

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Shemot  
January 6, 2024 \*\*\* 25 Tevet, 5784

Shemot in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Shemot," means "Names" and it is found in Exodus 1:1 - 6:1.

The children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile.

A child is born to Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram, and placed in a basket on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian. The next day he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Tziporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai, and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Moses' brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe; but Pharaoh refuses to let them go, and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest: "Why have You done evil to this people?" G-d promises that the redemption is close at hand.

Shemot Haftarah in a Nutshell: *Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22–23*

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah parallels the week's Torah reading on many levels. One of the

parallels is the message of redemption conveyed by Isaiah—"and you shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel"—that is reminiscent of the message of redemption that G-d spoke to Moses at the burning bush, a message that Moses then communicated to Pharaoh.

The haftorah vacillates between Isaiah's prophecies concerning the future redemption, and his admonitions concerning the Jews' drunken and G-dless behavior. Isaiah starts on a positive note: "In the coming days, Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom, filling the face of the earth . . ." He mentions G-d's mercy for His nation, and the measure-for-measure punishment He meted out upon the Egyptians who persecuted them. And regarding the future redemption: "You shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel. And it will come to pass on that day that a great shofar will be sounded, and those lost in the land of Assyria and those exiled in the land of Egypt will come, and they will prostrate themselves before the L-rd on the holy mount in Jerusalem."

The prophet then proceeds to berate the drunkenness of the Ten Tribes, warning them of the punishment that awaits them. "With the feet they shall be trampled, the crown of the pride of the drunkards of Ephraim . . ."

The haftorah ends on a positive note: "Now Jacob will no longer be ashamed, and now his face will not pale. For when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, who shall sanctify My name . . . and the G-d of Israel they will revere."

### Food For Thought

The Challenge of Jewish Leadership: Shemot by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l  
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/jewish-leadership/>

I used to say, only half in jest, that the proof that Moses was the greatest of the prophets was that when God asked him to lead the Jewish people, he refused four times: Who am I to lead? They will not believe in me. I am not a man of words. Please send someone else.

It is as if Moses knew with uncanny precision what he would be letting himself in for. Somehow he sensed in advance that it may be hard to be a Jew, but to be a leader of Jews is almost impossible.

How did Moses know this? The answer lies many years back in his youth. It was then when, having grown up, he went out to see his people for the first time. He saw them enslaved, being forced into heavy labour.

He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He intervened and saved

his life. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting, and again he intervened. This time the man he stopped said to him, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?"

Note that Moses had not yet even thought of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged. And these are the first recorded words spoken to Moses by a fellow Jew. That was his reward for saving the life of an Israelite the day before.

And though God persuaded Moses, or ordered him, to lead, it never ceased to be difficult, and often demoralising. Moses was faced with over forty years spent leading a group of people who were prone to criticise their situations, sin and rebel, and argue among themselves.

In an appalling show of ingratitude, the Israelites complain several times in the book of Shemot, after witnessing miraculous acts from God and his appointed leader. At Marah they complain that the water is bitter. Then, in more aggressive terms, they protest at the lack of food ('If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death'). Later, at Refidim, they grumble at the absence of water, prompting Moses to say to God, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!'

In Devarim, Moses recalls the time when he said to God: "How can I myself bear Your problems, Your burdens and Your disputes all by myself" ([Deut. 1:12](#)). And then in Beha'alotecha, Moses suffers what I have often called an emotional breakdown:

He asked the Lord, "Why have You brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do You tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land You promised on oath to their ancestors? . . . I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favour in Your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." [Num. 11:11-15](#)

And this was said, don't forget, by the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Why are Jews almost impossible to lead?

The answer was given by the greatest rebel against Moses' leadership, Korach. Listen carefully to what he and his associates say:

They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You

have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord assembly?" [Num. 16:3](#)

Korach's motives were wrong. He spoke like a democrat but what he wanted was to be an autocrat. He wanted to be a leader himself. But there is a hint in his words of what is at stake.

