

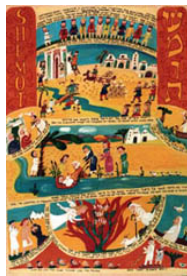


Around the Shabbat Table

**Shemot 5766
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Shalom!



Introduction

"Vayakam Melech Chadash Al Mitzraim Asher Lo Yodah Et Yosef"

"Now a new king arose over Egypt who knew not Joseph."

The book and Torah portion of Shemot begin by mentioning the names of Jacob's sons. "Names" in Hebrew are *Shemot*. The book is also referred to as Exodus because it relates to the story of the Jewish people's liberation from the Egyptian slavery. One might consider this portion as divining a dominant theme throughout our history: Freedom. This message of the Torah is told over again each Passover as we read the Haggadah.

Joseph and his brothers lived in Egypt. After his death they did not leave. They prospered, lived in Egypt, multiplied and grew strong. Generations later the new Pharaoh did not know the past role of Joseph and that of the Jewish people. Even though they had acculturated into the Egyptian public, the Pharaoh began to fear they would achieve too much power and become a threat to the authority of the crown. The Israelites were seen as fertile and prolific. They lived in the area of settlement that was the eastern part of the Nile delta, not in all of Egypt as we might think. The Egyptian balance of power began to change back to native Egyptian ruling families from the invader, the Hyksos. Even the name tells us part of the story. "The Hyksos," rulers from foreign lands, ruled Egypt for about a century and half. After that time, the cities of Pithom and Ramses were built as store cities, as we are told in the Haggadah. The return of the Egyptian Dynasty from the domination of the upper part of Egypt, places like Memphis and Thebes, caused a change in attitude towards the Israelites. The commentator Rashi tells us that the Pharaoh did know of Joseph but refused to recognize his accomplishments. We do not know the motivation of Pharaoh for his feelings and actions against the Israelites. We can speculate that perhaps it was because he was jealous of Joseph's meteoric rise from a prisoner to one of the highest positions in the court. Perhaps it was the fear of growing prosperity

the Israelites enjoyed or fear they would side with an enemy of Egypt in case of an invasion (as the Torah indicates). In any case, Pharaoh began a harsh campaign to uproot and destroy them.

This parasha brings up significant issues, and can be compared to a book that uses chapters to define themes and issues. The narrative in the parasha moves from point to point:

- The first theme is the establishment of an historic context for the Jewish people, thus the name *Shemot*.
- The second theme is a description of the measures Pharaoh took to destroy us, thus enslavement.
- The third theme is the introduction of a new leader, thus the birth and growth of Moshe.
- The fourth theme is the power of God, thus the revelation at burning bush and power of God.

Pharaoh's campaign against the Israelites begins with their enslavement and his goal to build the cities of Pithom & Ramses. Pharaoh accomplished at least two things by doing this. First, it freed up the Jewish holdings and provided Pharaoh with cheap construction labor. Secondly, the oppression was designed to decrease the Israelite population. Instead the Israelites became prolific. In response he ordered all male children born to a Jewish woman be killed. Shifrah and Puah, Hebrew midwives, refused to follow the King's order. Some Rabbinic sources suggest that Shifrah and Puah were Yocheved, Moshe's mother, and Puah, Miriam, Moshe's sister. Some Rabbinic commentators characterize them as Jewish heroines. They are seen as defying the Pharaoh; but as Hebrews they could not obey because they would have been guilty of murder, which is forbidden.

"Yavomer Melech Mitzraim Lamyaldot Halvriyot Asher Shem Achat Shifrah V'Shem Shenit Puah"

- Shemot 1:15

At this point, the stage is set for the birth of Moshe. Yocheved is able to hide Moshe for three months. Then, the Torah tells us, she built an ark and placed him in it near where the daughter of Pharaoh bathed. Pharaoh's daughter, seeing the baby, took him out of the water knowing the baby was a Hebrew. She named him Moshe, derived, according to the Torah, from the word "*Me-She-Tee-Hu* , I drew him out of the water". He became her adopted son.

