

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Moses' second question to God at the burning bush was, Who are you? "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 (I deal with it in my books *Future Tense* and *The Great Partnership*).

"His first question, though, was, *Mi anochi, "Who am I?"* (Ex. 3:11).

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" said Moses to God. "And how can I possibly get the Israelites out of Egypt?" 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 Tanakh 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?' (2 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. They were people who doubted their own abilities. There were times when they felt like giving up. Moses,

Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah reached points of such despair that they prayed to die. They became heroes of the moral life against their will. 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 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 Mount Horeb/Sinai, 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 go back and tell 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 Zipporah, daughter of a Midianite priest and was "content to live" there, quietly as a shepherd. We tend to forget that he spent many years 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? Why 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” (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” (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-darkhei ha-tsibbur*, *Hilkhos 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 Hagaddah 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. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd 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. ©2025 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah emphasizes the names of the family of Yaakov in this week’s parsha as it did in even greater detail in last week’s parsha of Vayechi. There may be various reasons for this concentration of interest in the names of the tribes of Israel, but whatever the reasons are, the Torah obviously feels it to be of great importance. In fact, throughout the Torah the names of the tribes are repeated many times. After all, we might ask, what is in a name? But the names of our ancestors are drummed into us by the Torah to provide us with a sense of continuity and tradition.

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.]” ©2025 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And he said to his daughters, “And where is he? Why did you abandon this man? Call him and let him eat bread!” (Shmos 2:20) Yisro, the priest of Midian, was a unique person. He was a top advisor to Pharaoh, but when Pharaoh decided to commit genocide and infanticide against the Jews, he spoke up. Because of that, Yisro had to flee Egypt and he settled in Midian.

A man of truth and reflection, he had investigated every religion in the world and found them all lacking. He rejected all idolatry and believed in the

Creator of the world, much as Avraham had. Unlike Avraham, who was lauded and respected everywhere, Yisro became an outcast. People would not associate with him and his daughters were abused by the locals. When they went to the well, the shepherds tossed them into the water, likely having a good laugh at their expense. But one day, something changed.

The girls came home dry, with sheep that had been watered, and it was much earlier than they usually made it back. What happened? he wondered. They told Yisro of an Egyptian man who stood up for them. When he came to the well, the waters rose to greet him and he watered their sheep for them. In fact, so much water rose that the other shepherds were able to water their sheep too.

Yisro asked them why they had left Moshe behind and not invited him to their home to break bread. Rashi explains that Yisro, who had seven daughters and was excommunicated by his community, hoped this man would marry one of them. But how did Yisro know that Moshe was going to be good husband material? Why would he think it would be good for his daughter to marry this man who simply arrived on the scene?

The commentaries offer many different insights that Yisro gleaned about Moshe. Since the water rose to meet him as it did to Yaakov Avinu, it was clear to him that Moshe was a descendant of Yaakov. Someone from that family would be a match to be proud of. But even if he didn't realize Moshe was Jewish, he knew of the “Egyptian's” kindness.

If he was helpful to Yisro's daughters, it meant that he, too, eschewed idolatry and didn't join in the excommunication. An Egyptian who abandoned their gods was obviously a thoughtful person, who seriously considered the truths of life.

The Malbim says that when Yisro asked, “Where is he?” He was suggesting that if Moshe had ulterior motives in helping the girls, he would have followed them home, hoping for payment or some sort of reward. From the fact that he didn't, it was clear Moshe was altruistic in saving them, and such a man should not be left behind.

The overarching lesson here is that when you find good people, you should hold onto them. Connect with them and make them part of your life. Don't take for granted their kindnesses and character. Be inspired by them and seek to remain in touch with them. It will make you a better person, too, but most of all, you will be building a treasure house of goodness by “collecting” good people.

Several Chasidim were discussing their 'yichus,' their regal Jewish lineage and ancestry. “I am a direct descendent of a great dynasty of Rebbes,” said one.

“My grandfather was a tremendous tzaddik who studied hidden works of Torah, and whose prayers

were known to yield results," said another.