Jews are a nation of strong individuals. "The whole community is holy, every one of them." They always were. They still are. That is their strength and their weakness. There were times when they found it difficult to serve God. But they certainly would not serve anyone less. They were the "stiff-necked" people, and people with stiff necks find it hard to bow down.

The Prophets would not bow down to Kings. Mordechai would not bow down to Haman. The Maccabees would not bow down to the Greeks. Their successors would not bow down to the Romans. Jews are fiercely individualistic. At times this makes them unconquerable. It also makes them almost ungovernable, almost impossible to lead.

That is what Moses discovered in his youth when, trying to help his people, their first response was to say, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?" That is why he was so hesitant to take on the challenge of leadership, and why he refused four times.

There has been much debate in British and American Jewry recently<sup>[1]</sup> about whether there should be an agreed collective stance of unconditional support for the state and government of Israel, or whether our public position should reflect the deep differences that exist among Jews today, within Israel or outside.

My view is that Israel needs our support at this critical time. But the debate that has taken place is superfluous. Jews are a nation of strong individuals who, with rare historic exceptions, never agreed about anything. That makes them unleadable; it also makes them unconquerable. The good news and the bad go hand in hand. And if, as we believe, God loved and still loves this people despite all its faults, may we do less? <sup>[1]</sup> It should be noted for context that this essay was written by Rabbi Sacks in November 2010, amidst a widespread communal debate regarding Israel.

[The Burning Bush in My Backyard: Shemot by Cantor Sheri Allen](https://truah.org/resources/sheri-allen-shemot-moraltorah_2024/)  
[https://truah.org/resources/sheri-allen-shemot-moraltorah\\_2024/](https://truah.org/resources/sheri-allen-shemot-moraltorah_2024/)

As Jewish clergy living and working in Texas, I've often been asked the question (mostly by my non-Jewish colleagues) about what "called me" to my work.

“Being called” is not an expression, in my experience, that is used often in Jewish spaces. It implies receiving a message from a higher power — an experience that, so far, has eluded me. I envy those who hear that call so loudly and clearly that there is no uncertainty about where their lives will take them.

So in response I tend to say, “I don’t consider myself as having been called. It’s been more like a slow, steady, evolving nudge.”

Although Moses’ call from God in Parshat Shemot is clear, he still needs quite a bit of nudging before he accepts it. Raised as royalty in Egypt, he flees to Midian and begins a new and quiet life as a family man and shepherd. Tending to his flock one day, he makes the intentional decision to stop long enough to observe that a burning thornbush is not consumed: “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” (Exodus 3:3)

It’s interesting that what draws Moses’ attention is not that the bush is burning, but that it is not burning up. Why does he seem to have no fear that this fire will spread and engulf his herd, himself, and the wilderness around him? Were burning bushes considered to be fairly harmless and commonly left alone to smolder into ash? If so, Moses might have passed this bush daily, until it became so familiar that he stopped noticing it altogether. Until the day when he was moved to actually stop and observe that, after so much time — perhaps every day since his Israelite siblings first cried out to God to rescue them — it was still intact, aflame but not engulfed. Burning until someone stopped and took notice. And this simple act of noticing, this curiosity, changes Moses’ destiny.

Moses’ question prompts God to communicate directly with him, charging him, “Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.” (Exodus 3:10) Although God clearly sees Moses’ leadership potential, Moses is riddled with insecurity, pleading, “Please, send someone else!” (Exodus 4:13)

It’s interesting that Moses’ successor, Joshua, responds very differently when God calls him to lead the people into the Land after the death of Moses. When God commands Joshua to “be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed...” (Joshua 1:9), there is no hesitation. Joshua immediately tells the people to get ready to cross the Jordan. He’s got a job to do, he recognizes it, and he jumps right in.

My spouse and I have lived in Texas for over 30 years. When we moved here, I was focused on raising three kids all under the age of six, and then I was studying to become a cantor and beginning my synagogue career. I knew that I was living in a red state — there were certainly enough red flags popping up through the years. But it literally took a pandemic for me to stop and notice not just a burning bush but an entire forest fire.



