly put-together man walked up, removed the lid, and began to rummage. He found a half-eaten sandwich, pulled it out, and gobbled it down. He then reached back in, examined the soda bottles and cans that had been disposed of, and found one that still had soda left. He pulled it out and guzzled down the little ginger ale that was left in the bottle.

I am embarrassed to admit that my first reaction as I witnessed him literally eat garbage right next to me was to recoil with a sense of disgust and revulsion. Something was incongruous about the way he was dressed, the fact that we were in a public, visible place, and what he was doing. But not a moment later I caught myself and realized — how hungry must this man be to be willing to reach into a trash bin in front of many other people, pull out a half-eaten sandwich that was contaminated with garbage, and put it in his mouth. How thirsty must he be that he would grab a stranger's unfinished bottle of ginger ale covered in someone else's germs and gulp it down.

The world produces enough food to feed all of its 8 billion people, yet 822 million people, over ten percent, are malnourished and go hungry every day. Around 9 million people die every year of hunger and hunger-related diseases, yet over 1 billion meals are wasted every day. I am hardly the first to recognize and point out that we must do a better job of rescuing food and getting it into the hands of those who are

hungry. (There are amazing organizations attacking this issue, like Leket in Israel or Shearit HaPlate in some cities in America, but not every community yet has such programs in place.)

It should hurt to observe a simcha and look out at the shmorg and Chosson's tisch in which so much food is leftover, untouched, and will eventually be wasted, then find ourselves at the main meal in which many of the guests won't remain even though food was prepared for them and to consider how many could benefit from food that will go right into the trash. How much food is disposed of even after eating the Shabbos and Yom Tov leftovers a few more days? What happens to the food from Kiddush and Shalosh Seudos at shuls everywhere?

I wanted to help the man who had gone through the garbage but he was gone before I knew it. In that moment, I felt not only tremendous compassion for him, but enormous gratitude for myself and my family. If you have fresh and clean food to eat, if each time you are hungry you are able to satiate yourself, if you don't know what it means to have to rummage through garbage to put something in your belly, you are fortunate and blessed. If you were in a room with nine other random people from the greater world, the chances are one of them would be hungry and malnourished enough to eat food out of the trash and if it isn't you, be grateful, say thank you each and every day.

We are fortunate to have Torah and Halacha that is designed to make us mindful. A Beracha before and after we eat reminds us to be grateful to have access to fresh and clean food and to further express gratitude when our belly is full and our body is hydrated. Our rabbis teach that benefiting from this world such as by eating without first making a beracha is considered me'ilah, taking sacred and holy property for oneself. The Tosefta (Berachos 4:1) references a verse in Tehillim (24:1), "The earth is Hashem's and its fullness." If you take and benefit from the world without first paying with a "thank you," you have taken something holy and made it profane, you have desecrated something consecrated.

We don't need to wait for something extraordinary to say thank you. Each and every day, with each and every morsel of food, there is so much to appreciate, not take for granted, and be grateful for.

Last Shabbos, we hosted Michael Gottesman of Shlomit, Israel, a community on the border of Israel, Gaza, and Egypt. On October 7, as a member of the community's volunteer security team, Michael grabbed his weapon, put on his vest and helmet, and went to defend his family and his community. Shlomit wasn't infiltrated but the neighboring community of Prigan was and they desperately needed reinforcements. Michael and others answered the call, the only volunteer security team that defended a neighboring community, not only their own. They encountered a large group of terrorists that far outnumbered them and were much better armed.

Tragically, four of those heroic volunteers fell in that battle. Michael himself was shot. The bullet entered from his side, in the small area not protected by the ceramic vest. It pierced his lung, went through his kidney and spleen, exited his left side and shredded his upper arm. He fell to the ground bleeding profusely and understood there was significant damage to his internal organs. He calculated that he didn't have long to live and used what he thought was his last breath to say Shema and to declare the unity of Hashem's existence.

After finishing Shema, he found that he was still conscious, still alive but thought that for sure, now he only had moments to live, enough time to think or say one more thing. What should it be? In a conversation at our Shul he shared that after saying Shema, he looked up to the Heavens and said, "Thank you Hashem. Thank you for a beautiful life. Thank you for my amazing wife, my beautiful children, my friends and neighbors. Thank you for all that you gave me. If I go now, Hashem, I just want to say thank you for everything."

As he described what happened, I thought to myself, what a perspective and what an attitude. Instead of saying, "Why me, Hashem, how could you do this," while lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood, Michael chose to look at his life and to say thank you.

It took two hours to evacuate Michael and two more hours for him to be picked up by the helicopter and taken to the hospital. Miraculously, he survived, though he spent many months in the hospital healing and many surgeries to reconstruct his arm. He continues to need rehab three times a week. While his body will please-God heal, he will forever carry the emotional and spiritual injuries and trauma of that day. He lost close friends, almost lost his life, but never lost his sense of gratitude.

If he could express gratitude in that moment, can't we and shouldn't we express gratitude when everything is going well, when we have food to eat, a roof over our head, and air in our lungs? We don't need to wait until we think it is the last moment of our life to say thank you for our lives, the big and small, the ordinary and extraordinary.

When we wake up in the morning, the very first words we say are Modeh Ani, which literally means, "Grateful am I." Grammatically, it would be more correct to say "Ani modeh, I am grateful," but our rabbis understood that the first word on our lips cannot be "I." Instead, despite it sounding clumsy, we wake up saying "Grateful," and with that we set the tone for our day, an attitude of gratitude.

With each beracha you say, be mindful to feel grateful for the food you will eat and committed to enable all to never go hungry. Wake up with an attitude of gratitude and fill each day with a sense of "Grateful am I."

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# **Parshas Shemos: The Selection of Mosheh**

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

## **I. WHY MOSHEH?**

In Parashat Sh'mot we are introduced to the central personality of the Humash - Mosheh Rabbenu. Mosheh's position as consummate leader and foremost prophet (Av laN'vi'im) is unrivaled, unchallenged and unquestioned within our tradition. What we are not told - at least not explicitly - is why Mosheh (if that is his real name - see Sh'mot Rabbah 1:20) was selected to lead the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt, to Sinai and (ideally) into the Land. In this shiur, we will attempt to find textual clues to explain the reason for his selection as Eved Hashem (the servant of God) at this critical point in our history.

## **WHY THE REPETITION?**

Let's begin with another question, addressed by some of the Rishonim: The Torah listed the names of all of the members of Ya'akov's household who descended to Egypt (B'resheet 46:10-27). Why does our new Humash - Sh'mot - begin with a partial recount of those names (1:1-4)?

Rashi responds that this demonstrates God's love for His children, that he counts them during their lives and, again, after their deaths. As Ramban points out, this is a profound piece of homiletics which reflects the special relationship that Ya'akov's family has with God - but it isn't the p'shat(straightforward) explanation of the repetition. (Perhaps Ramban was bothered by the extensive list in B'resheet as opposed to the brief list in Sh'mot).

Ramban explains that the theme of Sefer Sh'mot is G'ulah - redemption (he refers to Sh'mot as Sefer haG'ulah - see his introduction to Sefer Sh'mot). Therefore, the story needs to "pick up" from the onset of the exile, in order to allow the Sefer to be thematically whole. The reason that only a few names are mentioned in Sh'mot is that this is a thumbnail sketch and reminder of what we already know from B'resheet - sort of a "previously in our story" introduction to the next episode.

There may be something else implied by this brief recounting which will also help us figure out why Mosheh was the ideal leader to reverse the fortunes of the house of Ya'akov - but, first, a much larger question:

## **WHY DIPLOMACY?**

The goal of Mosheh's mission seems to be to lead B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt and to bring them to Sinai to worship God (see 3:12) - and then to the Land (3:8). Why must this job be done with diplomacy - and with the protracted and painful negotiations with Pharaoh which take a long time (according to the Midrash - one year) and take a terrible toll in human suffering? Why couldn't the omnipotent God just take the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt in one fell swoop? Surely our imaginations can easily conjure up a picture of swift and immediate redemption and exodus - but that wasn't God's plan. Why did God elect to employ a diplomat and to command him to negotiate with Pharaoh?

## **II. THE PURPOSE OF THE EXODUS**

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the exodus was not merely to liberate this nation of slaves - or even to resettle them in their ancestral Land - it was to bring them to Sinai:

...and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain. (3:12)

The clear expectation is that the people will be willing to follow Mosheh out of Egypt, into the desert - and worship God at that place. (There is a further expectation - that they will be willing to follow him into the Land - see the Ramban on this verse.)

For this to happen, the B'nei Yisra'el will have to be fully aware of two realities: Who God is - and who they are. They must have full awareness that Hashem, the God of Yisra'el is the only power to whom they owe complete allegiance and that He controls the heavens and earth.

They must also be aware of their glorious past and even more glorious destiny. They are the direct descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov; they are destined to become God's cherished people, His treasure among the nations - and a kingdom of Kohanim (Sh'mot 19:5-6).

We may infer from the verses at the beginning of our Sefer that the B'nei Yisra'el, at this point in time, did not share either of these critical attitudes and beliefs. (This deficiency becomes clear as Mosheh tries to convince the people that they should cooperate - and they want him to leave the situation as is and accept the status quo - see 5:19-21) As a people, they were in no way prepared for this national metamorphosis. Let's examine the beginning of our Sefer to discover the self-image of the B'nei Yisra'el at the time of imminent G'ulah. We will focus on three passages in the first chapter to illustrate the point.

### III. "THESE ARE THE NAMES"

These are the names of the B'nei Yisra'el who came to Egypt with Ya'akov, each with his household: Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi, and Yehudah, Yissachar, Z'vulun, and Binyamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. (1:1-4)

If we compare this brief list with the (nearly) exhaustive list of the seventy members of Ya'akov's household who descended to Egypt (B'resheet 46:10-27), we note two glaring differences:

(A) The B'resheet list is complete, including grandsons, a granddaughter - and several family events (e.g. the death of Er and Onan, v. 12). The second list, on the other hand, only lists the direct sons of Ya'akov. (see the end of section V for the answer)

(B) This one is a bit more subtle. The order of the list in B'resheet is the children of Leah, the children of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid), the children of Rachel and the children of Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid). In other words, the order is by mothers: The house of Leah and the house of Rachel. This is a reasonable order, given that Leah not only bore the most children but that her children were the oldest. In our verse, a slight change has taken place: The first two verses include the sons of Leah and the one (descending) son of Rachel (Yoseph was already in Egypt). The last verse lists the four sons of the handmaids. What has changed here?

If we look back at B'resheet 37:2 (see my shiur on Parashat Mikketz), we see that the children of the handmaids were set apart from the rest of the sons. As we explained, this was because there was a clear-cut class distinction within the family - sons of the wives (Rachel and Leah) occupying a favored status as opposed to the sons of the handmaids. In times of trouble (the famine), this distinction was erased (indicated by the order of the listing in B'resheet) but, now that the family was firmly settled into life in Egypt, those old differences resurfaced. Setting the tone for our story, we are presented with families which do not see themselves as equal and are not united.

### IV. "VAYISH'R'TZU"

Then Yoseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the B'nei Yisra'el \*paru\* (were fruitful) \*vayish'r'tzu\* (???); \*vayirbu\* (they multiplied) and \*vaya'atz'mu bim'od m'od\* (grew exceedingly strong), so that the land was filled with them. (1:6-7)

Rashi, commenting on the many verbs used to describe the amazing growth of the B'nei Yisra'el (which explains how we get from 70 people to a nation of several million at the time of the exodus), quotes the Midrash that the women would have sextuplets (playing on the six words used here).

