



ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY

RABBI REUVEN TRADBURKS
RCA ISRAEL REGION

PARSHAT SHEMOT

The Jewish people are in Egypt. A new Paro is concerned with the size of the Jewish people. He decrees hard labor, infanticide and then actively drowning the male babies. Moshe is born, raised in Paro's daughter's home. After seeing the Jews mistreated, Moshe flees to Midian, marries and settles there. At age 80, Moshe encounters the burning bush. G-d instructs him to go to Paro and demand, in G-d's name, to free the Jewish people. Moshe, after attempting to refuse this mission, goes to Paro. Paro increases the burdens. The people complain.



1ST ALIYA (1:1-17)

70 Bnei Yisrael descend to Egypt.

They grow exceedingly numerous, filling the land. A new king who knew not Yosef arises. Afraid that the Jews would join with enemies of Egypt, he seeks to weaken their numbers. A labor tax is followed by oppressive labor. Then the midwives are instructed to kill the Jewish babies. The midwives fear G-d and do not heed Paro's directive.

The book of Shemot, of Exodus, is radically different from Bereshit. Bereshit was the story of people: Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. Then Yosef and his brothers. And overlaid to the story of people is the Divine refrain, "I give to you the land promised to Avraham". It is almost like a song with

a chorus; each person is the verse, with the chorus of G-d's promise of the land repeated. Avraham and his life, with G-d's promise repeated. Yitzchak and his family, with G-d's promise repeated. Yaakov and then the Yosef story, with G-d's promise repeated. In Bereshit the people are center stage, with G-d ever present but of few words; the repeated promise.

In Shemot G-d and man switch places. It is the story of Divine control of Jewish destiny. He is the Main Director, the Jewish people the mere stage actors. He no longer lurks, with repeated promises. He acts, dominates, controls, manipulates. He initiates, communicates, and commands. Later, at Sinai, He reveals Himself.

But His appearance begins only when we hit bottom.

Paro acts to weaken the Jewish people. Vicious actions, including murder. The midwives fear G-d, refuse to murder. There is no mention of G-d's actions. We have seen this before. G-d's name is absent from the sale of Yosef, as it is here. Spiraling downward we can do on our own. Man does a mighty fine job of cruelty all on his own. G-d appears when we hit bottom.



2ND ALIYA (1:18-2:10)

The midwives defend their actions to Paro. Paro commands all Jewish baby boys to be thrown into the river. Moshe is born, placed in the water in a basket. Paro's daughter rescues him. Miriam arranges for Moshe's mother to nurse

him. He is returned to Paro's daughter and named Moshe.

When Moshe is born his mother "saw that he was good". And he was placed in the water, albeit in a basket. Those 2 elements, water and "it was good", immediately remind us of the first day of creation. In the beginning "the spirit of G-d hovered over the waters" (Genesis 1:2). And when light was created, "G-d saw the light and it was good." Moshe's being placed in the water and his mother "saw that he was good" could be the Torah's way of saying there is a new creation story taking place: with Moshe's birth, a new world dawns for the Jewish people.

The story of Moshe's rescue is in stark contrast to Yosef's sale. Yosef is thrown into a dry pit that has no water; Moshe is thrown into the water but remains dry. Yosef's brothers move away from the pit; Moshe's sister stays close to see what happens. Yosef's brothers didn't respond to his cry; Paro's daughter hears Moshe's cry. Yosef's brothers do not bring him home to his father; Moshe's sister brings Moshe home to nurse with his mother. Parallel stories; radically different.



3RD ALIYA (2:11-25)

Moshe matures. He goes out to see the travails of his brothers. He defends a Jew by killing his Egyptian aggressor, and then saves a Jew from a Jewish aggressor. He flees for his life to Midian, aids Yitro's daughters, is welcomed by Yitro, marries Zipporah, has a child Gershom. "For I am a stranger in a strange land". G-d sees the suffering of the Jews and remembers His covenant.

The reversal of the sin of the brothers

continues: the brothers did not see the suffering of their brother, Moshe wants to see and relieve the pain of his brothers.

Moshe names his son Gershom, for "I am a stranger". Which strange land is he referring to? Being a Jew in Egypt? Or being an Egyptian in Midian? Where is Moshe's home?

The story to this point is the story of people; G-d has yet to appear. In a world without G-d's presence, there are good people and bad people. Paro, evil. Midwives, good. Moshe's parents, brave. Paro's daughter, good. Moshe's sister, concerned. Egyptian slave master, cruel. Jews struggling, violent. Yitro, welcoming.

And Moshe? Goes out. Concerned. Helps those who need help. Feels angst; a stranger.