Sequestered at home with more time on my hands, unable to visit my now-adult kids (none of whom live in Texas), I began paying attention to what was happening outside of my tightly locked windows. And I became increasingly appalled by the injustice I witnessed: the vitriolic pushback against mask mandates, the attempts to impose voting restrictions on marginalized communities, and the further erosion of gun safety laws. I felt compelled to take action, but also paralyzed by it all — where does one begin when there are so many fires to put out?

Rabbi Matt Berkowitz comments,

“The challenge in our own lives is to recognize our own ‘burning bush’ moments: when a sign appears, we must have the patience and faith to embrace it, understand it, and be inspired by it.”

Turns out, I had no trouble recognizing the burning bush in my backyard. Our three adult children all identify as LGBTQ+. My youngest is transgender. The introduction of over 140 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in the state legislature this past year — with Human Rights Campaign (HRC) reporting that “Texas had a fifth of all of the anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in the country” — was my wake up call.

Initially, we thought about moving out of state and closer to our children. But whether it was a “calling” or simply a “wake-up call,” I felt compelled to stay and funnel my newfound inner fire into action.

Last year, I, along with another clergy friend, created an affirming, inclusive congregation that prioritizes social justice advocacy — not just for LGBTQ+ folks but for anyone who needs a safe space to live and pray authentically. We’ve been to the state capitol to protest the unjust bills that have now become law, testified at school board and city council meetings, marched in Pride parades, and forged relationships with other organizations and interfaith communities who share our values. We are small in number but strong in our desire to make our voices heard. When I began working as a cantor, leaning into social justice advocacy work was not on my radar. I often second-guess my decisions, and I will always choose playing it safe over taking chances.

Yet, even as someone who has virtually no experience in community organizing, I have chosen to risk making mistakes while also learning from those who have made their careers doing this work. And I marvel how they keep at it when it can seem so overwhelming and often hopeless. But that’s where that “nudge” comes into play — that desire to keep going and do what we can to make change, even if that change seems imperceptible most of the time.

Moses' newfound awareness of God's presence transforms a pasture where a thorny desert plant burns into a sacred space. Despite his reservations, he is able to see that God's presence illuminates even the most unassuming, seemingly dark and thorny places. May we, with all our insecurities, do the same. (*Cantor Sheri Allen is co-founder of Makom Shelanu Congregation in Ft. Worth, Texas, and a member of the Social Justice Commission of Conservative/Masorti Judaism.*)

[The Power of Names: Shemot by Udi Hammerman \(edited by Shoshi Ehrenreich\)](https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2021/12/22-parshat-shemot-the-power-of-name)

<https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2021/12/22-parshat-shemot-the-power-of-name>

I always find it a bit funny, a curiosity of naming conventions perhaps, that Sefer Shemot, referred to so much more respectably in English as "Exodus," simply means "names." As funny as it is, it rightfully draws attention to the significance of names in the unfolding saga of Jewish slavery, redemption, and revelation.

Shemot opens with a list of the names of Bnei Yisrael as they came down to Mitzrayim, counting each individual within those families. These names highlight the value of each individual: "Now all those descended from Yaakov were seventy souls, and Yosef, who was in Mitzrayim." [1] The book of Shemot does not just start with a list of names or of people, but of "souls".

Following this list, we learn of the harm that comes from Pharaoh's ignorance of names and of individuals. The text tells us that the new Pharaoh did not know Yosef, and without knowledge of him, Paroh views Bnei Yisrael as a threatening, unnamed mass. As if anticipating Paroh's next move, the Torah sets the stage by describing Bnei Yisrael as if it were a colony of insects: "Bnei Yisrael were fruitful and swarmed and increased and became very strong, and the land became filled with them." [2] This ignorance and fear is what lies behind his multi-staged plan of isolation and oppression in order to estrange them from Egyptian society, and ultimately what lies behind the command for his people to drown all male babies in the Nile. [3]

The significance of names is apparent from the beginning of the Torah. Seeking a helpmate for the first man, Hashem brings all of the animals of the world before him, "To see what the man would call them." [4] The process of naming is the first sign of recognition and connection between man and animal, between humans and the world around us. It is a core expression of humankind's role in the world: as a part of tending to Gan Eden and the world, we must be cognizant and appreciative of each creature that we are responsible for.