**S'forno has a different explanation. \*Paru\* (were fruitful) indicates having children, \*vayirbu\* (multiplied) indicates having many children and \*vaya'atz'mu\* indicates demographic and physical strength - all positive terms. \*Vayish'r'tzu\*, however, is a pejorative term. A \*sheretz\* is a rodent, commonly used as the archetype of impurity (e.g. \*tovel v'sheretz b'yado\* - see BT Ta'anit 16a, MT Teshuvah 2:3). S'forno explains that the whole generation which died (v. 6) refers to the entire group of 70 who had come from the Land. Once that link was broken, the people "turned to the ways of rodents, running (there is a Hebrew words play here) to the pit of despair." [emphasis added]**

It is unclear whether S'forno means that they engaged in the worst aspects of Egyptian culture or that they lost their sense of dignity and pride - but that becomes clear in his explanation of our third passage.

## V. "LET US DEAL WISELY"

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yoseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. (1:8-11)

The core of Pharaoh's speech here is phrased oddly: "...in the event of war, [they will] join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Why would a conquering nation want to - or even need to - escape? Rashi is bothered by this and explains that Pharaoh's intent was that the B'nei Yisra'el would throw the Egyptians out - but he didn't want to utter these horrifying words, so he turned them around. Ramban has a different approach; he explains that the concern is that the B'nei Yisra'el will "fleece the land" with the other enemies and will take the booty with them when they leave.

S'forno has a different approach to the verse. He reads the phrase: "...or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us..." as a parenthetical thought. In other words, Pharaoh's statement to the people was Let us deal wisely and get them out of the land - and his motivation for this was the concern of a fifth column in his land.

To that end, the Egyptians appointed taskmasters over the B'nei Yisra'el in order to afflict them - figuring that that would inspire them to leave. After all, what reason did they have to stay? Their ancestral and promised land was fertile again (the famine was long since over) and it was now clear that they were unwanted in Egypt. How surprised Pharaoh and the Egyptians were when the B'nei Yisra'el acquiesced to the human tax and complied with the orders to build cities for Pharaoh!

Once the Egyptians saw that these descendants of political and spiritual giants, (and of their former viceroy), were willing to accept this humiliating work - everything spiraled down. (The astounding parallel to the horrific tragedy of our century are too obvious to mention...) They were made slaves (again, no word of protest, rebellion or flight from the B'nei Yisra'el) and finally were the objects of limited genocide! The only protest we hear is from the midwives (who were possibly Egyptian women - [Avrabanel - after all, why would Pharaoh entrust this heinous mission to Jewish women?]) In addition, their reference to the Hebrew women [v. 19 - \*Ivriot\*] seems to be exclusive). As S'forno explains, the B'nei Yisra'el had totally lost their sense of self-worth, dignity and mission - and were already enslaved to the ideals of the Egyptian culture and polis. They were more concerned with successfully remaining in Egypt and gaining the approval of their Egyptian king than with maintaining their own heritage and legacy.

S'forno also uses this approach to explain the beginning verses: "And these are the names..." that only these names (the sons of Ya'akov) were worthy of mention - but the other members of the family (including grandchildren) weren't worthy, as their righteousness was not of the same caliber as their parents. (This explains the first question in section III above).

## VI. "Hashem IS JUST AND I AM WICKED"

We can summarize the "failings" of the B'nei Yisra'el as three:

A lack of dignity

A self-induced subjugation to Pharaoh and Egyptian culture

Continued tribalism

The B'nei Yisra'el were captive to the influence of Pharaoh and his court. In order to move the people into an awareness of their own mission and pride - and of the ultimate power of their God - they had to hear the Egyptians declare the power and justice of God and admit to their (Egypt's) own failings. This is the constant theme of the diplomatic interaction between Mosheh and Pharaoh - and B'nei Yisra'el will not be ready to leave (and move on to Sinai and the Land) until their biggest cultural icon (Pharaoh) comes to them in the middle of the night and begs them to leave, accepting the justice of their God and His decree.

**In order to enable this, the diplomat would have to be someone who had a sense of dignity, was comfortable within the court of Pharaoh - and who understood the essential unity of the nation. [emphasis added]**



## VII. ENTER MOSHEH

Adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, Mosheh was familiar with court protocol and etiquette. He had a sense of dignity, since he was not subject to the decrees of slavery - nor was he culturally enslaved to the Pharaoh - which is often the blessing of those who are inside. (Think about how many people are star-struck and successfully encouraged to buy products endorsed by the glitterati - but those who work behind the scenes of the corridors of power and influence are not nearly as awed by the stars).

As an outsider, he also understood the basic unity of the B'nei Yisra'el. Note how the Torah describes his interest in seeing the plight of the people: "Mosheh grew and went out among his brothers..." (2:11);

For Mosheh, it wasn't a case of seeing how the Levites or Danites were faring - all of them were (equally) his brothers. (This is easy to understand, when we compare the way members of a large Jewish community identify themselves as opposed to those in a small rural area. Those of us who have the luxury of living in a densely populated community identify ourselves - and claim allegiance - with a particular stream of thought, synagogue or school. Jews living in remote areas, on the other hand, first and foremost see themselves as Jews and point to their "fellows" in the city - they understand the essential unity of our people which often eludes the city folk.)

Mosheh was the perfect candidate who could unify the people, represent them with dignity in the court and battle Pharaoh on his own turf until the king of Egypt would declare:

"Hashem is just and I am my people are wicked" (9:27).

There is one other piece of information which we are given in the opening chapters which clarifies the special place of Mosheh at this juncture of our history.

## VIII. THE UNDERCURRENT OF B'RESHEET: FRACTURED BROTHERHOOD

Throughout Sefer B'resheet, we find a common story line regarding family relationships. The younger brother is favored over the older brother - and neither brother is comfortable with that outcome.

We first meet Kayyin and Hevel (Chapter 4), where the reaction (fratricide) is the most extreme. God favors Hevel's offering - and Kayyin kills him in response.

Next, we meet Yishma'el and Yitzchak (Chapter 21). Although Yishma'el doesn't attack Yitzchak, we never find a rapprochement between the two. The only time they meet again is at their father's burial.

We then meet Esav and Ya'akov (Chapters 25-35). Even though Esav threatens to kill Ya'akov (which fits with Esav's impetuous nature), they are eventually reconciled - after which they go their separate ways.

Next come Yoseph and his brothers (Chapters 37-50) - surely the most developed and complex fraternal relationship(s) in B'resheet. In this case, the brothers are eventually reconciled and stay together.

Fittingly, Sefer B'resheet ends with another younger-older scene, depicting the favoring of Ephraim over M'nasheh (Chapter 48). We are given no information about either one's reaction to grandfather's blessing - and it seems that things are improving in this vein as time goes on.

## IX. MOSHEH, AHARON AND MIRIAM - WORKING TOGETHER

Now, at the beginning of Sh'mot, we are introduced to Mosheh. He is clearly favored by his parents, as he is described as "good" at his birth, they make every effort to shield him and then, relying on some form of divine intervention, send him down the Nile. His older brother and sister have every reason to be jealous (following the B'resheet model - and the present state of the inter-tribal relations) - yet his sister (who is mentioned but not even named in the second chapter) looks after him and ensures his safety and continued relationship with family. When Mosheh is finally sent by God to Pharaoh, he refuses unless his older brother is included in the mission. God tells him that Aharon will rejoice upon seeing him (4:14) - and, as the commentators explain, he would rejoice over Mosheh's selection as God's messenger and not harbor any jealousy.

For his part, Mosheh includes both of his older siblings in the exodus and leadership of the people. Aharon is one of his right-hand men (Sh'mot 24:14) and Miriam leads the women (15:20).

Mosheh, Aharon and Miriam have finally corrected the tragic and destructive history of sibling rivalry - which is what got us to Egypt in the first place (Yoseph being sold by his brothers).

This only serves to underscore the enormity of the tragedy when Mosheh's leadership begins to unravel (see Bamidbar 12). It only happens when Aharon and Miriam speak ill of Mosheh, exhibiting jealousy over his unique relationship with God. Even the family which led us from slavery to freedom and to an appreciation of our own great mission couldn't fully escape the legacy of B'resheet.

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## **Parshat Shemot: Slavery's Racist Roots**

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### **PREPARATION FOR PARASHAT SHEMOT:**

1. A NEW SEFER: Sefer Shemot (Exodus) opens up with familiar names: the names of the sons of Ya'akov, personalities to whom we know we can look for leadership. We seem to be on firm ground despite having just begun a new sefer (book). We expect things to continue as before. But this sense of familiarity quickly evaporates as we encounter the new realities of Sefer Shemot. In what ways does the opening of Sefer Shemot present unfamiliar territory? What is missing from Bnei Yisrael's new reality? The answer to this question -- and the appearance of what is missing -- are primary themes of Parashat Shemot.

2. LEADERSHIP: Our discussions of Sefer Bereishit (Genesis) focused heavily on themes of leadership. Our discussions of Sefer Shemot, VaYikra (Leviticus), BeMidbar (Numbers), and Devarim (Deuteronomy) will also focus on leadership, as the career and personality of Moshe and other leaders offer great opportunities for insight. As each leader steps onto the scene, pay careful attention to his or her leadership style; ask yourself what leadership means in each context. Although many of us may think of leadership as a combination of charisma, power, "personal magnetism," and other buzzwords, we will see that leadership comes in many different flavors. If you do not consider yourself "charismatic, powerful, personally magnetic," etc. and you are asking yourself what leadership has to do with you, keep in mind that one of our goals is to think about different models of leadership and how our own characteristics and gifts offer us different leadership opportunities.

### 3. MOSHE:

a) The Torah tells us very little about the early life of Avraham. Instead, he appears somewhat suddenly on the scene as a prophet commanded and tested by Hashem. In contrast, the Torah provides plenty of detail about Moshe's birth, his early adventures in the Nile, his adoption by Paro's daughter, his trouble with informers, and many other details. Why does the Torah introduce Moshe to us in such detail?

b) Hashem commands Moshe to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, but Moshe seems very reluctant to do the job, as the Torah reports in great detail. What does this tell us about Moshe?

4. THE DIVINE PLAN: Why does Hashem command Moshe to demand that Paro release Bnei Yisrael for a trek into the desert to serve the Hebrew God, "Y-HVH" if He knows that Paro will only refuse and cruelly increase his demands of the Jewish slaves, making Moshe the target of Jewish anger?

### **PARASHAT SHEMOT:**

#### AND THEY ALL DIED:

Sefer Shemot (Exodus) opens up with familiar names: the names of the sons of Ya'akov, personalities to whom we know we can look for leadership. We seem to be on firm ground despite having just begun a new sefer, and it seems that things will continue as before. Many mefarshim (commentators) offer various explanations for why the names of the sons of Ya'akov appear here, since they have recently been listed at the end of Sefer Bereishit (in Parashat VaYigash). But from a literary perspective, the names may appear here simply to establish Sefer Shemot as a literary entity independent of Sefer Bereishit. The "unnecessary" review of the names signals the distinctiveness of this book from the previous one (see Bekhor Shor; Abravanel and others offer examples from other books in Tanakh which open up with information we already know from previous books). But a look at the list of Ya'akov's sons provides what may be a more satisfying answer: the Torah lists the sons of Ya'akov again to tell us that they are dead!

#### SHEMOT 1:1-7 --

These are the names of the sons of Yisrael who came to Egypt: Ya'akov, the man and his household, came: Re'uvein, Shimon, Levi, and Yehuda, Yissakhar, Zevulun, and Binyamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Asher. All of the souls who came from the loins of Ya'akov were seventy souls; Yosef was [already] in Egypt. Yosef and all of his brothers died, and all of

that generation [died]. Bnei Yisrael were fruitful, and swarmed, and increased, and became very, very mighty; the land was full of them.

