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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

My Mother – Knowing Who You Are “These are the names...” (1:1)

Parashat Shemot opens with a paradox.

The Jewish people are crushed, enslaved, stripped of power—yet it is precisely there that the Torah begins to speak about identity. “*And these are the names of the children of Israel...*” Names mean essence. Who you are does not change along with your circumstances.

My mother, may I be an atonement for her resting place, had something very rare: she knew exactly who she was. People said that when she walked into a room, she lit it up. She had a regal presence; like being in the company of royalty. And yet she came from the humblest of beginnings: Bethnal Green, East London, poverty, illness, fear. But none of that defined her.

Galut - exile - is not just about suffering; it is about the confusion of identity. Pharaoh’s deepest cruelty was not the slave labor. It was making the Jewish people forget who they were. When a person no longer knows who he is, he becomes easy to control.

And that is why redemption begins not with miracles, but with names.

My mother was never destabilized by change around her, because her sense of self was not borrowed from fashion, culture, or approval. So, when I became religious, she took it completely in her stride. There was no fear, no threat. She did not need me to remain the same in order for *her* to remain herself.

Often, when children become religious, parents react negatively, not out of ideology, but insecurity. If *your* identity depends on *my* choices, then my growth feels like your loss. But when your identity is rooted deeply, another person’s journey does not threaten it.

Parashat Shemot teaches that **true royalty is inner clarity.** A Jew can be a slave—and still be a prince. A woman can grow up in hardship—and still carry herself like a queen.

My mother lived that truth. And in doing so, she quietly taught what Geulah really begins with: knowing who you are—no matter where you stand.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

With the death of Yosef, the Book of Bereishet (Genesis) comes to an end. The Book of Shemot (Exodus) chronicles the creation of the nation of Israel from the descendants of Yaakov. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Pharaoh, fearing the population explosion of Jews, enslaves them. When their birthrate continues to increase, he orders the Jewish midwives to kill all newborn males.

Yocheved gives birth to Moshe and hides him in the reeds by the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter finds and adopts him, although she knows he is probably a Hebrew. Miriam, Moshe's sister, offers to find a nursemaid for Moshe and arranges for his mother Yocheved to be his nursemaid.

Years later, Moshe witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and Moshe kills the Egyptian. Realizing his life is in danger, Moshe flees to Midian where he rescues Tzipporah, whose father Yitro approves their subsequent marriage. On Chorev (Mount Sinai), Moshe witnesses the burning bush where G-d commands him to lead the Jewish People from Egypt to *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land promised to their ancestors.

Moshe protests that the Jewish People will doubt his being G-d's agent, so G-d enables Moshe to perform three miraculous transformations to validate himself in the people's eyes: transforming his staff into a snake, his healthy hand into a leprous one, and water into blood. When Moshe declares that he is not a good public speaker, G-d tells him that his brother Aharon will be his spokesman. Aharon greets Moshe on his return to Egypt and they petition Pharaoh to release the Jews. Pharaoh responds with even harsher decrees, declaring that the Jews must produce the same quota of bricks as before but without being given supplies. The people become dispirited, but G-d assures Moshe that He will force Pharaoh to let the Jews go.