When woman is created, Adam says "This is bone from my bones, flesh from my

flesh, therefore let her be called Ishah (woman) for she was taken out of Ish (man).”[5] Later, the first woman is given an even more specific name—Chava (Eve)—because of her universal role: “the mother of all the living.”[6] Both acts of naming open the potential for a relationship: first between Ish and Isha, and subsequently between Chava and the generations of the world that are connected to her.

Names are fundamental to our individuality, our souls, and ultimately our ability to live together in the world. The loss of names would be devastating; if we had to call each other “Hey you: tall guy, smart guy, guy with red hair...,” there could be no real relationship.

But if the removal of names can lead to the destruction of a people, then Shemot also shows that the appropriate use of names can bring redemption. Hashem’s desire to liberate the slaves is aroused, in part, by the names with which Shemot opens.[7] By keeping their Hebrew names during the period of enslavement, Bnei Yisrael prevented total assimilation into Egyptian culture and retained their connections to each other and Hashem.[8]

The interpersonal and environmental takeaway here is one and the same: the knowledge and acknowledgment of names is the foundation to fully relating to each other and with each element of the natural world. When we do this, we truly fulfill our Divine purpose. When we do not, we risk destroying Hashem’s world.

In the modern industrial supply chain, we have systematically obscured the names of so many people, places, and plants. The people who sell us the finished product frequently go unnamed; the people who grow or make it are almost always nameless; those who package and transport it invariably are. Usually, you can know where the product is first made, but the names of countless places along the way are lost. Even the natural elements put into the products we buy, from food to furniture, are often obscure: just think of “natural flavors.”

Though we are linked to all these people, places, and parts of nature through our consumption, our ignorance of their names makes it hard to be in a relationship with them. How do I relate to the world beyond my immediate surroundings if I do not know where they are? To the cows at an unknown dairy farm whose milk I drink every morning? To the chickens at the industrial poultry shed? When I buy brand new sneakers, do I consider who made them? How was that individual human being treated while he or she made my shoes?

If we deny the names—the unique identity—of other people, creatures, plants, and places of the earth, we risk becoming like Pharaoh. Threatened by the complexity and variety of the world, he chose to see others as nameless resources, as nothing



more than a means towards his own goals. Such a path, while often seeming to increase comfort and efficiency in the present, ultimately leads to relegation and oblivion. This namelessness is an important dimension of our environmental crisis: from farms to landfills, we frequently outsource harm, remove ourselves from being in a relationship with it, and in doing so, enable our further contributions towards it. [9]

But through naming, through the acknowledgment of the uniqueness of every part of Hashem's world, we can begin to find redemption, coming into full relationship with each other and our world. [1] Shemot 1:5 [2] Shemot 1:7 [3] Shemot 1:22. Rashi notes that the verse says "every son who is born," not "every son who is born to the Israelites." Pharaoh's mania to destroy Israel was so great that he decreed against his own people as well. [4] Bereishit 2:19 [5] Bereshit 2:23 [6] Bereshit 3:20. The Hebrew for Eve, Chava, is connected to the word for living, chai. It is interesting to note that the first man is not referred to by a proper name, Adam, until after Chava is named. Until then, he is called haAdam- "the man." [7] Shemot Rabbah 1:5: These are the names of the Children of Israel- for the sake of the redemption are they mentioned here. Reuven, as it says-I have surely seen the affliction of my people in Mitzrayim. Shimon, as it says- And God heard their cries, etc (quoting Exodus 3:7). [8] Vayikra Rabbah 32:5 [9] To read about the experiences of farmworkers in America, see here. For research on the impacts of living near a landfill, see here.

### [Moshe the Mindful? Shemot by Lilliana Shvartsman](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/moshe-the-mindful/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/moshe-the-mindful/>

Just a few verses after meeting Moshe, we delve into his world and learn a wealth of details: separated from his birth family, raised by Pharaoh's daughter, forced to flee after striking an Egyptian, and encountering God while tending to his father-in-law's flock. Just before discovering the burning bush, the Tanakh notes that Moshe drove his flock "into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God" (Exod. 3:1).