First the Torah lists the sons of Ya'akov, followed by a summary of the total number of people who came to Egypt as part of Ya'akov's household -- seventy people. The situation sounds as if it is under control: the whole group is only seventy people, and leadership for the group is amply provided by the sons of Ya'akov, who, as we know from VaYeishev, Mikkeitz, VaYigash, and VaYhi, include such capable leaders as Yosef and Yehuda. But the Torah quickly takes away this feeling of security by suddenly reporting two facts (I say "suddenly" because it is clear that these events take much longer to occur than their brief treatment in the Torah conveys):

1) Yosef, all of his brothers, and all of his generation are dead. In other words, all of the people we had been "depending on" for leadership, the mention of whose names had lulled us into believing for a moment that they were still here to lead, are gone. The family of seventy is left without a leader and no one appears to fill that vacuum. A crisis of leadership is brewing.

2) Bnei Yisrael (and here, ironically, the Torah uses the same phrase -- "Bnei Yisrael" -- to refer to both the twelve sons of Ya'akov and, only several lines later, to the thousands of their descendants who "swarm" and "fill the land") are no longer a family group of seventy people. They have grown to immense proportions. The Torah uses four different "growth" verbs to emphasize how quickly they grow and to what great proportions; the land literally "swarms" with them. This makes the lack of visible leadership even more worrisome: there is no comparison between the needs for leadership of a group of seventy people, and the needs for leadership of 600,000 people -- approximately the number of adult males who eventually leave Egypt.

### **A BREWING CRISIS:**

The Torah may be trying to communicate that with the death of the older generation and the explosive growth of Bnei Yisrael, a crisis of leadership is brewing: Who will represent Bnei Yisrael to the Egyptians, now that Yosef is gone? Who will organize them so that they can stand up for themselves, train them to defend themselves, provide spiritual leadership so they can maintain the monotheistic beliefs of the Avot in the midst of pagan Egypt? How will they preserve the moral values of the Avot if they do not remain distinct from the surrounding culture? Finally, despite the emphasis placed by Ya'akov and Yosef (just before their deaths, as we discussed on Parashat VaYhi) on the family's connection to Eretz Yisrael and their repeated assertion that Hashem will return the family to Eretz Yisrael, how will the people maintain an emotional connection to the land and not become comfortable and complacent in fertile Egypt?

To see how effective the leaders and educators of Bnei Yisrael are in Egypt in perpetuating the values and beliefs passed down by the Avot, see Yehezkel 20:5-10 for the dismal report.

### **OMINOUS SIGNS:**

One reason leadership is particularly necessary is because Egypt is not a friendly place for Bnei Yisrael. The roots of latent Egyptian hostility are struck well before Paro commands that Bnei Yisrael be enslaved:

1) The stories of Yosef and his brothers showed that the Egyptians, despite their need for Yosef as architect and executor of their national survival program in the seven-year famine, maintain racist and cultural prejudices against Bnei Yisrael:

a) They consider it "an abomination" to eat with Yosef, or with Ya'akov's other sons (Bereishit 43:32).

b) They look upon the raising of sheep, the occupation of Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'akov, and all of Ya'akov's sons, also as "an abomination" (Bereishit 46:34).

c) Despite Yosef's status as second to the king, he must humbly request permission of Paro to leave Egypt to bury his father in Eretz Canaan (Bereishit 50:4). Some mefarshim point out that one of the reasons Ya'akov asks Yosef to \*swear\* to bury him in Eretz Canaan is because he anticipates that Paro will refuse to let Yosef meet this commitment to his father unless Yosef has \*sworn\* to uphold it. Indeed, in requesting permission to leave, Yosef says that he is sworn to follow his father's wishes, hinting that he may fear that if not for the strength of his commitment, Paro would not grant permission. Most telling of all, Yosef seems unable to speak directly to Paro, and sends his request as a message, humbly worded, to be delivered to Paro.

Any group, under any conditions, needs leadership. But in an unfriendly and uncertain environment, leadership is especially critical. People must have someone to look to for hope and guidance, someone to focus their energies and help them accomplish their goals -- and, when necessary, force them to face realities they would rather ignore. Yosef and his brothers are dead; the family of seventy has grown into a group the size of a nation. And the situation is about to get worse.

## **WHO'S AT THE HELM?**

This vacuum of leadership is part of what enables Paro and his people to subjugate Bnei Yisrael. Paro himself testifies that Bnei Yisrael have become more numerous than his own people, that he fears that their strength threatens Egypt. We might have expected Paro to try to reach an agreement or treaty of some sort with Bnei Yisrael, as previous leaders (like Avimelekh) had done once they recognized the power in (or behind) Bnei Yisrael. But Paro is able to completely take advantage of Bnei Yisrael despite their strength. Among other causes, this weakness points to a lack of leadership. Even a powerful group is defenseless without leadership to direct its power and channel its energies. If leadership is not provided from within, by the appearance of a leader from among Bnei Yisrael, then leadership will be provided from without -- by a Paro, who will take advantage of the strength of the people for his own purposes.

## **EGYPTIAN FEARS:**

What are Paro's "purposes?" Why does he come up with the idea of making Bnei Yisrael suffer in various cruel ways?

SHEMOT 1: 8-10 --

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef. He said to his nation, "The nation of Bnei Yisrael is many, and more powerful than we are. Let us 'wise up' about him, lest he increase, and then, when a war breaks out, he will join our enemies, fight us, and go up out of the land!"

Paro seems to fear that Bnei Yisrael will leave Egypt and go wherever they choose (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Abravanel). Why? What does Egypt have invested in Bnei Yisrael's remaining where they are?

## **ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY?**

Although this new king does not remember Yosef, Egypt became dependent on Yosef long ago to save it from starvation. This established a relationship which Yosef himself became confined by: when he wanted to leave to bury Ya'akov, he had to ask Paro for permission (and obsequiously, at that). We usually assume that, once released from jail to interpret Paro's dreams, Yosef gains his freedom and has the power of the king, for all practical purposes. But it seems that he never gains complete freedom; one price of his being an indispensable asset to Egypt is that Paro keeps him under close watch and restricts his movements. Paro's attitude toward Yosef may have trickled down and become the prevalent Egyptian attitude toward Bnei Yisrael.

One other hint of the economic dependency of Egypt on Bnei Yisrael appears in Parashat VaYigash: when Yosef's brothers come down to Egypt with their father, Paro welcomes them. Knowing that the Egyptians consider shepherding an abomination, Yosef carefully prepares his brothers to let Paro know that they are shepherds. He suggests to Paro that his family live in the area of Goshen, not only because the area is well-suited for sheep, but also in order to achieve some seclusion from the Egyptian populace, who would object to their shepherding. Paro not only agrees to this arrangement, but also requests that Yosef find out if his brothers are good shepherds, and if so, to have them take care of his sheep as well! The Torah does not tell us whether Bnei Yisrael become the shepherds of the royal flock, but this remains a possibility. (If so, we have a pattern repeated here: Paro is unwilling to let Bnei Yisrael leave in the same way that Lavan was unwilling to let Ya'akov leave. Both Lavan and Paro see their flocks increasing under the care of this family and know that if Ya'akov/Bnei Yisrael leave, their success will come to an end.) Jewish history has provided plenty of examples of forced expulsion of Jews when religious or economic motives come into play. It stands to reason that when Jews are seen as essential to the economy, they may be forced \*not\* to leave.

## **AN INFERIOR PEOPLE:**

Rashbam (and perhaps Abravanel and other mefarshim) implies that even before the Egyptians officially enslave Bnei Yisrael, they already look at Bnei Yisrael as either cheap labor or a potential source of slave labor. The Egyptians fear that

this source of labor may one day develop feelings of independence and decide to leave Egypt. That the Egyptians look at Bnei Yisrael as potential slaves fits well with the hints we have mentioned that the Egyptians consider Bnei Yisrael a lower class: they refuse to share a table with members of Bnei Yisrael and consider Bnei Yisrael's traditional and current occupation an abomination.

Seforno (1:8) develops this theme further, suggesting that even though Yosef's deeds have certainly been written in the official Egyptian royal history, the new king refuses to \*believe\* that someone as capable as Yosef could have been part of the nation he sees before him now. Seforno adds (1:10) that part of what convinces Paro that Bnei Yisrael is the enemy are some of the elements which have faithfully fed antisemitism over the millennia: Bnei Yisrael have different customs (e.g., circumcision), a different language, and a different culture and value system. This, Seforno says, is behind the Egyptian refusal to break bread with Bnei Yisrael. Paro is not merely a leader facing a threatening group, he an antisemitic leader of an antisemitic society determined to maintain its source of cheap labor and determined to defend itself against the alien 'inferiors' whose number and strength have begun to worry him.

## **DEHUMANIZATION: INSECTS AND VERMIN**

Several other hints complete the picture: the Torah uses the word "**va-yishretzu**" to describe the great increase in Bnei Yisrael's population. The word "sheretz," which in the Torah refers to swarming, rodent-like, creeping-crawling creatures, is hardly the word we would choose to describe our own growth! In all of the places "sheretz" appears in Tanakh -- 29 places, to my knowledge -- "sheretz" refers to people in only ONE other place (Bereshit 9:7). In every other context, "sheretz" is a swarming or creeping animal; for example, "All swarming creatures [sheretz] which swarm on the ground are disgusting; they are not to be eaten" (VaYikra 11:41).

If you wanted to describe a couple blessed with many children, you would not say, "They breed like rabbits!" or "They swarm like cockroaches!" unless you meant to be disrespectful and dehumanizing. And, shockingly, the frogs which are to swarm over Egypt in just a little while are described using the SAME WORD the Torah uses to describe the growth of Bnei Yisrael (from the perspective of the Egyptians): "The river shall swarm ["sharatz"] with frogs; they will come up into your house, your bedroom, on your bed, in the house of your servant, among your people, in your ovens and in your baking-pans" (Shemot 7:28; see also Tehillim 105:30, which uses the same word to describe the plague). By describing Bnei Yisrael's growth in this way, the Torah is telling us that the Egyptians, frightened by Bnei Yisrael's explosive fertility and already accustomed to looking at Bnei Yisrael as a lower, alien class, feel threatened by their "swarming," rodent-like multiplication.

And it is no accident that just after describing Bnei Yisrael as experiencing such growth, the Torah reports that "the \*land\* was full of them" -- for a "sheretz" is (usually) a creature of the ground, as the above-quoted pasuk (verse) from VaYikra confirms. The Egyptians see Bnei Yisrael as a population of useful creatures -- but who are growing to epidemic proportions. The "obvious" solution: strictly enforced population control.

No Jew living in (or after) the twentieth century needs to be reminded that there is barely a hair's-breadth between merely \*thinking\* of a group of people as essentially inferior and actually \*treating\* the members of such a group as subhumans. If one wanted to convince a group of economically productive people to stay in the area, one would offer them attractive incentives; but if one wanted to get a \*monkey\* to stay in one's area, one would simply put him in a cage. It is only because the Egyptians think of Bnei Yisrael as sub-Egyptian that they are able to enslave and murder them.

## **POPULATION CONTROL BEGINS:**

The Egyptians begin by imposing a human tax (what is usually referred to in Tanakh as "mas oved") on Bnei Yisrael, demanding that the people perform physical labor -- building -- for them. This alone is not unusually cruel; many kings forced subjugated peoples to provide a set number of laborers for work, and many kings even demanded that their own people provide laborers for work required by the kingdom (including Shlomo HaMelekh! See I Melakhim 5:27). But the work imposed by Egypt is not to serve constructive national needs, but to erase any potential dreams of freedom by making it so difficult for the people to make it from day to day that no one will be able to raise his eyes above the struggle and develop a vision of freedom and independence. More practically, no one will have the energy to continue having children. When this strategy does not work -- "As much as they oppressed them, so did they increase and expand . . ." (1:12) -- the Egyptians turn to harsher measures. True enslavement begins with a vengeance, as the Egyptians force Bnei Yisrael into harsh slave labor.