Q & A

Questions

1. Why does the verse say "And Yosef was in Egypt"?
2. "...And they will go up out of the land." Who said this and what did he mean?
3. Why did Pharaoh specifically choose water as the means of killing the Jewish boys?
(Two reasons.)
4. "She saw that he was good." What did she see "good" about Moshe that was unique?
5. Which Hebrew men were fighting each other?
6. Moshe was afraid that the Jewish People were not fit to be redeemed, because some among them committed a certain sin. What sin?
7. Why did the Midianites drive Yitro's daughters away from the well?
8. How did Yitro know that Moshe was Yaakov's descendant?
9. What lesson was Moshe to learn from the fact that the burning bush was not consumed?
10. What merit did the Jewish People have that warranted G-d's promise to redeem them?
11. Which expression of redemption would assure the people that Moshe was the true redeemer?
12. What did the staff turning into a snake symbolize?
13. Why didn't Moshe want to be the leader?
14. "And Hashem was angry with Moshe..." What did Moshe lose as a result of this anger?
15. What was special about Moshe's donkey?
16. About which plague was Pharaoh warned first?
17. Why didn't the elders accompany Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh? How were they punished?
18. Which tribe did not work as slaves?
19. Who were the: a) *nogsim* b) *shotrim*?
20. How were the *shotrim* rewarded for accepting the beatings on behalf of their fellow Jews?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 1:5 - This verse adds that despite being in Egypt as a ruler, Yosef maintained his righteousness.
2. 1:10 - Pharaoh said it, meaning that the Egyptians would be forced to leave Egypt.
3. 1:10,22 - He hoped to escape Divine retribution, as G-d promised never to flood the entire world. Also, his astrologers saw that the Jewish redeemer's downfall would be through water.
4. 2:2 - When he was born, the house was filled with light.
5. 2:13 - Datan and Aviram.
6. 2:14 - *Lashon hara* (evil speech).
7. 2:17 - Because a ban had been placed on Yitro for abandoning idol worship.
8. 2:20 - The well-water rose towards Moshe.
9. 3:12 - Just as the bush was not consumed, so too Moshe would be protected by G-d.
- 10.3:12 - That they were destined to receive the Torah
- 11.3:16,18 - "I surely remembered (*pakod pakadeti*)."
- 12.4:3 - It symbolized that Moshe spoke ill of the Jews by saying that they wouldn't listen to him, just as the original snake sinned through speech.
- 13.4:10 - He didn't want to take a position above that of his older brother, Aharon.
- 14.4:14 - Moshe lost the privilege of being a *kohen*.
- 15.4:20 It was used by Avraham for *akeidat Yitzchak* and will be used in the future by *mashiach*.
- 16.4:23 - Death of the firstborn.
- 17.5:1 - The elders had been accompanying Moshe and Aharon but they were afraid, so one by one they slipped away. Hence, at the giving of the Torah, the elders weren't allowed to ascend with Moshe.
- 18.5:5 - The tribe of Levi.
- 19.5:6 - a) Egyptian taskmasters; b) Jewish officers.
- 20.5:14 - They were chosen to be on the Sanhedrin.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Tefillat HaDerech (Part 2)

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Lao Tzu – Chinese Philosopher

Bon Voyage!

Tefillat HaDerech reads: **May it be Your will, Hashem, our God and the God of our fathers, that You should lead us in peace and direct our steps in peace, and guide us in peace, and support us in peace, and cause us to reach our destination in life, joy, and peace** (If one intends to return immediately, one adds: **and return us in peace**). **Save us from every enemy and ambush, from robbers and wild beasts on the trip, and from all kinds of punishments that rage and come to the world. May You confer blessing upon the work of our hands and grant us (alternative version “me”) grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us, and bestow upon us abundant kindness and listen to the voice of our prayer, for You hear the prayers of all. Blessed are You Hashem, who listens to prayer.**

Even though *Tefillat HaDerech* is recited by an individual embarking on a journey, the *Tefillah* is actually written in the plural. The Talmud (*Brachot* 30a) tells us that anyone who needs to recite *Tefillat HaDerech* should “associate themselves with the community.” Rashi explains that a person’s prayers are more readily answered when they include others as well.

Rashi’s explanation is teaching us a vital lesson in the way that Hashem expects us to interrelate with each other. Clearly, Hashem wants us to think of others during our *Tefillot*, because *Tefillah* should not only be self-centered. There are many opportunities throughout the day when each and every person can ask Hashem for their individual and particular needs. Rashi is teaching us, however, that effective prayer means accustoming ourselves to include others in our *Tefillot*.

The most obvious example, perhaps, is the *Amidah*, which is the bedrock of our daily prayers. The blessings of the *Amidah* were deliberately composed in the plural so that each blessing includes everyone. Thinking of others is such an integral part of our *Avodat Hashem* that before beginning the *Amidah* - says the Arizal - each person should pause momentarily and focus on the words “*V’Ahavtah leRei’echa Kamocha*” – that we should love our fellow like ourselves.