Why, after years among people, did Moshe seek the wilderness—a solitary and desolate place? Was it for his own sake for a moment to himself, or did he go there with the purpose of finding God?

As I near the end of my journey through rabbinical school, especially as I enter my final semester, I am reflecting on how I've processed this experience. Someone recently asked if I journal to navigate the transition toward becoming a rabbi. Typically, my response would have been no; I shy away from that form of self-reflection. Yet, I've recently embraced the unfamiliar: welcoming solitude with my pen, journal, and self.

Moshe's journey mirrors the struggles many face in navigating transitions and seeking purpose amidst uncertainty. The 19th-century Polish commentator Ha'emek Hadavar suggests Moshe intentionally led his flock to the most remote location, a place no other shepherd dared venture, seeking solitude. He needed such desolation to encounter God. While we don't know if Moshe had his own meditation, journaling, or spiritual practices that promoted solitude, his courage and strength in recognizing the necessity of solitude are evident. Being alone doesn't equate to feeling lonely; it can be a conscious endeavor to connect with oneself and, more profoundly, with God. Perhaps Moshe only gathered the courage to approach the burning bush precisely because of the solitude he sought, away from the chaos of family and life.

I wonder if the intentional separation from the familiar, an act often misconstrued as loneliness, was instead a purposeful endeavor. It echoes the profound truth that solitude can foster not only self-discovery but also a profound connection with the divine.

In this desolate moment, Moshe finds the strength to approach "the heart of the fire," בְּלִבְת־אֵשׁ, without turning away ([Exod. 3:2](#)). Had the fire appeared in a more crowded area, Moshe might have been concerned for others' safety. Yet, in the vast desert, with a moment to breathe, Moshe gazes long enough into the fire to realize it does not consume the bush. Here, his leadership potential emerges: he investigates the peculiar bush, showing no fear, approaching closer, and suddenly encountering God.

Rashi teaches that God resided within this fire. Thus, Moshe wouldn't have noticed God's presence without his courage to move toward it. If he hadn't sought to distance himself from the noise of society, he may never have discovered his true purpose.

Virginia Woolf described solitude as "freedom from the oppression of constant noise and distraction."[\[1\]](#) In an era dominated by incessant noise and perpetual connectivity, finding moments of true solitude becomes an arduous task. However, therein lies the irony—amidst the digital clamor, the pursuit of solitude becomes all the more valuable for inner exploration and spiritual connection.

We must view spending time with our thoughts as a deliberate internal exploration, even if it involves uncomfortable self-reflection, in pursuit of meaningful experiences. Surely, Moshe didn't know he was destined to become a prophet, but his courage to step away and lead his flock into the wilderness was the first stride toward becoming the leader of the Israelites.

This deliberate quest for introspection, akin to the ancient solitude sought by

Moshe, stands as a testament to the enduring human quest for understanding and purpose. Just as Moshe's solitude paved the way for his divine encounter, our contemporary pursuits of journaling, meditation, or venturing outside comfort zones serve as modern pathways to self-discovery.

Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani, who spent extensive time alone in a Japanese cabin in the 1980s, taught, "The only real teacher is not in a forest, or a hut or an ice cave in the Himalayas, It is within us."<sup>[2]</sup> Tiziano Terzani's wisdom reverberates today, reminding us that the most profound teachings originate not from external sources but from within ourselves. The transformational power of solitude, whether in the wilderness of ancient times or the quiet corners of our modern lives, serves as a timeless beacon guiding us toward self-realization and enlightenment. *(Lilliana Shvartsmann is a student at the Rabbinical School of JTS, class of '24)* <sup>[1]</sup> Woolf, A Room of One's Own <sup>[2]</sup> Crane, Brent. "The Virtues of Isolation" The Atlantic. March 30, 2017.

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### Yahrzeits

Rebecca Greene remembers her father, David Schwartz on Saturday, January 6<sup>th</sup>

Craig Miller remembers his mother, Roberta Miller on Wednesday, January 10<sup>th</sup>

Blossom Primer remembers her mother, Ester Rappaport on Friday, January 12<sup>th</sup>