"Well," said the third, "I can't claim any of those things. My 'yichus' is that I'm the first of my family to wear Tefillin every day." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Two Midwives

The beginning of the Book of Shemot (Exodus) talks about the B'nei Yisrael after they had come down to Egypt. The B'nei Yisrael grew exponentially, becoming a theoretical threat to the Egyptians. As the B'nei Yisrael continued to increase, Par'oh planned to enslave them and minimize their power. The Egyptians worked the B'nei Yisrael strenuously, yet they continued to increase. After a long period of slavery, Hashem decided to send a savior who would free the people from this slavery. Par'oh's magicians predicted that a child would be born that year who would save the B'nei Yisrael.

The Torah gives us Par'oh's reaction: "The King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the first was Shifra and the name of the second Puah – and he said, 'In your assisting the Hebrew women at childbirth and you see on the birthstool; if it is a son, you are to kill him, and if it is a daughter, she shall live.' But the midwives feared Elokim and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they kept the boys alive. The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this thing, that you have kept the boys alive?' The midwives said to Par'oh, 'Because the Hebrew women are unlike the Egyptian women, for they are midwives (lively); before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth.' Elokim did good to the midwives, and the people increased and became very strong. And it was because the midwives feared Elokim that He made houses for them."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin points out the dilemma facing the Egyptians: they did not wish to limit the number of Jewish slaves because these slaves worked hard and produced good results, but the Jews increased at an alarming rate, much greater than the Egyptians, and this frightened the Egyptians. They decided that they should kill the male children since they would grow up to become possible soldiers in battle against them, yet they would let the female children live since they did not pose a threat militarily, and they might grow up to marry the Egyptian men and become like them.

There is a difference of opinion as to the identities of the two midwives who are mentioned by name: "The King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the first was Shifra and the name of the second Puah." Rashi tells us that Shifra was Yocheved, Moshe's mother, because she beautified (mishaperet) the child at birth. Puah was Miriam,

Moshe's sister, because she cried out and spoke and cooed (from the word ef'ah) to the babies. Both of these references come from Tractate Sotah 11b, yet it is unclear why Yocheved and Miriam represent these characteristics as opposed to any of the other midwives. The Kli Yakar explains that we can understand the words of description differently. It is possible to say that the "Hebrew midwives" were not Jewish, but Egyptian "midwives of the Hebrews." The Kli Yakar focuses on the words "the midwives feared Elokim." If these women were Yocheved and Miriam, why did the Torah need to tell us that they feared Elokim? Once it was established that these were Egyptian women, that statement demonstrates growth on their part and an additional reason to praise them.

It may seem strange that Par'oh only spoke to Shifra and Puah. According to HaAmeik Davar, there were many midwives among the B'nei Yisrael, but Shifra and Puah were the leaders of the midwives. That creates several problems for us: (1) if these women were not Jewish, why would any of the Jewish midwives listen to them, especially about killing the boy babies? and (2) if these women were Yocheved and Miriam, how could Miriam, who was very young when Moshe was born, become one of the leaders of the midwives if she was still so young?

Our Rabbis deal with the fact that the words, "and they kept the boys alive," were said twice. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term, "va't'chayena et hay'ladim" means that the midwives not only permitted the boys to live but actually kept them alive. These women did the opposite of what the King had ordered. "His demand to the midwives made them extra zealous in the opposite direction, so that no breath of suspicion should be attached to them, that, obeying the King's orders, they had done something or omitted to do something, by which the child's life could be endangered. Henceforth, they must do everything possible, work with all their art, go down on their knees and pray to Hashem, that now no still-born child should be born, no child come into the world with any hurt."

HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the Rambam insisted that various preparations of a newborn be done on the day of birth, even if that day would be Shabbat, because it would be a danger for the child should they not be done. These actions included washing the child, cutting the chord, wrapping the child, and applying salt to the child, four actions which would normally be forbidden on Shabbat, but would be permitted in this situation because of the danger involved were they not done for the child. Par'oh was upset with Shifra and Puah, not only because they did not grab the boys immediately upon birth to kill them, but it appeared that they assisted in preparing the child, following the steps quoted by the Rambam.

The Ohr HaChaim asks what it was that the two midwives did that caused Par'oh to say, "Why have

you done this thing." Par'aoth had instructed them to kill the boy babies, which they had not done, and his question should have been, "Why have you not done this thing." The Ohr HaChaim explains that the Egyptians saw that these midwives were bringing water and food to the women who had given birth and did not understand that the water and food were also for the newborns. Since it was unclear why the midwives continued to bring water and food to these women's houses long after the birth, Par'aoth began to suspect that the male children were alive.

