

Hebrew Insights into Parashat Sh'mot – Sh'mot (Exodus) 1– 6:1 with Hebrew Tools

The opening verses of this Parasha reiterate what we have read recently in Parashat Va'yigash; namely, the names of the sons of Yisrael who had gone down to Egypt. Compared to the first list (Gen. 46:8-25), this one is much more brief and 'basic.' It is these "names" ("sh'mot"), which lend the title to the Parasha, as well as to the whole book. The fruitfulness promised to the Patriarchs is already starting to be evident. "And the children of Israel were *fruitful* [of the root p.r.h for "fruit"], and increased [of the root sh.r.tz applied to the animals in Gen. 1:20-21] abundantly, and *multiplied* - va'yirbu - and became *exceeding mighty* - va'ya'atzmu; and the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1: 7 italics added). This verse sums up one of the first phases of the Israelites' stay in Egypt, while at the same time also echoing B'resheet (Genesis) 47:27: "So Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt in the land of Goshen; and they *took a hold* of it - va'ye'ach'zu - and grew and multiplied exceedingly" (italics added). The above-mentioned verb for "increase" - va'yishretzu - is not mentioned in the Genesis 47 scripture, and as we noted, it is generally applied to animals. Is this a hint as to the condition of the Israelites at this point? Last week we noticed how Ya'acov, whereupon bringing up the "land of Yisrael" in the course of blessing Ephraim and Menashe, emphasized "achuzat olam" (48:4), the "everlasting possession," or literally, the "everlasting hold." But while the old Patriarch stressed "holding" or "grasping tightly" on to the Land of Promise, his descendants seemed to be very quick to "take hold" of foreign soil (as seen in the above quoted v. 27).

According to Nehama Leibowitz[1], by their settling and establishing a foothold in Egypt, the Israelites committed a sin. Thus, their new home turned into a place of exile and bondage, as the Parasha clearly points out. The commentary goes on to say, however, that suffering and exile also produced refining and purification (e.g. Deut. 4:20; Jer. 11:4; Is. 48:10), had an educational value (e.g. Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Deut. 16:11-12), and motivated the humanitarian treatment of others (e.g. Lev. 25:38-43; Deut. 5:14-15). Slavery and bondage demand redemption, and according to the commentary, such a redemption "serves as a spur for a religious duty, imposing on every Israelite the duty to redeem his fellow being from slavery." However, we cannot ignore the clear and somewhat inauspicious prediction given to Avraham during his awesome vision in B'resheet (Genesis) 15, namely, "Your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (vs. 13, 16).

"The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete"; "yet" (in the above quote) is "ad heh'na," literally "thus far." In Vayikra (Leviticus) 18: 25 we read: "For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants." From the time YHVH made His declaration to Avraham it took well over 600 years for the Amorites' (a generic name for the Canaanite people groups) iniquity to be "sha'lem," "complete." The 'quota of their iniquity' is only made full when the Children of Yisrael enter the Land of C'na'an, and thus the former are being "vomited

out by the land." In this way, the four hundred years of Egyptian exile, and another forty of wandering in the desert, were necessary for the completion of Elohim's objectives for the Israelites, while this time capsule was also instrumental in fulfilling a larger and more global 'judicial plan.' In the Divine economy, nothing is ever meaningless or lost. The Great Economist is very precise, and is sovereign over time, events, and the protagonists' roles therein.