When this too fails to control Bnei Yisrael's growth (see Ibn Ezra 1:13), Paro turns to more direct methods: he instructs the midwives to kill all baby boys. This brings us back to the theme of leadership: Rashi (1:16) explains that Paro cares about killing only the boys because his astrologers have told him that a leader is to be born to Bnei Yisrael who will eventually lead them to salvation. Since Paro assumes that such a leader can only be a man, he must kill all of the boys. But it doesn't take astrologers to know that a nation which suffers from a lack of leadership might become much more powerful if a leader appears! Paro knows that in order to control Bnei Yisrael, he must 1) reduce their population and 2) prevent them from developing leadership. As we said above, it is largely because of a lack of strong leadership that Paro is able to enslave and kill as he pleases. Paro is aware of this and knows that in order to maintain his latitude, he must extinguish any flickerings of leadership and independence which appear.

### **JUST LIKE ANIMALS:**

Then a strange event takes place: Paro finds out that the midwives have not been carrying out his orders to kill all baby boys. He summons them and demands an explanation. The midwives respond with what seems a flimsy excuse:

SHEMOT 1:19 --

The midwives said to Paro, "The women of Bnei Yisrael ["lvriyyot"] are not like Egyptian women -- they are "HAYYOT." Before the midwife can get to them, they have already given birth!"

The mefarshim debate the meaning of the word "hayyot." Hazal (Sota 11a), Rashi, and Abravanel take it quite literally and explain that the midwives mean that the women of Bnei Yisrael are like animals, which give birth without the aid of midwives. Some mefarshim suggest that "hayyot" means "energetic" or "quick"; others suggest that it means "midwives" (as it does in Hullin 4:3) -- the women who give birth are skilled as midwives themselves, so they do not summon the official midwives for help. Unless we accept that "hayyot" means midwives, which seems unlikely since this word is not usually used to mean "midwives" in Tanakh, how could the midwives hope to satisfy Paro with the explanation that the women of Bnei Yisrael are either "animals" (Hazal) or "quick at giving birth"? Why would Paro believe that these women are different than other women?

Rabbi Dan Jacobson (a friend of mine) suggested that Paro's willingness to accept this explanation is one more manifestation of the Egyptian view of Bnei Yisrael as inherently inferior. Paro is not surprised to hear that the women of Bnei Yisrael are "hayyot," "animals," and that they therefore give birth without the aid of midwives; this merely confirms his deeply held beliefs about Bnei Yisrael's inferiority. These people, "swarmers" who "fill the land," not only reproduce in the numbers that the lower animals do, they even give birth as lower animals do. They are simply uncivilized, and do not require trained medical assistance, as the more refined and complex Egyptian women do.

If "hayyot" means "energetic" or "quick" (as some mefarshim suggest), Paro is again not surprised to hear that there is a biological difference between the women of his nation and those of Bnei Yisrael. "Scientists" of Nazi Germany expended much effort and research "discovering" ways in which the Jew was biologically (not just culturally or psychologically) different than the Aryan. This was important because part of dehumanizing the Jew was "proving" that he was of a different race than the Aryan. Once this had been "proven," it could be easily "demonstrated" that the Aryan was superior in every way and that the Jew was not truly human.

### **A NATION OF KILLERS:**

Until now, only the midwives had been instructed to carry out Paro's "population control" scheme. Paro's final step, once he sees that they cannot help him, is to bring his entire nation into the effort to put Bnei Yisrael in their place:

SHEMOT 1:22 --

Paro commanded his entire people, saying: "Any boy who is born -- throw him into the river! Any girl -- let her live."

Lest we imagine that only Paro and a small group of bloodthirsty maniacs are responsible for murdering the babies of Bnei Yisrael, the Torah makes it clear that the entire nation is not only complicit, but actively involved in the murders. I hate to belabor the point -- especially a point this painful and horrifying -- but anyone who has trouble imagining how "normal" people could drown newborn, helpless babies in the Nile need only look back fifty years and witness how "normal," highly cultured Germans murdered Jews of all ages in terrifyingly horrible ways with customary German efficiency.

### **"RIGHTEOUS GENTILES":**

One other fascinating parallel to the Holocaust is worth mentioning at this point: the Holocaust produced some heroes, "righteous gentiles" who protested against the madness by saving Jews when they could, often at enormous personal risk. Abravanel claims that the midwives discussed above were indeed "righteous gentiles" -- that in fact, they were not midwives from among Bnei Yisrael, but Egyptian midwives who had been assigned to Bnei Yisrael (Abravanel interprets "me-yaldot ha-ivriyyot" to mean "the midwives \*of\* Bnei Yisrael," not "the Israelite midwives"; he supports this by asserting that Paro would never have trusted members of Bnei Yisrael to kill babies of their own nation) and who flouted Paro's orders to kill the baby boys because, as the Torah says, "they feared Hashem."

One other "righteous gentile" also appears in our parasha: Paro's daughter, who finds Moshe floating in a box in the Nile, realizes he is a child of Bnei Yisrael, and nevertheless adopts him. This brings us to the next major unit of Parashat Shemot: the appearance of Moshe Rabbeinu.

### **A LEADER APPEARS:**

Parashat Shemot begins by stressing the lack of strong leadership which plagues (no pun intended) Bnei Yisrael. But the second half of the parasha fills the vacuum with the birth, initiation, and first acts of leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu. We will focus on Moshe Rabbeinu in next week's shiur.

Shabbat Shalom



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**SEFER SHMOT - Introduction**

Is Sefer Shmot simply a continuation of Sefer Breishit - or is there something that makes it unique?

For example, are the Ten Commandments and the laws of Parshat Mishpatim included in this book, simply because they were given 'first' - or should we look for a thematic connection between those laws and the story of the Exodus?

As our series of shiurim rests on the assumption that each "sefer" [book] of CHUMASH [= the five 'books'] carries a unique theme, we will begin our study of Sefer Shmot in an attempt to identify its primary theme. Afterward, we will consider that theme in our study of each individual chapter or unit.

In our study of Sefer Breishit, we employed this approach to uncover its primary theme of "bechira" – i.e. how & why God chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of a nation that will bring the Name of God to mankind. In those shiurim, we demonstrated how that theme helped us understand the deeper meaning of each story and the progression of its events. Now, in our study of Sefer Shmot, we will employ a similar approach.

Therefore, we begin our study with quick overview of Sefer Shmot, in an attempt to find not only its underlying theme, but also its thematic connection to - and distinction from - Sefer Breishit.

**A TABLE OF CONTENTS**

To identify a common theme of any book, it is helpful to first make a list of its major topics and then to contemplate what connects these topics together.

Let's see what happens when we apply this approach to Sefer Shmot.

If we limit ourselves to a discussion of the most general categories, I think that everyone would agree with the following table of contents for Sefer Shmot:

- 1) "Yetziat Mitzraim" (the Exodus/ chaps. 1->17)  
[including the journey to Har Sinai]
- 2) "Ma'amad Har Sinai" (the Theophany / chaps. 18->24)  
[including the mitzvot of Parshat Mishpatim]
- 3) "The Mishkan" (the Tabernacle / chaps. 25->31)  
[God's commandment to build the Mishkan]
- 4) "Chet ha'Egel" (the sin of the Golden Calf/ 32->34)  
[including the story of the second luchot]
- 5) "Building the Mishkan" (its construction/ 35->40)  
[concluding with the "shechina" dwelling thereupon]

Therefore, to identify an overall theme for the entire book, we must search for a theme that connects all of these topics together.

**RAMBAN'S APPROACH - GALUT & GEULAH**

Ramban, in his short introduction to Sefer Shmot, attempts to do exactly this, i.e. to identify a common theme for the entire book. [It is recommended that your first read this Ramban.]

After defining Sefer Breishit as "sefer ha'yetzira" [the book of the creation of the world and of the people of Israel (and hence the patterns of its history)], Ramban proceeds to explain why Sefer Shmot begins with the story of Yetziat Mitzraim:

"... after completing Breishit, a special sefer is dedicated to describe the first "galut" [exile] as specifically decreed [in Sefer Breishit [see 15:13-16] and Bnei Yisrael's redemption from that GALUT..." (see Ramban's intro to Shmot1:1)

After explaining why Sefer Shmot begins with 'the redemption from exile' (as forecasted in Sefer Breishit), next Ramban must explain the progression in Sefer Shmot from Yetziat Mitzraim to Ma'amad Har Sinai, and then to the Mishkan:

"... and the GALUT is not over until they [Bnei Yisrael] return to the level of their forefathers... and even once they achieve their freedom from Egypt, they are not considered redeemed yet, for they still wander in the desert... But once they arrive at HAR SINAI to receive the Torah and build the MISHKAN, and God's shechina dwells upon them - then they return to the level of their forefathers... and are then considered totally REDEEMED..."

Note how Ramban understands the concept of "geulah" [redemption] as the underlying theme of the **entire** Sefer. This allows him to identify a common theme to the various topics of Yetziat Mitzraim, Matan Torah, and Mishkan. Although one could argue with Ramban's conclusions, he clearly assumes - as we did in our introduction - that there is a need to study each "sefer" in search of its unifying theme. In fact, Ramban opens his commentary to each "sefer" of Chumash in a very similar manner, i.e. with an attempt to identify its theme, and thus explain its flow of topic.

In our own study of Sefer Shmot, we will follow a direction similar to Ramban's, showing how all the various stories in Sefer Shmot carry a common theme (even though we may arrive at a slightly different conclusion). However, we begin our own study by focusing a bit more on its thematic connection to Sefer Breishit.

**FROM BREISHIT TO SHMOT**

We can readily understand why Sefer Shmot begins with the story of Yetziat Mitzraim, as that story appears to continue the narrative of Sefer Breishit. However, if Sefer Shmot simply continues the story of Sefer Breishit, why is it necessary to begin a new book?

To help clarify how these books differ, let's consider Sefer Breishit as God's '**master-plan**', while Sefer Shmot can be understood as the first stage of its '**implementation**'.

In other words, the "bechira" process - that emerged as the primary theme of Sefer Breishit - can be viewed as God's master plan for the creation of a special nation that will one-day represent Him and sanctify His Name. As such, the book began with the underlying reason for God's need of this nation (chapters 1->11), followed by His choice of the forefathers of that nation - and hence the stories of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov -focusing on the covenantal promises and which specific children would be chosen (chapters 12->50). This 'planning stage' reaches its conclusion as all of Yaakov's children are not only chosen, but also united (after the events of "mechirat Yosef") - and the 'seeds' of this nation have planted in the land of Egypt.

Sefer Shmot can be viewed as the first stage in God's implementation of this plan.

Recall God's opening promise to Avraham Avinu that he will become a "goy gadol" - a great nation (see 12:1-3). That's the 'plan'- therefore, Sefer Shmot begins by explaining HOW Bnei Yisrael became that great nation (Shmot 1:1-6).

Recall as well that in His covenant with Avraham Avinu ("brit bein ha'tarim" /see 15:13-18), God forecasted a period of 'slavery and oppression in a foreign land'; hence the first chapter of Sefer Shmot continues with the story of how that enslavement began (see 1:7-20). In the ensuing story of the Exodus (Shmot chapters 2 thru 15), God fulfills that next stage of that covenant by punishing their oppressor and redeeming His nation from Egypt.

The next major topic of Sefer Shmot is "Ma'amad Har Sinai" - which flows directly from the story of Yetziat Mitzraim - for in order for God's master plan to be fulfilled, Bnei Yisrael must receive a set of laws that will make them that special nation. To prepare them for that transformative moment, various events take place on their journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai (see Shmot chapters 14 thru 17). Upon their arrival at Sinai, the covenant is finalized and the first set of Laws are given, as described in Shmot chapters 18 thru 24. [In our of detailed study, we will also explore the thematic connection between "brit Sinai and "brit mila" ("I'hiyot Icha E'lokim -see Breishit 17:7-11).