Shifra and Puah's act of defiance guaranteed the future of the Jewish People. They endangered themselves to preserve our people and enabled the birth of Moshe. Sometimes a small act of bravery has a much greater result than the act itself. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

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Raising a Hand to Strike

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"**A**nd Moshe said to the wicked one (*rasha*), "Why do you strike your fellow?" (*Shemot* 2:13). The word translated "strike" (*takeh*) is technically in the future tense. From this our Sages derive that one who simply raises his hand against his neighbor is referred to as a *rasha* (a wicked person), even before actually striking him.

The prohibition of injuring another is biblical, derived from the verse: "He may be given up to forty lashes **but not more**" (*Devarim* 25:3). As is the case for all biblical prohibitions (*Javin*), a transgressor is liable to *malkot* (lashes) for transgressing, unless he is already subject to a financial penalty. Therefore, if someone causes an injury to another and the damage done is minimal (less than a *perutah*), he is liable to *malkot*. We might therefore conclude that someone who simply raises his hand against his neighbor (causing no damage and earning himself no financial liability) should incur the punishment of lashes. Why then is such a transgressor only referred to as a *rasha* but not lashed?

It is possible that the prooftext cited above is not the real source of the prohibition. Instead, it may be that the prohibition is rabbinic, with the biblical text simply serving as an *asmachta* (support). Even though according to this understanding the transgression of raising one's hand against a neighbor is only rabbinic, someone who does so is referred to as a *rasha*. This status may disqualify him to serve as a witness, and may mean that his oath is not relied upon. Alternatively, it is possible that calling him a *rasha* does not disqualify him as a witness. It may simply mean that we are permitted to refer to him as a *rasha*, which is what Moshe did.

There is another significance to a person being considered a *rasha*. The person whom he is

threatening is permitted to report him to the ruling authorities, Jewish or non-Jewish, and he is not considered a *moser* (an informer who turns in a fellow Jew to the authorities in defiance of Jewish law). Furthermore, the person being threatened is permitted to attack his attacker – not physically (as he has not yet been struck) but verbally, by name-calling. For example, he may call the threatening person a *mamzer* (a child born of an adulterous or incestuous union), even though doing so may cause his attacker more harm than the attacker would have caused him had he landed his threatened blow. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

This week's Torah portion is the beginning of the second book of the Torah known as "Shemot -- Names." This book title comes from the opening verse in this week's Torah portion: "These are the names of the children of Israel that came to Egypt" (*Exodus* 1:1).

However, in English the book is known as *Exodus*. This is an entirely reasonable title as much of the first half of the book relates to the slavery of the Jewish people in Egypt and the events leading to their eventual freedom. In fact, most of the weekly Torah portions in *Exodus* are directly relevant to the stories behind leaving Egypt and the acceptance of the Torah on Mount Sinai shortly thereafter (including the sin of the Golden Calf).

This makes the Hebrew name for the book -- *Shemot* -- seem a bit odd; it is non-descriptive and seems to ignore the incredible events leading up to the birth of the Jewish people. It is particularly strange that the book called *Names* introduces the primary figures of the upcoming stories by totally omitting their names!

"A man of the house of Levi went and married Levi's daughter. The woman became pregnant and had a son. When she realized how extraordinary he was she hid him for three months. When she could no longer hide him, she placed him in a box that she had waterproofed and placed him among the reeds on the banks of the Nile. The child's sister stood watch over him to see what would happen" (*Exodus* 2:1-4).

The "man" that the Torah is talking about is Amram -- the preeminent leader of the Jewish people. The "daughter" of Levi was Yocheved. The nondescript "son" was none other than Moses, and his anonymous "sister" was the soon to be famous Miriam. Even the woman who saved Moses is known simply as "Pharaoh's daughter." So why is the book called *Names*?

Later in this week's Torah reading we find that Moses has to flee Egypt because he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was viciously beating one of the Jewish slaves. Pharaoh heard of the incident and

sentenced him to death, at which point Moses decides that it would be wise to "get out of Dodge." He flees to nearby Midian and is sitting by a well -- minding his own business -- when he notices male shepherds harassing some female shepherds and preventing them from drawing water for their sheep.