Our Sages teach (*Bava Kama* 92a): “Whoever prays for mercy for his fellow, when he himself needs that same thing, is answered first.” Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer (1815-1871) was the son of the famed Chatam Sofer, the chief rabbi of Pressburg,

Bratislava. Rabbi Avraham Sofer headed the illustrious Yeshivah in Pressburg that his father had led before him. In his seminal work “*Ktav Sofer*” he explains that when a person prays for someone else, their *Tefillah* is on a much higher level than if they were praying just for themselves; because praying for others transforms the prayer from self-centered to altruistic; subsequently, it carries more spiritual weight.

Interestingly, even though *Tefillat HaDerech* is said in the plural - “lead **us** in peace, direct **our** steps...” - there is one phrase that, according to some, is said in the singular: Towards the end of the *Tefillah* we request that Hashem “grant **me** grace, kindness and mercy.” Many years ago, I heard a fascinating explanation from Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht z”l as to why this is so:

The phrase “grace, kindness and mercy”, he explained, refers to each person’s personal connection to Hashem. It is only through being continuously mindful of Hashem’s blessings that a person can reach a level of true contentment. Thus, while we can pray for the wellbeing of other travellers just as we pray for success in our own travels, yet when it comes to individual spiritual growth and each person’s feeling of protection and care from Hashem, one can not always pray for others, since each person has their own exclusive connection to Hashem that requires their own unique approach. As the Chofetz Chaim once told a father who approached him for a blessing that his children grow up to be God-fearing and righteous: “That requires far more than a blessing. That requires continuous effort and dedication.”

To be continued...

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TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

RETURNING A DIVORCEE

Mitzvah 580 — *Devarim* 24:1-4

If a divorced woman gets married to another man and then gets divorced again, she cannot remarry her first husband. The Torah explains that such a practice is abominable in Hashem's eyes, and it could fill the land with sin. If it would be permitted, two men could divorce their wives temporarily with the intention of remarrying them after they have been married to the other man temporarily, thereby undermining the very foundation of marriage and the holiness of our nation.

Furthermore, if it were permitted to return a divorcee, it would be difficult to keep the Mitzvah not to covet the wife of another man who might be persuaded to relinquish his marital rights temporarily. Now that this is prohibited, and the only possibility of marriage to a married woman is through a permanent divorce, it is only natural not to covet something that in all likelihood will never become attainable (*Moshav Zekeinim*).

We may suggest a further reason: Without going into halachic details, the Sages prohibited a divorced couple from living in close proximity out of concern that their familiarity will lead to sin (*Kiddushin* 27b); thus we see that there is a greater concern regarding a previously married couple. In light of this, we may suggest that the Torah removed any possibility for a man to return his ex-wife once she has remarried so that his familiarity will not lead him to covet or transgress other prohibitions.

Lastly, the possibility of returning to the first husband could undermine the bond of the second marriage (see also *Pesachim* 112a). By completely severing the bond of the first marriage, the Torah grants the second marriage added strength and sanctity.

In *Parashas Shemos*, Amram married Yocheved after divorcing her, and, according to *Targum Yonasan*, after she had already gotten remarried to another man and divorced (*Bamidbar* 11:26). This was permitted because the Torah had not yet been given. Had the Torah already been given, Yocheved would have been prohibited to Amram on account of a more severe prohibition: she was his father's sister. Although our ancestors strove to keep the Torah even before it was given, they sometimes determined it necessary to make exceptions. In this case, Amram determined that Yocheved was his designated wife, and only a woman as righteous as she would bear him children of great stature (*Netziv* to *Shemos* 6:20). Furthermore, none of the aforementioned reasons behind this Mitzvah applied in this case, as Amram was a completely righteous man who never committed a sin (*Shabbos* 55b), and he certainly did not divorce Yocheved with improper intentions.

As to why Hashem made it occur that a man as great as Moshe emerged from a union that He would later prohibit, *Chizkuni* explains (*Shemos* 6:20) that this served to humble Moshe. As the Sages teach, when electing a governor, choose someone who has a fault in his lineage so that the honor and authority of his position will not make him overly prideful (*Yoma* 22b).