From this point on, the logic behind the progression of topics in Sefer Shmot becomes more difficult to ascertain. Considering that Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai to receive the entire Torah, we would expect Sefer Shmot to record ALL the mitzvot they received at that time. Instead, Sefer Shmot records only SOME of those mitzvot (the "dibrot" & Parshat Mishpatim), and then focuses primarily on the mitzvot relating to the Mishkan, while other commandments given at Har Sinai are recorded elsewhere in Chumash – i.e. in Vayikra, Bamidbar, and Devarim.

In our study of Sefer Shmot, we will need to explain why only one unit of those mitzvot (i.e. the laws in Parshat Mishpatim) are recorded in Sefer Shmot ;and then consider why its focus shifts exclusively to the laws of the Mishkan.

For example, in his commentary to Shmot 25:1, Ramban explains why specifically the Mishkan (chapters 25 thru 31) emerges as the next major topic – for Bnei Yisrael now require a symbol of their special relationship with God. The Mishkan will remind Am Yisrael of their covenantal responsibilities; allow the nation to approach God, and demonstrate (to themselves and the other nations) how God dwells in their midst.

Our shiurim will also discuss Rashi's approach, highlighting the intricate thematic connections between Mishkan, Maamad Har Sinai **and** the sin of the Golden calf ["chet ha'egel"].

In light of the events of "chet ha'egel", a serious doubt arises concerning the very possibility of this special relationship. Sefer Shmot describes how that first covenant is broken, and how and why a new covenant is be forged that must include God's attributes of Mercy (see Shmot chapters 32 thru 34). In its aftermath, the Mishkan is finally built and God's presence dwells with His Nation (chapters 35 thru 40), a sign that the relationship has been fixed.

When Sefer Shmot reaches its conclusion, everything is ready for what should be the next stage of God's master plan – i.e. Bnei Yisrael should travel from Har Sinai to Canaan and inherit the Land. Why that does not happen, will emerge as a primary topic in our study of Sefer Bamidbar.

Based on this thematic setting, our opening shiur (on Parshat Shmot) will discuss the significance of God's "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush, while the shiurim on Parshiot Va'eyra & Bo will focus on Moshe's mission to prepare Bnei Yisrael for their redemption. Our shiur on Parshat B'shalach will discuss the need for the various events that take place during Bnei Yisrael's journey from Egypt to Har Sinai. In Parshiot Yitro & Mishpatim we will discuss the dialectic nature of the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai, as well as the special nature of the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim and their covenantal significance. Finally, our shiurim from Parshat Terumah through Parshat Pekudei will focus on the conceptual relationship between the Mishkan, Ma'amad Har Sinai and "chet ha'egel."

As usual, it is highly recommended that you use the study questions to prepare for the shiurim (even though the shiurim are written so that you can follow even without advanced preparation). Also, it is helpful to study using a Tanach Koren (or similar). This will make it much easier for you to determine the flow of topic and theme from 'parshia' to 'parshia.'

b'hatzlacha!  
menachem

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## INTRO PART II / For Parshat Shmot

### USING OUTLINES

We conclude our introductory shiur by bringing an example of how 'outlining' the flow of 'parshiot' can serve as an excellent study tool, especially helpful when searching for a central theme in any given unit.

In the following table we first list each 'parshia' in Parshat Shmot - and assign a short title to describe its primary topic.

Afterward, we will attempt to transform this list into an outline, by considering its thematic progression.

[It will help show how Parshat Shmot 'sets the stage' for the upcoming events in Sefer Shmot, as discussed in our introductory shiur.]

#### **'PARSHIA'      TOPIC**

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1:1-7       | Bnei Yisrael multiply, becoming a nation in Egypt.<br>(linking Sefer Breishit to Sefer Shmot) |
| 1:8-22      | The enslavement and its hardships begin   |
| 2:1-22      | The birth and early life of Moshe Rabeinu<br>[up until his arrival in Midyan]                 |
| 2:23-25     | God hears the crying out of Bnei Yisrael  |
| ** 3:1-4:17 | God's "HITGALUT" TO MOSHE AT THE "SNEH"<br>[Moshe receives his MISSION & clarifications].     |
| 4:18-26     | Moshe leaves Midyan to fulfill his mission.   |
| 4:27-4:31   | Moshe meets the elders, to inform the<br>nation in regard to their forthcoming redemption     |
| 5:1-3       | Moshe & Aharon go to Pharaoh, requesting<br>permission to worship God in the desert           |
| 5:4-6:1     | The mission appears to backfire;<br>Pharaoh doubles their workload.                           |

[Chapters 6 thru 14 describe how his mission is completed!]

#### **BUILDING UP TO THE BURNING BUSH**

We posit that the story of God's "hitgalut" [revelation] to Moshe at the burning bush should be considered the highlight of Parshat Shmot, for the mission that Moshe receives at the "sneh" - to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt - will emerge as the primary topic of the first half of Sefer Shmot, while the first two chapters serve as important background for that "hitgalut".

Let's explain how and why:

Recall from our shiurim on Sefer Breishit how its primary theme [the "bechira" process] progressed with each "hitgalut", i.e. each time that God spoke to the Avot. For example, in God's first "hitgalut" to Avraham Avinu, He introduced the concept of a special nation. In each subsequent "hitgalut" to the Avot, the details of God's future relationship with that nation slowly unfolded.

In a similar manner, we will see how the primary theme of Sefer Shmot is first introduced in God's opening "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush (see 3:1->4:17).

As this "hitgalut" is not described until chapter three, the first two chapters of Sefer Shmot serve as their 'backdrop':

- The first parshia in Sefer Shmot (1:1-7) explains how Bnei Yisrael became a NATION in the land of Egypt, thus fulfilling God's promise to Yaakov in the final "hitgalut" of Sefer Breishit (see 46:3-4 & our shiur on Vayigash).
- The next parshia (1:8-22) describes how the enslavement began, as foreseen in "brit bein ha'tarim" (15:13-15).
- The first 'parshia' in Chapter two (2:1-22) describes how God prepares His redemption with the story of birth of Moshe Rabeinu until he runs away to Midyan.
- In the final 'parshia' (2:23-25), we told of how the redemption finally begins, as God hears the cries of Bnei Yisrael's oppression.

The stage is now set for God's opening "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu in chapter three, where he will receive his mission to

redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

To better appreciate how the progression of topics in that key 'parshia', we now demonstrate another tool - that is also helpful when studying Chumash. We take an individual 'parshia', and divide it into paragraphs, and then make an outline to help follow its progression.

The following outline organizes this entire 'parshia', i.e. from 3:1 to 4:17 - highlighting its progression of topics:

### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. 3:1-3 Moshe notices the 'burning bush'
- B. 3:4-6 God identifies Himself to Moshe

### II. THE MISSION

- A. 3:7-8 God heard their cry, therefore He is coming:  
To redeem them, and bring them to Israel:
- B. 3:9-10 Moshe is charged to go to Pharaoh  
And take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt-

### III. QUESTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

(re: how to accomplish this mission)

- A. 3:11-12 How can I to go to Pharaoh, & take them out
- B. 3:13-22 What precisely do I tell Bnei Yisrael & Pharaoh
- C. 4: 1- 9 Why (and how) should they believe me
- D. 4:10-17 How can I, specifically, be Your spokesman

Let's explain:

First, God identifies Himself to Moshe Rabeinu (I) and then explains to him the mission and its purpose (II).

At the **center** of this outline lies God's charge to Moshe that he take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt (II-B).

Finally, Moshe responds to this assignment by asking several questions regarding how he is to accomplish his mission (III).

### GOD'S MESSAGE AT THE SNEH

What was the purpose of the "hitgalut" at the burning bush? As we will discuss in our shiur on Parshat Shmot, it did much more than just supply Moshe Rabeinu with some information. Rather, God will give Moshe a very complex mission, while explaining its goals and purpose.

In our shiurim on Parshat Shmot and Va'eyra, we explain what this mission is all about, noting that Moshe actually receives a DOUBLE mission.

Afterward, we will see how the next set of parshiot (chapters 6->17) will describe how Moshe actually completes this mission.

Till then,

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

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## PARSHAT SHMOT *Let My People Go*

Was Moshe Rabeinu's plea of 'Let My People Go' just a HOAX?

As preposterous as this might sound, Rashbam claims that this is the only way to explain the story in Sefer Shmot!

In this week's shiur, we uncover the basis for this daring interpretation by Rashbam, while arriving ourselves at a very different conclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

From youth, we are so familiar with the story of the Exodus that we rarely pay attention to the Torah's detail of that story. However, when one undertakes a careful reading of the first fourteen chapters of Sefer Shmot (as Rashbam does), the story that unfolds is quite different from what is commonly assumed.

In the first section of our shiur, we will review the story of the Exodus in the Bible to prove Rashbam's basic assertion - that Moshe **never, not even once**, asks Pharaoh to grant Bnei Yisrael freedom from slavery, or to emigrate to the land of Israel.

Instead, each time when Moshe goes to Pharaoh and demands 'Let My People Go', he is only requesting permission to allow Bnei Yisrael a three-day journey to worship their God in the desert.

Afterward we must explain why Moshe never tells Pharaoh the 'whole truth', and why this was all part of God's master plan.

In the second section of the shiur, we will show how this analysis serves as the foundation for Rashbam's conclusion that this 'master plan' is merely a 'hoax'.

In the third section, we will question this conclusion, and offer a different approach that will help us better appreciate the theological significance of the entire process of the Exodus.

### PART ONE

#### FREEDOM OF RELIGION or FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY

It is quite understandable why the saying 'Let My People Go' is commonly understood as a plea for freedom from slavery. After all, this was Moshe's recurring plea to Pharaoh just about every time they met. Furthermore, the holiday of Passover, when we commemorate the events of the Exodus, is commonly associated with freedom from slavery ['zman cheruteinu']. Therefore, it only makes sense that people would understand Moshe's demand that Pharaoh 'let his people go' as a request for freedom.

However, when we undertake a careful analysis of the story of the Exodus in the Bible, it becomes quite clear that Moshe is making a totally different request, relating more to 'freedom of religion' than to 'freedom from slavery'.

The proof of this point is rather tedious but very straightforward. All that we need to do is to follow the plot that unfolds in Sefer Shmot, tracing each time that Moshe Rabeinu goes to Pharaoh to make demands on behalf of Bnei Yisrael.

#### MOSHE'S REQUEST FROM PHARAOH

To be thorough, we begin our analysis by first examining God's original instruction to Moshe concerning his mission to Pharaoh, as explained to Moshe at the burning bush:

"...Then you and the elders shall go to the King of Egypt and tell him: The God of the Hebrews had come and told us - we must embark upon a **journey of a three day distance into the desert to offer sacrifices to our Lord**" (see 3:18).

As you review this pasuk and its context, note how this demand to Pharaoh makes no mention of any request for freedom from slavery. Instead, Moshe is instructed to demand that Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael the right to worship their God in the desert (at a site a three day distance from Egypt).

And this is precisely what Moshe does when he first goes to Pharaoh. Let's take a careful look at the Torah's description of that first confrontation in chapter five:

"Afterward, Moshe and Aharon came and said to Pharaoh: Thus said the God of Israel, let My People go and **worship Me in the desert**. [Pharaoh refuses.] And they answered: the God of the Hebrews has called upon us to embark upon a **journey of a three day distance into the desert** in order that we may **sacrifice to our God, lest He strike us with 'dever' (pestilence) or 'cherev' (sword)**." (5:1-3)

Note once again that all we find is Moshe's request to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship God in the desert; no more - no less!

However, we must also pay attention to the implication of the final phrase of this pasuk - "lest he strike us with **dever** or **cherev**". Moshe warns Pharaoh that should he not allow Bnei Yisrael this journey to worship their God in the desert, a severe Divine punishment will ensue and many people - Egyptians & Hebrews - may die from 'dever' or 'cherev'. Hence, Moshe's demand implies that it may be in the 'best interests' of the Egyptian people - to allow Bnei Yisrael this 'short vacation' to worship their God in the desert. [See Ibn Ezra & Chizkuni on 5:3.]