The women were the daughters of Jethro who had been banned from communal life in Midian because of their father's rejection of idol worship. Jethro had been a high priest in Midian, and perhaps unsurprisingly, his community took his rejection of idol worship rather poorly. Thus, his status there was considerably diminished, and his daughters were harassed and prevented from watering their sheep.

Moses runs off the male shepherds who were harassing them and gives them the opportunity to water their sheep first. Jethro notices that his daughters arrive home earlier than usual, and he asks them what happened, they reply, "An Egyptian rescued us from some shepherds" (2:18-19).

The sages of the Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 1:32) teach that when they said "An Egyptian rescued us" this alluded not to Moses but rather to the Egyptian that Moses killed, the one that forced him to flee Egypt and arrive on their doorstep. The Midrash illustrates this with the following analogy; a man was bitten by a wild donkey and ran to a nearby river to soak his leg in the cool water.

As soon as he gets to the river, he notices a child drowning and he pulls him out. The child remarks, "If it hadn't been for you, I would have surely drowned!" The man responds, "Do not thank me, thank the wild donkey that bit me. For if it had not been for his bite I never would have headed to the river, and I wouldn't have seen you drowning." So too Moses explained to them that if it had not been for the Egyptian he killed he never would have been at the well in Midian to save them.

This was the story they retold to their father. The Torah informs us that Jethro told his daughters to go and find the man who saved them, and to invite him for dinner. Moses agrees to spend some time at Jethro's home, he settles there, and ultimately Jethro offers Moses his oldest daughter's hand in marriage.

What is going on here? Moses came from one of the most prominent Jewish families in Egypt, was raised in the palace by the Pharaoh, and will become the greatest prophet to ever live. How is he suddenly marrying the daughter of a local ex-priest from Midian, a woman whom we hardly know anything about?

(I am reminded of the many times in my 35 years of marriage when I would introduce someone to my wife; they would look at her for a moment and make some small talk, all the while a bit wide eyed, and I just knew they were thinking, "Wow. How did this guy ever convince someone like her to marry him?")

In next week's Torah reading, when it came

time to strike Pharaoh and the Egyptian slave masters with plagues, we see that Moses does not initiate the plagues that affect the Nile River (it turned into blood), nor the soil of Egypt (which turned into a massive plague of fleas). The sages explain that because the Nile had protected Moses when he was a baby, and the earth had benefitted Moses when he buried the Egyptian taskmaster that he had killed, Moses was prohibited from striking both the Nile and the ground because he owed them debts of gratitude.

The Midrash illustrates this core value of having gratitude with the following aphorism: "One ought to not cast stones into a well from which he drank." We have often discussed the concept of adopting an "attitude of gratitude" being a core tenet of Judaism. In fact, the great 13th century Jewish philosopher Rabbeinu Yonah of Gironde (today Gerona in Catalonia, Spain) points out the importance of starting one's day with the quick prayer of *Modeh Ani* as soon as one awakens. This prayer, which expresses gratitude to the Almighty, in his words "inflames a love and appreciation for the Almighty" first thing in the morning.

Still, one must wonder at this concept raised by the sages of owing a debt of gratitude to an inanimate object such as a well or, in Moses' case, the Nile and the soil in Egypt. It seems patently absurd. How are we to understand what our sages are trying to teach us?

It is important to understand that Judaism does not believe that inanimate objects have any special magical powers. In fact, that concept borders on idol worship. To be sure -- we place mezuzot on the doorways of our homes and wrap tefillin (phylacteries) -- both of which contain chapters from the holy Torah and seem similar to "mystical" amulets -- but they serve a specific purpose of consecrating oneself and one's home in the service of the Almighty. The focus is squarely on the channeling of connection to the Almighty, not -- God Forbid -- the innate power of those objects.

Similarly, we wear tzitzit (ritual fringe corners) to remind us of God's commandments and that we are to guard our eyes and hearts from going astray. It is not the tzitzit that provides the protection -- it is our conscious effort to improve who we are and become God-like that induces holiness within our lives.

Maimonides, in his epic work on philosophy *Guide to the Perplexed* (1:61) discusses writing "healing names of angels" or other amulets and dismisses them as silly and foolish, things in which "no sane individual should engage."

