

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shemot
January 18, 2025 *** 18 Tevet, 5785

Shemot in a Nutshell

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 (Tzipporah), 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/Haftarah-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

[Who Am I?: Shemot by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l \(5772\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/who-am-i/)

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Moses' second question to God at the Burning Bush was, 'Who are You?'. He asks God in the following way:

"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.[1]

Moses' first question, though, was, Mi anochi, "Who am I?"

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" said Moses to God. "And how can I possibly get the Israelites out of Egypt?" Ex. 3:11

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 Tanach 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?' (II 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. Instead, they were people who doubted their own abilities, who became heroes of the moral life against their will. There were times when they felt like giving up. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah reached points of such despair that they prayed to die. But 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 over time the answer revealed itself.

Still, 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 the mountain, 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 went home and told 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 - Tziporah, daughter of a Midianite priest - and he had been "content to live" there, quietly as a shepherd. We tend to forget just how many years he spent 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? How 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” (Ex. 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” (Ex. 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-darchai ha-tsibbur, Hilchot 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 Haggadah 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. [1] I expand on this within my books [Future Tense](#) and [The Great Partnership](#).

[Shemot: A Turn for the Better by Ariella Rosen](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/a-turn-for-the-better-2/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/a-turn-for-the-better-2/>

It's an all too familiar image: an individual in distress calling out, seeking help, as person after person walks by, completely ignoring their plight. Many of us prefer to see ourselves as the exception, the one who would stop and offer a hand, but statistics paint a different picture. In social psychology, the bystander effect describes the direct inverse correlation between the size of a crowd and the likelihood that someone will step in and help in a moment of crisis. In other words, someone in distress is much more likely to receive support from a solitary passerby than from a large group gathered around them. It appears to be the case that human beings are much more willing to step up when we are alone.

In Parashat Shemot, it appears that Moses took conscious steps to operate as a lone bystander, taking action that seems unlikely had a larger crowd been present. Raised in Pharaoh's household, now an adult, Moses went out to walk among the Hebrew slaves as they labored. After witnessing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, “[He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand](#)” (Exod. 2:12).

It was only after concluding that no other witnesses were present that Moses took action. One could debate his motivations: Was he making sure that no one would observe this violent action on his part? Was he checking to see if anyone else was preparing to step in and help? Commentaries suggest the former, and perhaps this moment is a perversion of the bystander effect: Moses acted alone both because he didn't want to be seen and because he realized there was no one else who would stop this beating.

This is not the only time Moses's life is altered by a decision to turn his head. After discovering that there was indeed a witness to his killing of the Egyptian, Moses fled to Midian, where he quickly (at least in the text) finds himself married to Tziporah, daughter of Jethro, herding his father-in-law's sheep through the wilderness. One such trek brought him to the base of Mount Horeb (also considered to be Sinai), where Moses encountered a bush that is aflame, but not consumed by the fire:

["I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight", Moses says, "why doesn't the bush burn up?" \(3:3\)](#)

While before, when he made the choice to save his fellow Hebrew, he turned to and fro to be sure his actions would not be witnessed, this time he turned precisely in order to bear witness. And of course, it is this second decision to turn and notice that is the catalyst that launches the Exodus story and results in his leadership over the Israelite people for the next forty years.

Various commentaries seek to define the nature of Moses's turning at the Burning Bush. Did he move closer in order to inspect this oddity? Did he step farther away in order to take in the scene as a whole? Midrash Tanhuma (Shemot 15:2) relates a debate over how much Moses turned aside:

[And Moses said: I will turn aside now, and see this great sight \(Exod. 3:3\). Rabbi Yohanan said that Moses took three steps forward \[closer to the bush\]. Rabbi Simeon the son of Lakish said he took no steps, but rather simply turned his neck to observe it. The Holy Blessed One said to him: Because you troubled to look, be assured you will merit that I shall reveal Myself unto you.](#)

In other words, even the simple act of turning his neck a few degrees was enough for God to decide Moses was worthy of the prophetic messages he would soon receive, and the mantle of leadership that he would assume. It did not matter that he made a slight hesitation rather than a full detour; it was enough to open himself to an encounter that would change not only his life but the course of an entire people.