The outcome of this first encounter is disastrous for the people of Israel, for Pharaoh not only refuses this request, he is so angered by it that he doubles their workload (see 5:4-10).

Nonetheless, God commands Moshe once again to go to Pharaoh and demand once again that he grant them permission to worship Him in the desert. This time, however, God will provide Moshe with some 'leverage' by performing miracles whose purpose will be to convince Pharaoh to take his warning seriously.

This background can help us appreciate God's explanation of the purpose of the Ten Plagues, when He speaks to Moshe in chapter seven. As a response to Pharaoh's refusal statement of: "lo **yada'ti** et Hashem" [I never heard of this God] (see 5:2), God explains to Moshe that the purpose of the plagues will be to convince Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews indeed exists and He will bring plagues if His people do not worship him:

"And Pharaoh will not listen to you, so I will put My Hand against Egypt, and I will take People out with great punishments - "**ve-yad'u** Mitzrayim ki Ani Hashem" - so that Egypt will know that I am God" (see 7:4-5).

It will take ten Plagues to finally convince Pharaoh that it is in his best interest to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship their God; nevertheless, when Pharaoh finally allows Bnei Yisrael to leave (after the Tenth Plague), it was only in order to worship their God. To our surprise, Pharaoh never granted Bnei Yisrael freedom from slavery, or permission to emigrate! Nor did Bnei Yisrael ever ask for it.

To prove this interpretation, we need only note how Moshe prefaces each and every warning to Pharaoh before a plague begins. For example, before the first plague, God instructs Moshe:

"Go meet Pharaoh in the morning... and say to him: Hashem, the God of the Ivrim has sent me to you demanding Let My People Go and **worship Me in the desert**, and behold you have yet to listen. Thus says the Lord, with this (plague) you will know that I am God..." (see 7:14-17).

Then, in each successive plague we find an almost identical opening warning: "**shlach et ami** - Let My people go – **ve-ya'avduni ba-midbar** - so that they can **worship Me in the desert**", [or else ...]

See 7:16 (first plague); 7:26 (second plague); 8:16 (fourth plague); 9:1 (fifth plague); 9:13 (seventh plague); and 10:3 (eighth plague). [Note that Plagues 3,6, and 9 don't have any pre-warning.]

As you review these psukim and their context, you will also notice that this is all that Moshe requests. Not even once does he ever even hint to Pharaoh that Bnei Yisrael plan to leave for good!

### NEGOTIATIONS & MORE NEGOTIATIONS

This interpretation can also help us understand the various negotiations that take place between Moshe and Pharaoh during the Ten Plagues. If you follow their conversations, you'll find that they focus **ONLY** on this issue of a three-day journey to worship God, and **NEVER** on 'emigration rights to Palestine'.

Let's cite several examples that show the progression of these negotiations. Note how Pharaoh slowly acquiesces to Moshe's demand (to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship God in the desert).

#### ROUND ONE:

After 'makat arov' (the fourth plague), Pharaoh finally budes. He grants Bnei Yisrael permission to worship their God, but not in the desert, rather **within** the Land of Egypt (see 8:21-23). But once again, pay careful attention to how Moshe rejects this proposal for technical reasons. Moshe claims that if Bnei Yisrael would offer sacrifices in the land, the local population of Egypt would 'stone them'. Therefore, Moshe insists that Bnei Yisrael can only worship God in the desert.

Pharaoh then agrees to allow a short journey into the desert, but not a three-day distance:

"And Pharaoh said, I will send you out so that you can worship your God in the DESERT, but don't go too far away..." (see 8:24).

However, once that plague ended, Pharaoh hardened his heart once again and reneged on his promise (see 8:25-28). Even though Pharaoh is clearly worried about giving Bnei Yisrael permission to leave, he never accuses Moshe that he may be planning to run away! Likewise, Moshe himself never mentions the possibility that they may not return. [Later in the shiur we will discuss what Pharaoh is afraid of.]

#### ROUND TWO:

Later, after Moshe warns of the impending plague of locusts, Pharaoh's own servants demand his concession to Moshe (see 10:7). In response, Pharaoh enters into a new round of negotiations with Moshe that eventually reach an impasse over the issue of WHO can leave. Moshe insists that even the women and children come along, while Pharaoh allows only the men to leave (see 10:7-11).

Again, note the reason for Moshe's insistence on allowing the women and children to join; not because they are leaving forever, but rather - "for all family members need to worship God" (see 10:9). Never does he tell Pharaoh that everyone must go because the entire nation plans to migrate to Eretz Canaan. Moshe's various 'excuses' all imply that he plans to return.

#### ROUND THREE:

Finally, after the ninth plague ['choshech'], Pharaoh conducts one final round of negotiations. This time, he is willing to grant permission even for the women & children to leave, but not their sheep and cattle (see 10:24-25). Once again, Moshe counters with a 'technical reason', claiming that all the animals must come along, since they are not sure precisely which type of animals God will request for a sacrifice (see 10:26!).

In summary, at every stage of these negotiations, Moshe consistently rejects any concession or compromise, insisting that **EVERYONE** must go. Still, despite numerous opportunities, he **NEVER** even suggests that they plan to leave for good. Likewise, no matter how resolutely Pharaoh sticks to his hard line, he **NEVER** states a suspicion that Bnei Yisrael may be leaving forever.

#### EVEN AFTER THE TENTH PLAGUE!

In the Torah's account of the Exodus (in the aftermath of the Tenth Plague / see 12:29-36) we find conclusive proof for this interpretation. Note Pharaoh's immediate reaction when he hears reports of the death of the Egyptian first born:

"... and he [Pharaoh] called to Moshe and Aharon at night and said: Get up and get out... and GO WORSHIP your God - "ke-daberchem" - as you (originally / in 5:3) requested! Even your sheep and cattle take with you, as you requested (in 10:26), and BLESS ME AS WELL..." (see 12:31-33).

The tenth plague awakens Pharaoh to the realization that Moshe's original warning of 'dever' or 'cherev' (see 5:3) has actually come true. Now, he finally gives in to the very last of Moshe's demands - allowing them to take their sheep and cattle with them on their journey to the desert. (Recall that is where the last set of negotiations broke down.)

Not only does Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael a three-day journey to offer 'korbanot', he even requests that Moshe will pray there on his behalf (to make a MISHEBERACH for him - see 12:32 "u-berachtem gam oti")!

Clearly, even after the Tenth Plague, Pharaoh only grants Bnei Yisrael permission to worship God in the desert! And for the very simple reason - that's all that Moshe ever asked for!

This also explains why the entire Egyptian nation urges Bnei Yisrael to leave as quickly as possible (see 12:33-35). They want to make sure that Bnei Yisrael can sacrifice to their God as soon as possible - thereby bringing this horrifying plague to an end (see 12:33). This explains beautifully why the Egyptians 'LEND' ['va-yish'alu'] Bnei Yisrael their finest wares, to encourage them to leave as quickly as possible (see 12:35-36). As Bnei Yisrael are

only taking a 'holiday leave' to worship their God, the Egyptians have every reason to assume they will return afterward back to Egypt - and bring back what they 'borrowed'.

The Torah uses the word 'borrowed' to describe what Bnei Yisrael took from the Egyptians, for that's exactly what they did!

### THE LAST 'TRICK'

A final proof for this interpretation is found in Parshat Beshalach when Pharaoh is totally astonished when he finds out that Bnei Yisrael had 'run away':

"And it was told to the King of Egypt - ki BARACH ha-am - that the people had RUN AWAY..." (see 14:5).

Now, this pasuk makes sense only if Pharaoh had not granted them total freedom, but only a permit to temporarily worship God in the desert. Had he actually set them free, why would he be shocked to hear that the people had 'run away'?

However, according to our interpretation, Pharaoh is shocked for the opposite reason - because Bnei Yisrael DID NOT travel into the desert. This may sound a bit complicated, so let's explain by taking a careful look at these psukim.

First of all, recall from 12:37 and 13:17-18 that Bnei Yisrael had left Egypt traveling toward the desert. Then, in the middle of that journey, God suddenly commands Moshe to execute a 'turn-around' maneuver.

"And God told Moshe, tell Bnei Yisrael to TURN AROUND and set up camp... near the Red Sea. [In order that] Pharaoh will say they are wandering in the land (of Egypt), for the desert has closed them in" (see 14:1-4).

In other words, God commands Bnei Yisrael to turn around in order to convince Pharaoh that they are not going to the desert. Had Bnei Yisrael continued on their journey towards the desert, Pharaoh would have had no reason to chase them. After all, he wants them to go to the desert to worship their God, as they requested. It is specifically because they DON'T go to worship God, but instead RETURN TO EGYPT and set up camp by the Red Sea, that Pharaoh concludes:

"...what have we done [we've been tricked!], for we have set Bnei Yisrael free from their slave labor!" (see 14:5).

It is only now that Pharaoh realizes that Bnei Yisrael have left slavery. What leads him to this conclusion? The answer is quite simple.

Let's consider what Bnei Yisrael have done. Clearly, they did not travel to the desert (as they had requested). However, they also do not return to their homes in Goshen, i.e. to their slavery. Nor do they travel towards Eretz Canaan. Instead, they stay in Egypt, and set up camp by the sea. So what are they up to?

Pharaoh reaches the obvious conclusion. Bnei Yisrael have implicitly declared their independence - in the Land of Egypt! Therefore, for the sake of his national security, Pharaoh must immediately declare war on this rebellious nation (see 14:6-10). If he doesn't attack them first, they surely will soon attack him. After all, they are numerous, and armed (see 13:18).

In fact, this was Egypt's greatest fear from the very beginning. Recall that the enslavement began because Bnei Yisrael had become so numerous that Egypt feared that they would take over their own country (see 1:8-10, and Rasag, Rashi and Ibn Ezra on 1:10)!

Pharaoh's decision to attack ultimately leads to Bnei Yisrael's momentous salvation at the Red Sea. [That topic will be discussed in detail in our shiur on Parshat Beshalach.] It also explains why Bnei Yisrael can keep the various wares that they had 'borrowed' from the Egyptians. After Egypt declared war on Bnei Yisrael, their 'bank accounts' are 'frozen'.

There can be no two ways about it. This is the 'story of the Exodus' in the Bible. Despite the numerous movie versions and the popular understanding that 'Let My People Go' is a request for 'freedom from slavery', in Chumash it is simply a request for the 'freedom to worship God in the desert'!

Surely, this interpretation raises many questions.

First of all, with the Ten Plagues 'up his sleeve [or staff]', Moshe is in a position to demand just about anything he wants from Pharaoh. Why should he ask for a 'three day vacation' when he can ask for total freedom?

Furthermore, what does he gain by not telling the 'whole truth'?

In Part Two of our shiur, we will first discuss Rashbam's approach to this question, showing how the above analysis forms its basis. Afterward, we will suggest an explanation of our own.

### LET MY PEOPLE GO - PART TWO

In our introductory shiur to Sefer Shmot, we explained that God did not appear to Moshe (at the 'sneh') simply to provide him with some information, rather God charges Moshe with a MISSION:

"And now go for I am sending you to Pharaoh - and TAKE My people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (3:10).

Note that at first, God instructs Moshe to take His nation out of Egypt, without providing even a clue concerning HOW to get the job done!

### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

As we would expect, Moshe Rabeinu is startled by God's commandment. Considering his having been a fugitive from Egypt for many years, why should Pharaoh even allow him an audience? Furthermore, Moshe has been away from his people for most of his adult life. [Recall that he ran away at a rather young age and returns only at age eighty!] How could they possibly accept him as their official leader?