G-d appears. His name appears 5 times in 3 verses. Everything changes now. Or perhaps not. All the human activity to this point; has He orchestrated it, or is it people doing what people do? Some good, some not? Or mere puppets in the Hand of the Puppeteer?



4TH ALIYA (3:1-15)

Moshe and the burning bush. Moshe, Moshe, Hineni. G-d speaks, Moshe cowers. G-d tells him: I have seen the suffering of My people. I will save them from Egypt and bring them to the Land of milk and honey. I am sending you to go to Paro and he will release My people from Egypt. Moshe objects: who am I to go to Paro? And the Jewish people will question who sent me. G-d says: tell them the G-d of their forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov sent you.

The entire story of the Torah changes here. G-d moves from the unseen force behind human action to directly dictating

human activity. He tells Moshe that He will take the Jewish people out of Egypt and bring them to the Land of Israel. Up until now, the Jewish people have been promised the Land but have lived only with the promise, not with its fulfillment. They have not seen the Hand of G-d but have rather detected it behind the events. As Yosef said “G-d has brought me to Egypt to save the family.” He never heard that. He peered behind the veil and detected it.

Now the veil is drawn. Moshe is told in vivid detail exactly what will transpire. The Jews will be sent out by Paro. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is a pillar of Jewish belief because it is a blatant, direct display of G-d’s Hand in our history. It is His Hand in full display, not behind the veil.



5TH ALIYA (3:16-4:17)

G-d continues: Gather the people. Tell them that I will take them to the Land. They will listen. Go to Paro. I know he will not listen. I will smite the Egyptians. You will be loaded with gold, silver and clothing from the Egyptians. Moshe is still convinced that the people will not believe him. G-d gives him signs: staff turns to snake and then back, hand turns leprous and then back. And water to blood. Moshe objects: I am not a good speaker. G-d says: I give speech to man. I will send Aharon with you. He will speak. Take your staff.

Moshe’s reluctance is striking. Avraham did not demur from a pretty rough

command to sacrifice his son. Noach didn’t either when given a command that would bring derision. Moshe is a very begrudging leader. But that itself is instructive. Moshe is not a man driven by a mission, a great, charismatic leader who leads his people from oppression to freedom, displaying the power of human will in the face of injustice. And after all, he is 80, a rather late start on leading his people.

The charismatic leader leading his being from slavery to freedom would be a great story. But it is not our story. Our story is of the Divine Hand guiding human events through a reluctant leader. This is not Moshe’s story. It is the Divine’s. And even that great refrain “let my people go” is not Moshe speaking. It is rather “let My people go”. It is Moshe quoting G-d to Paro – he is but the messenger.



6TH ALIYA (4:18-31)

Moshe gets Yitro’s blessing to return to Egypt. G-d tells Moshe that those seeking his death have died. G-d tells him to tell Paro: G-d says Israel is my first born. Send out My son, for if you do not, I will slay your first born. Zippora circumcises her son. Aharon greets Moshe. They gather the people. The people believe that G-d will redeem them.

G-d adds one more thing to Moshe; Israel is My first born. As if to say – “Moshe, this is a story of love. I view the Jewish people as my beloved first born.” And. Refusal by Paro will result in Divine punishment. Our western ethos is uncomfortable with these central principles of Judaism: G-d’s Hand in history, G-d’s love for the Jewish people, and Divine punishment. As Rabbi Sacks, z”l, said; Radical then. Radical now.





7TH ALIYA (5:1-6:1)

Moshe and Aharon approach Paro, requesting a 3-day journey to the desert to celebrate. Paro refuses. He increases the workload. Conflict arises between the Jewish workers and the Egyptian supervisors. The Jews criticize Moshe for increasing their burden. Moshe complains to G-d. G-d reassures him that through a strong hand, Paro will send them out.

What a great lesson: even when G-d Promises, don't think it is all clear sailing. His promises run smack into the uncomfortable reality of human beings. The plan for the Jews to leave runs into the reality of Paro and his resistance. Paro derails the plan, at least in part. That is the lesson: man meanders as the Divine plan unfolds, up and down, forward and back. But resistance need not dull the end. The end will come. Maybe later than sooner. But a Promise is a Promise. ■



STATS

13th of 54 sedras; 1st of 11 in Shemot.
Written on 215.2 lines in a Torah (18th).
7 parshiot; 6 open, 1 closed.
124 pesukim - 15th (tied with Emor).
1763 words - 14th (Emor: 22nd).
6762 letters - 16th (Emor: 23rd).
2nd in Shemot in those three categories.



MITZVOT

No mitzvot are counted from Sh'mot. One of 17 sedras without mitzvot.

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פי כה אמר ה' צבקות אלקי ישראל עוד יקנו בתים ושדות וכרמים בארץ הזאת ירמיהו ל"ב טו:

"For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."

Jeremiah 32:15



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