Let us return now to the present situation in Egypt. The rising of the new king "who does not know Joseph" (1:8) introduces us to a new phase into which Ya'acov's children are being thrust quite unawares. This king identifies the Israelites as a Nation, or People - "am," which may also explain the reference to them in singular person, rather than plural. "The people of the sons of Israel," he calls them, pointing out their multiplication and might. "**Rav ve'atzum**" are the adjectives used here (v. 9), as in verse 7 above. This multiplicity and might appear to constitute a threat to himself and to his people, and so he describes this foreign race as being, "more numerous and mightier *than us*" (v. 9 italics added). It seems that exaggeration and bigotry play no small part in these words, which are used to instigate a plan to solve the "Hebrew problem" (compare the term "Jewish problem" used in Europe, which culminated in Hitler's "final solution"). Interestingly, at the very end of last week's Parasha, Yoseph charged his brothers concerning taking his *bones* back to the land, whenever YHVH would *visit (pakod)* them (Gen. 50:25). In our Parasha, at the very beginning of the book of Sh'mot (Exodus), we read about the "*might*" of the People of Yisrael. Both **bone** and **might** share the same root of a.tz.m (ayin, tzadi, mem). This root lends itself to several significant words, which we will examine more thoroughly in Parashat B'ha'a'lot'cha (Numbers 8-12). Suffice it to say here that Yoseph's *bones* "multiplied" greatly, in accordance with the promise granted to his sons, although at present this blessing appears to be causing severe adversity.

Thus, to counter this (hypothetical) threat of a population explosion, the king takes a number of measures, all of which are expressed in verbs denoting suffering, suppression and servitude, found in chapter 1:11-14. First they "set over them" - "**sa'rey measeem**" - **tax collecting princes**, to (literally) "afflict them with suffering." However, "the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew" (v. 12). The verb "grew" is "yifrotz," of the root p.r.tz which we examined in Parashat Va'yeshev (Gen. 38:29), where we noted that it means "to **break forth**." This caused the Egyptians "to **loath**" or "**abhor**" ("va'yakutzu") them, and in turn they made them do **rigorous labor** ("va'ya'vidu" - a.v.d. - **labor, work**; while "eh'ved" is "slave"). "And they made their lives bitter with hard *labor* in mortar, in brick, and in all manner of *work* in the field. All their *work* in which they made them *work* with rigor" (v. 14 italics added). In verses 13-14 the root a.v.d (ayin, vet, dalet) - work, labor, slave - occurs five times, impressing upon the reader the sense of perpetual toil.

The commentator Benno Jacob [2] observes that the initiators of the acts of ritual enslavement are always mentioned (in their acts of harassment) in the plural, whereas the Israelites are referred to in the singular (in verses 10-12 each reference to the Israelites reads "he," although not translated that way in English). The commentator

goes on to say, "Israel is pictured here as characterless, faceless, bereft of leadership." Interestingly, the Parasha opens with the names of the individuals whose descendants, in just a matter of a few verses, are described as being submerged in a sea of suffering and oblivion (although, as we have said above, the singular person could have also been used because the Israelites were viewed as an "am" - a single nation, a people).

The only two characters singled out here are the midwives (who are mentioned by name). They were assigned the heinous task of doing away with every Hebrew male newborn. Their defiance of the king's edict (1:17) results in Yisrael becoming even more *numerous* and *mighty* - *rav* and *atzum* (the same term we looked at above, stemming from the root a.tz.m, v. 20b). These two Elohim-fearing women are a testimony to the full involvement of Yisrael's Elohim with His People, even at a time when the Nation was being forced into conditions of bondage and forgetfulness. However, whereas "am Yisrael" as a whole was occupied with endless and huge building projects for their taskmasters, it says about the midwives that Elohim established *their* "**batim**" - 1:21 literally "**homes, houses**" and also "**families, dynasties**" (translated "households")!

The subjugating process increasingly gathers momentum; taxing (1:11) turns into hard labor (v. 11), then to enslavement (vs. 13, 14) and to 'limited' infanticide (v. 16), which finally becomes an imposition on the entire Egyptian nation, compelling it to engage in a full-blown genocide by exterminating every Hebrew male newborn (v. 22). Thus, the 22 verses, of Sh'mot's first chapter, span and recount a long and eventful period.