Therefore, Moshe's immediate response to this command is quite understandable:

"And Moshe said to God: WHO am I that I can go to Pharaoh, - VE-CHI OTZI - and [HOW can I] take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt?!" (See 3:11, read carefully.)

No matter how we translate the phrase 've-chi otzi' in this pasuk (its precise definition is a bit problematic), it certainly seems that Moshe is asking HOW he is supposed to take Bnei Yisrael out. However, God's answer to his question does not seem to address this issue at all:

"And He said: For I will be with you, and this is the sign that I have sent you - WHEN you take the Nation out of Egypt, you shall worship Elokim on this mountain" (see 3:12).

How does this answer Moshe's question? Moshe asks HOW he is supposed to take them out, and God tells him what to do AFTER he takes them out! What Moshe asks - God never answers, and what God answers - Moshe never asked!

Now there are two basic approaches to solve this problem. Either we can 'reinterpret' Moshe's question to fit God's answer [see Rashi & Seforno], or we can 'reinterpret' God's answer to fit Moshe's question [see Rashbam].

In our shiur we will deal primarily with the latter interpretation. But before we begin, let's take a quick glance at Rashi's approach.

### RASHI - 'FOR WHAT PURPOSE'!

Rashi (on 3:12) deals with this difficulty by reinterpreting Moshe's question (in 3:11). When Moshe asks 'VE-CHI OTZI', he asks not HOW to take them out, but rather WHY am I (and/or Bnei Yisrael) WORTHY of being taken out of Egypt? To this God responds that AFTER they leave Egypt, Bnei Yisrael are to worship Him and receive the Torah on this mountain. This merit alone renders them worthy of Yetziat Mitzrayim. In other words, God here explains the PURPOSE of Yetziat Mitzrayim - that Bnei Yisrael will receive the Torah at Har Sinai!

### RASHBAM - 'HOW TO GET THE JOB DONE'!

Unlike Rashi, Rashbam refuses to reinterpret the question. Instead, he reinterprets God's answer. He accomplishes this by

dividing God's answer into two parts, corresponding to both the two parts of God's original command & the two parts of Moshe's original question. The following table maps out this parallelism in psukim 3:10-12:

#### **THE FIRST HALF OF EACH SENTENCE**

3:10/ COMMAND: Go, I have sent you to Pharaoh!  
3:11/ QUESTION: Who am I, that I can go to Pharaoh?  
3:12/ ANSWER: For I will be with you, and this [the sneh] is the sign that I have SENT you...

#### **THE SECOND HALF OF EACH SENTENCE**

3:10/ COMMAND: Take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt!  
3:11/ QUESTION: [HOW] can I take them out of Egypt?  
3:12/ ANSWER: [In order to] take them out of Egypt, [tell Pharaoh that] this nation must worship their God on this mountain.

Rashbam's interpretation of 3:12 is very creative. He claims that Moshe asks (in 3:11) that even if he is allowed to speak to Pharaoh, HOW can he possibly convince Pharaoh to let them free? God answers Moshe by telling him to 'TRICK' PHARAOH - "Tell Pharaoh that you must take Bnei Yisrael [for a short time] out of Egypt, in order that they can worship their God on this mountain."

In other words, Rashbam claims that God instructs Moshe to 'deceive' Pharaoh requesting permission to worship God in the desert. Once they leave, Moshe will lead Bnei Yisrael to the Promised Land, where they will live forever, never again to return to Egypt!

Rashbam clearly reads into this pasuk much more than is written. In fact, Rashbam himself admits to doing so! However, he explains that he bases this interpretation on a later pasuk in this 'hitgalut' - where God issues more specific instructions to Moshe regarding his meeting with Pharaoh:

"... Then you and the elders shall go to the King of Egypt and tell him: 'The God of the Hebrews had come and told us that we must go for a three-day journey into the desert [to Har Chorev] to offer sacrifices to our Lord'" (3:18).

As we explained in Part One, Rashbam's approach is based on the above analysis that Moshe never asks for freedom, rather for a journey of a three day distance to worship God in the desert. Considering that Moshe's true intention (as he tells Bnei Yisrael) is to take them to the Promised Land, the 'three day journey' request must be part of a 'master plan' to 'sneak' Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt.

Furthermore, the final phrase of 5:3: "lest he strike us with DEVER or CHEREV" - explains God's intention in 3:12. The plan is rather simple. Moshe warns Pharaoh that if he does not allow Bnei Yisrael to journey into the desert and worship their God, a severe Divine punishment will ensue and many people will die (including Egyptians).

As we explained above, a careful analysis of the entire Exodus narrative renders Rashbam's explanation that God commands Moshe to employ 'trickery' as the simple 'pshat'.

Even though we have referred to this plan as 'trickery', Rashbam does not call this 'lying' - he refers to it instead as 'derech chochma' - a wise scheme. He brings a parallel example from Sefer Shmuel. When God instructs Shmuel with the mission to anoint David as king, Shmuel expresses his fear that Shaul may find out and then kill him. To solve this problem, God provides Shmuel with a 'cover up', telling him to claim that he is going to Bet-Lechem to offer a public sacrifice. Once there, he will secretly anoint David as king. [See Shmuel I/16:1-3!]

When you read this Rashbam inside, note the 'confident' style with which he begins his explanation:

"Anyone who would like to understand the primary 'pshat' of these psukim should study my interpretation of this pasuk, for those who explained it before me did not understand it at all!" [See Rashbam 3:11-12.]

Later on, Rashbam is so sure that his interpretation is correct that he concludes his commentary by stating:

"Anyone who explains these psukim in any other manner is totally mistaken!" [See end of peirush to 3:11-12.]

#### **'NOT SO FAST ...'**

Despite the charm and appeal of Rashbam's explanation, there appears to be a major 'hole' in his theory. Let's explain:

Recall that, in addition to his mission to Pharaoh, Moshe's mission also included that he tell Bnei Yisrael that God had now come to take them out of Egypt to the Promised Land (see 3:16-17). And this is exactly what Moshe does in 4:29-31.

Is it possible to expect that over one million people know the 'real' plan, and Pharaoh won't find out? Can it be expected that no one will leak the story? Doesn't Pharaoh have his own CIA [KGB, Shin Bet... take your pick]?

Furthermore, it appears that Moshe has nothing to gain by not telling Pharaoh the whole truth? Either way, God tells Moshe that Pharaoh won't listen in any event (see 3:19), so why not tell Pharaoh the whole truth in the first place?

Finally, is God not powerful enough to bring plagues capable of forcing Pharaoh to grant Bnei Yisrael total freedom? Is it better to deceive Pharaoh rather than tell him the truth?

#### **NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE**

When we read the story of the Exodus, it is commonly assumed that the only obstacle preventing Bnei Yisrael's return to Eretz Canaan was their enslavement to Egypt. However, if we consider their condition more realistically, we realize that Bnei Yisrael had no alternative other than remain in Egypt. Let's explain why:

Bnei Yisrael's population is over two million. [The census included 600,000 men over the age of twenty. Figure an equal amount of women, and considering the high birth rate figure as many children under twenty as adults over twenty, and you arrive at a figure of about two million!]

To provide food and water for this size population is not an easy task. Egypt, thanks to the Nile River and Nile Delta, could provide their needs. However, survival of a nation of this size in desert conditions, even for a few weeks, would be impossible.

Even if Pharaoh had granted them permission to emigrate, could a nation of some two million people [ex-slaves] survive the lengthy, arduous journey through the desert? And even if they could make it to Canaan, could they conquer the land with its walled cities and formidable, armed enemies? As the 'meraglim' themselves concluded, such a plan would be suicidal - and that's a conclusion reached by people who had witnessed the miracles of Yetziat Mitzrayim! [See Bamidbar chapters 13->14.]

Without anything less than a 'miracle', Bnei Yisrael have no option other than to remain in Eretz Mitzrayim.

Furthermore, Bnei Yisrael had been living in Egypt for (at least) the last two hundred years. Certainly, in the eyes of the Egyptians (and most likely in their own eyes), even though they may be 'third class citizens', they remain a distinct ethnic group within Egyptian society and culture.

In fact, it is for this very reason that their enslavement begins when Bnei Yisrael become so numerous. Egypt fears that they may soon take over! Many dynasties in Egypt had been taken over by enemies from within or by foreign powers. They now fear that Bnei Yisrael may soon become powerful enough to take over their own country or help others do so (see 1:8-10).

Thus, despite the hardships of their enslavement, [without some sort of miraculous, divine intervention] Bnei Yisrael had no realistic alternative other than staying in Egypt. When Bnei Yisrael cry out for salvation in 2:23-25, they are an oppressed working class who desire a lighter workload and better living conditions; they are NOT yearning for Zion.

With this in mind, let's imagine what would have happened had Moshe presented Pharaoh with this plan of an en-masse emigration to Eretz Canaan. Pharaoh most probably would have dismissed him as insane! Moshe would have lost all credibility in the eyes of Pharaoh as a responsible leader of the Hebrew

Nation. Instead, God instructs Moshe to make a fairly reasonable request - to allow his afflicted brethren to worship their God. Moshe does not lie to Pharaoh, nor does he deceive him. He simply claims the legitimate right of religious freedom for an oppressed people!

Furthermore, God can demand that Pharaoh grant religious freedom to an oppressed people, and hence punish him for not obeying; but He can't expect Pharaoh to act as 'an ardent supporter of Zionism' - allowing an entire nation to embark on a journey that would most certainly be suicidal!

Hence, there would no point for Moshe to demand that Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael to emigrate. Instead, he demands that Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael the right to worship their God in the desert. This is not a lie, for this is exactly where Bnei Yisrael first plan to go (to Har Sinai), and there they will offer korbanot (see Shmot 24:4-11).

This explains why Pharaoh never accuses Moshe (during the Plagues) that he may really be planning to take Bnei Yisrael to Eretz Canaan, for Pharaoh never considers this a realistic option!

So what is Pharaoh worried about? Why is he so adamant not to allow them to worship their God in the desert for a few days?

The answer is quite simple, and it explains every problem that we have raised thus far.

Pharaoh has ONE fear, and only one fear: From the time that the enslavement began until the day of the Exodus, Pharaoh's only fear is that Bnei Yisrael may take-over his country. That is exactly why he enslaved them in the first place (see 1:8-10), and this is exactly why he is reluctant to allow the entire nation to leave with all their belongings.

Pharaoh fears that should he let them free to worship their God, they will take advantage of the situation, and instead of returning to slavery, they will return and rebel; or join with other nations and attack. By not allowing them to travel too far, and by leaving their women and children (or at least cattle) behind, Pharaoh remains with a clear advantage. But should the entire nation leave to worship their God, nothing guarantees that Bnei Yisrael will return to their servitude. Instead, they could take advantage of the situation and declare their independence when they return to Egypt, or possibly even attack Egypt.

And when Bnei Yisrael finally did leave Egypt, what Pharaoh feared most is exactly what happened. Bnei Yisrael DON'T go to the desert. Instead they march away 'armed' (see 13:18), with all of their own possessions, and with a significant amount of 'borrowed' Egyptian gold and silver - everything they need to declare independence! As soon as Pharaoh realizes that they are not going to the desert, he concludes that he has a rebellion on hand, and he launches a pre-emptive strike before they attack him (see 14:1-6).

With this in mind, we can suggest an answer to our other questions as well.

### **KEEPING A SECRET**

Even though Moshe had told Bnei Yisrael of God's promise to take them to Eretz Canaan, had the Egyptians heard this 'rumor', they would have scoffed at the very thought. Could a multitude of slaves possibly organize themselves into an independent nation? Could they survive the journey through the desert? Could they conquer the kings of Canaan? Are there any neighboring lands as good as Egypt?