The message of this midrash is clear: sometimes a slight pivot is enough to lead to an entirely different destination, if only we will ourselves to make that shift. Twice in this parashah, Moses found this to be true. What would it take for us, then, to overpower the phenomenon that prevents too many of us from stepping off course, and to allow ourselves to turn aside, to truly notice that which is unnatural or unjust, regardless of whether or not others join us? Perhaps if we allow the unexpected to penetrate our consciousness just enough, we can throw off the identity of bystander and allow the reverberations of that tiny motion to propel us in

changing the course of history. (*Ariella Rosen is the Former Director of Admissions at the JTS Rabbinical School and H.L. Miller Cantorial School*)

[Shemot: Worthy to Be Named by Rabbi Shuli Passow](https://truah.org/resources/shuli-passow-shemot-moraltorah_2024_/)

[https://truah.org/resources/shuli-passow-shemot-moraltorah_2024_ /](https://truah.org/resources/shuli-passow-shemot-moraltorah_2024_/)

V'eleh sh'mot b'nei yisrael ha'baim mitzraima.

And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt. Every man and his household came with Jacob: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad and Asher. And it was that every soul who came from the loins of Jacob totaled 70 souls. (Exodus 1:1-5)

V'eleh sh'mot, “and these are the names,” the book of Exodus begins. Yet, where are the names? The early portion of Parshat Shemot is characterized not by names, but rather by a sense of anonymity. The introductory nature of the opening verses creates the expectation that we are about to meet new characters, but we read only the familiar names of Jacob and his sons; their offspring are lumped together as “70 souls.” As the narrative progresses, the text repeatedly refers to the people as one unit — “the people,” “the children of Israel,” and “the Hebrews” — leading the biblical scholar Nechama Leibowitz to describe the nation as “characterless and faceless, devoid of personalities.” (New Studies in Shemot)

Chapter two continues in a similar vein. As the Torah narrates Moses' birth and adoption by Pharaoh's daughter, the text seems to go out of its way to avoid naming the characters, referring to them only as “man,” “woman,” “son,” “daughter,” “sister,” “child.”

V'eleh sh'mot. Yet where are the names?

In this landscape of obscurity, the three characters who are named in these early chapters stand out in strong relief. First, we meet Shifra and Puah, midwives who provide their services to the Israelite community. They are characterized by their willful defiance of the royal decree to kill the male Hebrew children: Shifra and Puah, “fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt told them: they let the boys live.” (Exodus 1:17)

It would not be unreasonable to question the midwives' motives, to argue that in fearing a divine punishment more severe than Pharaoh's, they act primarily in their own self-interests. However, in commenting on the midwives, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (also known as Shadal) writes that “whoever has a god...will recoil from massacring innocent children,” painting these women as agents of moral clarity who act in accordance with their religious values. (Shadal's commentary on Exodus 1:15)

Soon after, the young man who has previously been referred to as “son,” “child,” and “youth,” is finally named: Moses. As with the midwives, the text juxtaposes Moses’ naming with acts of opposition to injustice: He kills an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave; when he comes across two Hebrews fighting with each other, he chastises the oppressive party; and he drives away a group of Midianite shepherds who are preventing seven sisters from drawing water for their family’s flocks. On these three episodes, Leibowitz comments: “Each of [them] represents an archetype. First, he intervenes in a clash between a Jew and a non-Jew, second between two Jews, and third between two non-Jews. In all three cases, Moses championed the just cause.” She notes that this progression reveals Moses’ commitment to the value of justice, applied universally, as he holds his own people and those from other nations to the same standards.

The Torah deems Shifra, Puah, and Moses worthy of being named on the basis of their efforts to subvert the injustice that surrounds them. These leaders should push us to ask ourselves if we are fully inhabiting our named identities as we face today’s moral challenges. Though we are millennia away from our ancestors’ Egypt, a new political reality is on our horizon. What courageous action will be called for? What risks might we be asked to take?

V’eleh Sh’mot. Will our names be on the list? *(Rabbi Shuli Passow serves as the chief program and engagement officer at B’nai Jeshurun in New York City, where she oversees social justice, hesed, and other adult programming.)*

Yahrtzeits

David Rubin remembers his father Martin Rubin on Monday January 20th
Treasure Cohen and Rachel Rose-Siwoff remember their father Abraham I. Levin on Tuesday January 21st