The next chapter reports a sudden development. Nehama Leibowitz comments, "One family, father, mother, and daughter emerge from the gloom of this faceless mass."^[3] The anonymity is only gradually broken, though, as the protagonists of this first part of the chapter remain nameless, albeit distinct. The only specific name in this narrative is the name that Par'oh's daughter gives the baby whom she finds. It is to be **Moshe**, "because I **drew** him **out** of the water" (2:10 emphasis added). And as we observed in Parashat Miketz (Gen. 41-44:17), this name is probably an Egyptian one, as "mes" or "mesu" in ancient Egyptian mean "child" or "son," ^[4] yet the Hebrew language adapts to foreign terms by employing puns or a 'play on words' (such as the in the name "Bavel," Gen. 11:9). There is, however, one other instance in Scripture where the root m.sh.h (mem, shin, hey) is used: "He drew me out - yimsheni - of many waters," sings King David (2nd Sam. 22:17; Ps. 18:16), being an apt description of Moshe's current condition, and also of the future predicament of his people, when they too will face a large body of water. The basket that baby Moshe was put in is called "**tey'va**," the identical word used for Noach's ark! The gigantic structure and the little basket are both havens of safety and protection, out of which deliverance with large-scale ramifications was destined to emerge.

It takes the death of the king (2:23) for the Children of Yisrael to "groan" and "cry out" - "**va'yiz'aku**" - and "**their cry**" - "**shava'atam**" - goes up to Elohim. Notice that here the verb "to cry out" is different from the noun "cry." In other words, by the time the cry ("**za'a'ka**") reaches heaven, it turns into a "**sha'va**" (sh.v.a. shin, vav, ayin), a noun which is "akin to deliverance or salvation" (y.sh.a - yod, shin, ayin) ^[5]. Thus, the cry

already contains within it the response! And so we read that Elohim "heard," "remembered," "looked" (or "saw"), and "acknowledged" (2:24-25).

Chapter 3 elaborates on the implementation of the above verbs through the person of Moshe and his mission. It will be by Moshe that YHVH will reveal Himself to His People. Moshe spends time in the **desert**, "**midbar**," "tending the flock of Yitro (Jethro), his father-in-law... and he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of Elohim" (3:1). "Midbar" stems from the root d.v.r (dalet, vet/bet, resh), meaning "speech," but this root also supplies us with "to drive" (as in "push out") and "defeat." It shares the same root with "pestilence" or "plague," and with the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple ("dvir"). It seems that when the one who is stricken with *plague* (sin) is *driven* to the 'backside' of the *desert*, it is there that he hears YHVH's still small voice *speaking*, and before long finds himself in the *Holy of Holies*, with Moshe being a case in point. In 4:10 - 16, the root d.b/v.r. is repeated seven times in various forms such as "words" and "speaking."

YHVH reveals Himself to Moshe, talking to Him in the place of silence and desolation, thus indicating that His Presence and sovereignty are not limited by the way *things* (also of the root d.v.r - davar = thing) may appear in the natural. The sea, for example, that will face the Israelites in their future escape, will turn into "dry land" which will enable their passage. Incidentally, this "dryness" or "parched land" is called "charava" (Parashat B'shalach, Ex. 14:21), of the root ch.r.v (chet, resh, bet/vet). The particular desert location referred to here is called "**Chorev**" (Horeb, 3:1) and also stems from the root, ch.r.v (chet, resh, vet), which means "**desolation or waste**," forming also the root for "cherev" - "sword" and "churban" - "destruction." Not surprisingly, in this part of the world where water is scarce, "dryness" and "destruction" are almost synonymous.