"Vatikrah Shmo Moshe Vatomer" Ki Min Hamyim Mesheetehu"

"And she called him Moshe for she said I drew him out of the water"

Moshe was from the tribe of Levi and was raised in the palace. Moshe learned the ways of the palace, but also learned the traditions of his Hebrew ancestors from his Hebrew caregivers. As an adult, Moses was witness to an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moshe beat the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. Fearing punishment, Moshe escaped to Midian. In Midian Moshe joined the House of the Midianite Priest, Reuel. He married Zipporah, Reuel's (Jethro's) daughter, and they had a son "*Gershom*." The name Gershom indicated that Moshe was a stranger in a strange land.

"Va Teled Bain V'Yikrah Et Shmo Gershom Ki Amar: Ger Hayiti B'ereetz Nachriah."

Moshe tended the flocks of his father in law Jethro and took them into the wilderness. It is here that God calls on him to lead the Jewish people out of slavery. Midrash tells us that Moshe was chosen because of his compassion as exhibited by his treatment of his flocks. He cared for each as though it was his own child.

Moshe questioned God about his role and whether he had the ability to do the job. God convinced Moshe by saying, "I will be with you". God also told Moshe to tell the Israelites that he was sent by *Eh'Yeh* to bring them out of Egypt to a land of flowing milk and honey, "*Eretz Zavat Chalov U-devash.*" Moshe was instructed to tell the Israelites that "*Eh'Yeh Asher Eh'yeh, I am who I am, Eh'yeh sent me to you.*"

Moshe followed God's direction and with Aaron overcame his fears and self-doubt. There is a Midrash that says it took God a whole week to convince Moshe to return to Egypt to lead the people out. Some argue it was because of his humility and that he felt others might be more qualified to represent God. Others argued he did not want to replace Aaron, his brother, who had been the leader of the Israelites.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

1. The Pharaoh of Parashat Shemot established a precedent for slavery, cruelty, torture, and inhumanity. Compare him to other cruel rulers that have attempted to destroy the Jewish people. Some examples to start with, Antiochus, Torquemada, Hitler.
2. Shifrah and Puah placed themselves in danger when they disobeyed Pharaoh's decree to kill every Jewish male born. Can this act of defiance be compared to an act by any woman of our time?
3. Moshe reluctantly took on the task of freeing the Jewish people. Rather than being excited, why do you think he balked at the chance to lead his people out of Egypt? Talk about how humility, doubt, fear, and courage affect decisions you makes.
4. Why do you think the Pharaoh was so fearful of the Israelites when they were a small segment of the whole population?
5. What do you think was the role of women in Egyptian society? How do you reconcile the fact that the Pharaoh's daughter was able to engineer the saving of Moshe from Pharaohs decree?

Some Texts to Wrestle With

1. "But the more they oppressed, the more numerous they multiplied and the more they spread out." The Egyptians tried to break the spirit of the children of Israel. They would make men do women's work and vice versa. They would do everything to divide them. But in face of each adversity, they had hope and faith. How do you think they achieved this?
2. *Va-teled Bain V'yikrah Et Shmo Gershom, Ki Amar: Ger Hayiti B'erezt Nachriah. He called him Gershom; because he said I have been a stranger in a strange land.* Moshe fled to Midian and was taken in by Jethro (Reuel). Sarna, in *The Heritage of Biblical History* draws a connection of Moshe that traces the lineage of Midian to Abraham - Notice the name Reuel: Do you see God [E] in the name?
3. *And I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and bring them out of that land to a spacious land flowing with milk and honey.* Finally Moshe agrees to God's request to lead Israel out of Egypt, but stipulates before he can accept the mission that he must return to Midian to ask his father-in-law's permission to leave. "He befriended me when I was a

stranger in Midian, gave me a roof over my head, and his daughter as a wife." Do you think Moshe's loyalty to Jethro is necessary? Why/why not?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. How can we apply the hospitality of Jethro to our life today? Would you invite a stranger to live in your house, offer work and encourage a relationship with your daughter?
2. Moshe joined his brother Aaron in doing God's work. How did their individual strengths make them a dynamic duo for the job of taking Israel out of Egypt?
3. "Eretz Zavat Chalav Udvash" The words come from Shemot. How can we use that theme to encourage travel to Israel?
4. Shifrah and Puah were models for civic disobedience. When is it proper to ignore the law and follow your heart?
5. The Torah tells us the original seventy people who came to Egypt developed into a whole nation. The Haftorah for this Parasha is from Yeshayahu [Isaiah] 27:6. It compares the Jewish nation to a tree with roots. How do you see this connection? Talk about why this Haftorah is a good fit with the Parasha.

Shabbat Shalom

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

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