No one was keeping any secrets. Even the majority of Bnei Yisrael felt that this idea would lead to national suicide (see 14:12!). Why should the Egyptians believe this 'rumor' any more than Bnei Yisrael did? Throughout Sefer Shmot and Sefer Bamidbar, we find the people time and time again expressing their desire to return to Egypt. As the "meraglim" (spies) themselves later conclude, it is the only logical alternative (see Bamidbar 14:1-4).

Although God's promise of a land 'flowing with milk and honey' (see 3:8,17) was originally endorsed by the elders (see

4:29-31), only a short while later, after their workload was doubled, these hopes fizzled out (see 5:1-21).

### **THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

In addition to our explanation that God has no intention to fool Pharaoh, one could even suggest that there is a certain thematic value in the fact that Moshe's request from Pharaoh is specifically for 'religious freedom' and not the right to emigrate.

The story of the Exodus, and hence God mission to Moshe at the 'sneh', focuses on two independent issues:

- 1) To redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt - to fulfill Brit Avot;
- 2) To 'teach' Pharaoh and his country the lesson of 'ANI HASHEM' - that God of Israel exists.

In His 'hitgalut' to Moshe at the 'sneh', God charges Moshe with the responsibility of dealing with both issues.

Let's begin with the latter by asking a more basic question: why must Moshe confront Pharaoh in the first place? If the entire purpose of Yetziat Mitzrayim is simply to fulfill 'brit Avot' and take Bnei Yisrael to Eretz Canaan, why involve Egypt in this process at all? Surely God could create circumstances whereby Bnei Yisrael would emigrate without official Egyptian authorization. For example, let God cause a sudden change in Egyptian policy, or make just one miracle where all the Egyptians would fall asleep for 48 hours, etc.

[See Ramban on 3:13 for an interesting perspective.]

Nonetheless, at the 'sneh' we see how God insists that Bnei Yisrael must receive Pharaoh's permission to leave. Note how the psukim emphasize this point:

"Now go, I have sent you to PHARAOH..." (3:10)  
and Moshe responds:

"Who am I that I should go to PHARAOH?..." (3:11).

Moshe's confrontation with Pharaoh constitutes a critical element of God's plan. God does not tell Moshe to 'trick' Pharaoh. Rather, Moshe must confront Pharaoh over the fundamental issue of religious freedom - the basic right of any people, especially an oppressed nation, to worship God. The fact that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt - the world superpower and center of ancient civilization - rejects this request shows that he considers himself above his fellow man. He acts as though he himself is a god; God must therefore teach him (and any future Pharaoh/monarch) the lesson of "ve-yad'u Mitzrayim ki ANI Hashem" (see 7:5,9:16,11:9,14:4).

[One could suggest that the natural resources of Egypt, especially the inestimable Nile river, granted power to the Egyptian people. [See Yechezkel 29:1-3.] This power not only allowed their monarch to claim divine power and authority, but also led Egypt to their self-proclaimed privilege to oppress other nations - to act as though they were gods. It is not by chance that the first plague strikes specifically the Nile River.]

### **TWO PERSPECTIVES**

Therefore, from a universalistic perspective, the primary goal of Yetziat Mitzraim is that Egypt - the center of ancient civilization - realize that God is above all Man - "ve-yad'u Mitzraim ki Ani Hashem." Moshe must deliver this message to the Egyptian people, in God's Name, directly to Pharaoh (as explained in 3:10-12, 18-20). The MAKKOT ensure that the Egyptians will ultimately internalize this message.

Hence, when Moshe is commanded to go to Pharaoh and demand Bnei Yisrael's right to worship their God, it's not a 'trick', but rather a basic, human demand.

On the other hand, from Am Yisrael's perspective, the central purpose of Yetziat Mitzraim relates to the fulfillment of God's covenant with the Avot, that Bnei Yisrael return to Eretz Canaan in order to become God's special nation. As Bnei Yisrael must prepare themselves for this redemption (as we will explain in next week's shiur), Moshe must convey this message to them (see 3:7-9, 13-17). Ultimately, this redemption will take place in wake

of the events that unfold once Pharaoh allows Bnei Yisrael to leave after the Ten Plagues.

#### **FROM MAKKOT TO DIBROT**

In conclusion, it is interesting to note the inter-relationship between these two aspects of the Exodus.

As we explained in Sefer Breishit, an ultimate goal of the Nation of Israel is to establish a model society that can bring all mankind to recognize God. At Yetziat Mitzrayim - when Israel becomes a nation - it is significant that Egypt - the center of ancient civilization and the epitome of a society that rejects God - must recognize God, specifically at the moment when Am Yisrael becomes a nation.

Initially (and unfortunately), this goal must first be achieved through force, by Moshe's MATEH and God's TEN Plagues. Ultimately, when Israel becomes a nation in its own land, this very same goal can be achieved in a more 'peaceful' manner - i.e. through education - should Bnei Yisrael integrate the message of Moshe's DIBUR and the principles of God's TEN Commandments.

*shabbat shalom,  
menachem*



### FOR FURTHER IYUN

#### A. Hashem's Response to Moshe's question - 3:12

Before presenting the various approaches taken to this pasuk let us first identify the various problems that immediately arise. The pasuk reads, "He said, I will be with you, and this shall be a sign that I have sent you, when you free the nation from Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain." The mefarshim must grapple with the following questions:

Most urgently, as we discuss in the shiur, is the issue as to how Hashem here responds to the concerns Moshe expresses in 3:11: "Who am I, that I can go to Pharaoh and that I can take Bnei Yisrael from Egypt?"

To what does 'this' refer in the phrase, "this shall be a sign that I have sent you"? Does it refer to the immediately preceding clause - "I will be with you," that somehow Hashem's "being with" Moshe serves as a sign? Or does it refer to the immediately following clause, the nation's serving Hashem at this mountain after leaving Egypt? How could Matan Torah serve as a sign that "I have sent you"? Significantly, an 'etnachta', signifying a pause in the sentence, appears under the word, 'shlachtica' ('that I have sent you'), perhaps suggesting that the 'sign' refers to what was mentioned earlier, rather than that which follows the 'etnachta'.

Why does Moshe need a sign that Hashem sent him; did he ever express any doubt that it was God who spoke to him? He doubted only his ability to speak to Pharaoh and demand the release of the slaves.

A question that necessarily relates to the previous questions: what does Matan Torah have to do with Yetziat Mitzrayim? Why does Hashem mention it here to Moshe?

It is important to bear all these questions in mind when surveying the various interpretations. This will help us appreciate what prompted each mefaresh to explain as he did.

In the shiur we accept the Rashbam's interpretation of the pasuk, that Hashem responds to Moshe's concerns by telling him that a) He will ensure Moshe's permission to come before Pharaoh and b) he would free Bnei Yisrael by 'fooling' Pharaoh into thinking that he requests merely permission for a three-day trek into the wilderness to worship Hashem.

Here is a brief survey of some other explanations offered:

- A. Rashi, first interpretation: The burning bush serves as a sign to Moshe that he will succeed, since "I have sent you". Just as the bush was not consumed by the fire in compliance with Hashem's will, so will Moshe succeed because he performs Hashem's mission, which can never fail. The second half of the pasuk refers to a second question that Moshe had asked: in what merit Bnei Yisrael will be freed? Hashem responds that He will redeem them in the merit of their eventual assembly at that mountain for Matan Torah.
- B. Rashi, second interpretation: The clause, "this is the sign that I have sent you..." bears no connection to the first part of the pasuk. Hashem 'parenthetically' informs Moshe that his success in freeing Bnei Yisrael will serve as a sign of the fulfillment of a different promise - Matan Torah.
- C. Ibn Ezra (Peirush Ha-katzar) cites an approach that completely separates the two halves of the pasuk, before and after the etnachta. That is, "when you leave Egypt you will serve God" is merely additional information that does not address Moshe's concern. Within this approach, Ibn Ezra cites two versions. According to the Geonim, Hashem's 'being with Moshe' will serve as a sign, while the anonymous 'acheirim' view the miracle of the burning bush as the sign (recall Rashi's first interpretation). Either way, it seems, these phenomena serve as a sign "that I have sent you." As Ibn Ezra notes, however, Moshe never doubted Hashem's having sent him (as noted earlier). Additionally, we should add, this approach leaves unresolved the question as to why Hashem makes mention of Matan Torah in this context.
- D. Ibn Ezra himself (in his Peirush Ha-katzar) suggests a somewhat revolutionary pshat, claiming (though somewhat cryptically) that the word 'ot', generally translated as 'sign', here means 'purpose'. Hashem thus informs Moshe that the

purpose of His taking Bnei Yisrael from Egypt is for them to stand at Har Sinai and receive the Torah. Ibn Ezra does not explain why Hashem suddenly mentions this now, rather than when He initially instructed Moshe to go to Pharaoh.

- E. Ramban understands the reference to Matan Torah as Hashem's assurance to Moshe that Bnei Yisrael will agree to go to Canaan. Moshe was concerned that the people would refuse to go in fear of the nations they would have to fight upon entering the land. Hashem thus tells Moshe that the nation will first worship Him on that mountain, and there they will accept the mitzvot and Moshe as their leader. They will then follow him to Canaan. (One version of the Seforno's commentary on our pasuk has him adopting this explanation - see footnotes on the Seforno in the Torat Chayim Chumash.) Although Ramban does not make it clear how this serves as a 'sign', he likely refers to Ramban's reading of this pasuk, as he explains in Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 8:6. Ramban there writes that Matan Torah served to firmly establish Bnei Yisrael's faith in Moshe as Hashem's prophet. Thus, it serves as a 'sign' to Bnei Yisrael "that I have sent you".
- F. Seforno explains the opening phrase, "I will be with you," as meaning that Hashem will guarantee the fulfillment of every one of Moshe's predictions. This will serve as a sign to one and all - Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians - that Hashem has sent Moshe to free the slaves. As for the mention of Matan Torah, Seforno follows Rashi's approach, that Hashem here informs Moshe that the merit of Matan Torah renders Bnei Yisrael worthy of redemption.
- G. Abarbanel - first approach: Like one view mentioned earlier, this approach identifies the burning bush as the sign. It serves as a sign to Moshe that Hashem will assist him in his meetings with Pharaoh. In this approach, Abarbanel suggests two possible explanations of the second half of the pasuk: the Ramban's explanation, that Matan Torah will give Bnei Yisrael the confidence and hence the willingness to go to Canaan, and Rashi's interpretation, that Matan Torah renders them worthy of deliverance from Egypt. (Abarbanel expresses his preference for this first approach.)
- H. Abarbanel - second approach: The prophecy Moshe now received serves as sign for him that God will accompany him to Pharaoh such that he will succeed. The mention of Matan Torah responds to another question of Moshe, which he expressed when said, "... and that I will take Bnei Yisrael out from Egypt." Moshe here asks the question that, as we discuss in the shiur, many among Bnei Yisrael probably asked: why must they leave Egypt at all? Why can't Hashem simply free them from bondage without taking them from Egypt? To this Hashem responds that they must serve Him, and this worship cannot take place in Egypt, given the widespread idol worship in the country; Moshe must therefore take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt to worship Hashem in the wilderness.
- I. Abarbanel - third approach: Moshe had questioned his ability to undertake this mission on the basis of his lowly stature. Hashem responded that He will accompany Moshe, and his lowly stature will itself serve as a sign to Hashem's having sent him; a simple, old man could not defy Pharaoh and lead a multitude out of Egypt without Hashem's help. For this very reason, Bnei Yisrael will serve Hashem after leaving Egypt, rather than worship Moshe himself, as they will clearly recognize the Almighty's hand in this process.

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We should note that all these approaches give rise to the problem of "ikar chaser min ha-sefer", that Hashem seems to have omitted the primary component of His message to Moshe in this pasuk. This is characteristic of very difficult and ambiguous psukim. Since the pasuk makes little sense as written, the mefarshim have no choice but to read external information into the text in order to make it comprehensible.