Elohim's plans for His people may be elicited from some of the terms used here. He declares that He Himself "will **go down**" to rescue His people from **Mitzrayim** (Egypt - **straits, narrowness, adversity**), and "will **bring them up**" to "a good and **broad land**" (3:8 emphases added). When Moshe is to assemble the elders of Yisrael he is to convey to them that, the Elohim of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'acov literally, "visiting has visited you and that which has been done to you in Egypt" (3:16). We also noticed above, in Yospeh's request at the end of the B'resheet (50:25), that he used the same term when he expressed his faith about Elohim *visiting* His people to take them back to the land. In both these cases "visit" is "**pakod**," the root being p.k.d (pey, kof, dalet), and means "to **visit, attend, muster, appoint, [6] count, or miss**." This word is also known as "precept" (e.g. Ps. 119:15, 27). Like several of the other words for "commandments" and "laws" this one also has, as is evident here, a different or broader meaning than what is generally perceived - something that we will be taking a closer look at when several of these terms will surface in future Parashot (Parasha - singular; Parashot - plural). This verb appropriately sums up YHVH's multi-faceted plan for His people.

The long discourse that the reluctant Moshe has with YHVH is about to end when YHVH tells him: "Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you

shall say" (4:12). Similar words are repeated in verse 15, with the promise to instruct him and his brother A'ha'ron (Aaron) as to what they will have to do. It was likewise a totally submissive Yeshua who expressed a similar idea during His earthly ministry, "The son can do nothing by himself, he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the son does also" (John 5:19, see also 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

Moshe and A'ha'ron comply and go to see Par'oh. In 5:4 we read: "And the king of Egypt said to them, Moses and Aaron, why do you keep the people from their work? Get to your burdens!" "Keep the people" is "tafri'ou," from the root p.r.a., (pey, resh ayin), which we looked at in Parashat Miketz (Ge. 41-44:17), where we also noticed its (coincidental?) similarity with the name Par'oh. The meaning of this root, being "unruliness" and "dishevelment" (of hair), is not incompatible with this king's conduct toward his Hebrew subjects.

We noted above that, because of their lowly state the Hebrews were referred to in singular person. In 4:22 they are referred to once again in this manner; but this time for an entirely different reason. Here YHVH calls Yisrael, "My first born son." Even though by the end of the Parasha the lot of the Israelites is made (temporarily) even worse than it had been before Moshe's audience with Par'oh, the People, who at the beginning of Sh'mot are presented as a forgotten and maltreated mass, are now the object of YHVH's direct intervention. It is, therefore, with these words that our Parasha ends: "Then YHVH said to Moses, 'Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will expel them out of his land'" (6:1).

In Parashat Sh'mot we see once again the sovereignty of YHVH over the schemes and intentions of the enemy. Just as in the case of Yoseph, whose destiny the enemy attempted to disrupt, yet YHVH used this very plan to catapult him into the place that He had designed for him, so is this principle also true in regards to Moshe (and in an even greater sense to Yeshua, see 1 Cor. 2:7, 8). The very man whose command should have brought about this infant's death, ended being the one in whose palace the infant was protected, raised, and groomed for leading the Israelites out and away from under his despotic and tyrannical control and dominion.

1 New Studies in Shemot, by Nechama Leibowitz, trans. Aryeh Newman, Eliner Library, Jerusalem, 1995

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon, ed. Francis Brown, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass.

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

Hebrew Tools for Everyday Use

In Parashat Sh'mot there are some very useful words for simple usage in Modern Hebrew, such as "sh'mot" - "names", "shem" - "name"; "taxes" - "missim";

“building”, or “built” - “ba’nu”; “batim” - “houses”, “homes”; “worked” or “toiled” - “avdu”; “speaking” - “diber”, etc. Let’s try to put some of these into use.

What is your name (masculine)?

Ma shim’cha?

What is your name (feminine)?

Ma sh’mech?

Many taxes

Harbeh missim

The builder built houses

Ha’ba’nai ba’na batim

The children of Yisrael worked hard

B’ney Yisrael avdu ka’sheh

Elohim spoke to Moshe in the wilderness

Elohim diber el Moshe bamid’bar

Recording: <http://vocaroo.com/i/s13bvCfZUyIC>