(In a similar vein, I have always been disturbed by the supposedly "holy objects" that are often distributed for "protection," like red strings. I believe they fall squarely in the category wherein Maimonides characterizes the purveyors of such items as misguided, and the people who believe in them as fools.)

By contrast, the sages do encourage people to have an appreciation for inanimate objects that naturally bring us closer to the Almighty. For example, according to Jewish law, when a person comes to a place in which a miracle occurred for him or his ancestors, he is obligated to make a special blessing thanking the Almighty. It is not about the place containing holiness, it's the appreciation of what the Almighty did for him there that causes an outpouring of gratitude for God, who orchestrated the miracle. Like tefillin, mezuzot, and tzitzit, our focus is directed back to God -- the source of all blessings.

We must consciously zero in on everything and anything that reminds us of the gratitude that we owe the Almighty. Whether it's a well we drank from, or Moses' odd relationship with the Nile and the soil of Egypt -- we cannot do anything that lessens the feelings of gratitude that we owe the Almighty. That is why we do not throw rocks in wells that we benefitted from, and Moses was not the appropriate agent to initiate those plagues on the Nile and soil of Egypt.

The reason that the book of Exodus is simply called *Shemot* or Names is because the second book of the Torah is concerned with showing us that the guiding hand of the Almighty is behind everything in creation; God alone orchestrated events in such a way to achieve the birth of the Jewish nation by taking us as slaves out of Egypt and giving us the Torah. The personalities in the story -- and how they came to be -- are mostly irrelevant.

This is also why -- as strange as it seems -- Moses felt that the daughters of Jethro should understand that he was only there through the hand of God -- the strange circumstances that forced him to leave Egypt and arrive at their doorstep could have only been orchestrated by the Almighty. The Egyptian taskmaster whom Moses rightfully killed was simply a pawn to reveal the power of God in moving the world in a certain direction. When Moses saw that they understood his message he felt that this was a family with which he could connect, and he eventually marries the daughter of Jethro.

This week's portion tells a story often repeated throughout history: The Jews become prominent and numerous. There arises a new king in Egypt "who did not know Joseph" (meaning he chose not to know Joseph or recognize any debt of gratitude). He proclaims slavery for the Jewish people "lest they may increase so much, that if there is war, they will join our enemies and fight against us, driving (us) from the land."

Moses is born and immediately hidden because of the decree to kill all male Jewish babies. Moses is saved by Pharaoh's daughter, grows up in the royal household, and goes out to see the plight of his fellow Jews. He kills an Egyptian who was beating a Jew,

escapes to Midian when the deed becomes known, becomes a shepherd, and then is commanded by God at the Burning Bush to "bring My people out of Egypt." Moses returns to Egypt and confronts Pharaoh who refuses to give permission for the Israelites to leave. God says, "Now you will begin to see what I will do to Pharaoh!" © 2025 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

While parshas *Shemos* ("Names") does begin with names, those of the shevatim, and introduces the naming of Moshe, it is ironic that, when the parsha's narrative begins, anonymity seems the rule.

"A man went out from the house of Levi and took a daughter of Levi" (*Shemos*, 2:1). We know the references are to Amram and Yocheved, but their names are not provided. Likewise with Moshe's sister (2:4) whom we know to be Miriam but is unnamed. Same with Dason and Aviram, who are named in parshas *Korach* (*Bamidbar* 16) but not here in *Shemos*. And "the daughter of Par'oh," we know, from *Divrei Hayamim*, was named Bisya. But in our parsha she has no name. And what names are introduced for other dramatic personae seem pedestrian in their meanings. See Rashi 1:15 on *Shifra* and *Puah*.

What occurs as a possible message in the abundance of namelessness is that even simple people, those who haven't established any sort of "name" -- fame or distinction -- for themselves, are capable of accomplishing great things; of, by their choices and actions, "making a name" for themselves. Every Tom, Debby and Harriet, in other words, can play a role as pivotal as those played by Amram, Miriam and Bisya. What matters isn't one's credentials but, rather, one's actions.

And the idea that we should not feel limited is something the Kotzker famously commented on with regard to the Midrash stating that Bas Par'oh's hand, extended to baby Moshe, elongated to reach him. She apparently reached out for something that was well beyond her reach, which is why the miracle had to happen. And yet she reached out all the same.

When one is seeking to do good, she (or he) should not feel constrained by "reality," be it physical distance or any lack of credentials.

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