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בס"ד

## Parashat Shemot Part I On Exodus Chapter 1

### 1. Introduction (Verses 1-7)

The book of Genesis traced the major events pertaining to the founding family of Israel from its origin to its becoming an extended clan successfully settled in Egypt. The Book of Exodus continues the narrative and assumes familiarity with the Genesis text. It opens with a brief summary of the family's migration to Egypt then depicts the clan's growth into a national entity and its enslavement in the previously friendly host country, followed by its deliverance (in accordance with G-d's prophecy to Abraham in Gen. 15:13). The manifestations of linkage to the previous book are extensive and compelling.

Exodus' first five verses comprise a digest of the Genesis 46 account of Jacob's move with his family from Canaan to Egypt (Gen. 46:8 ff.). Indeed, both passages begin with the identical six-word clause. The final of these five verses of our Exodus account corresponds to the closing verse of that Genesis passage (v. 27) in standard chiasmus fashion (AB-B'A'). Here, it states "the total number of individuals who came forth from the loins of Jacob numbered seventy" and "Joseph was in Egypt." There, it is "Joseph's sons who were born in Egypt were two," followed by "the total number of individuals of the house of Jacob that came to Egypt was seventy."

The enumeration at the beginning of Exodus begins with the children of Leah followed by those of Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah, the order in which Jacob married the four women. (It is also a chiastic arrangement: first wife, second wife, second wife's maid, first wife's maid.) This order does not follow the Genesis 46 model (Leah, Zilpah, Rachel, Bilhah) but parallels that of Genesis 35 (35:23-26). Perhaps the Genesis 35 sequence, which is followed by the genealogies of Esau and Se'ir, is the "official" one. The Genesis 46

listing, describing the family as it was migrating, may reflect its traveling arrangement, that is, the personal groupings of the sons and their children.

The next verse in Exodus 1 (v. 6) quickly shifts the scene forward with "Joseph and all his brothers" and all the previous generation passed away. In highlighting Joseph's centrality, the passage further addresses the reader who is aware of the Genesis narrative.

The final introductory verse (v. 7) describes (and reflects) Israel's profuse proliferation with multiple terms, פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיִּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם. It proclaims the fulfillment of G-d's great blessings of fertility that had been articulated at key points throughout Genesis. At creation, He blessed man with פָּרוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת הָאָרֶץ (Gen. 1:28). After the flood, His blessings to Noah and his sons began with these five words (9:1) and concluded with פָּרוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּרְבוּ (9:7). His promises to Abraham included וַתִּפְרֹתֵי אֶתְךָ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד (17:2,6). By combining words and phrases associated with Creation, with the new start after the Flood and with G-d's covenant with Abraham, the message is unmistakable: An epochal development for the benefit of humanity was at hand, the advent of the nation of Israel.\*

The one word in our Exodus 1:7 description of Israel's remarkable growth that G-d had not explicitly mentioned in granting blessings in Genesis is וַיִּעֲצְמוּ (became mighty, in the sense of a great increase in numbers). However, G-d did mention עֲצוּם (in a similar sense) in Genesis in describing the future nation that would stem from Abraham and the blessings the nations of the earth would receive through him (Gen. 18:18). \*\*

## 2. The Meaning of וַעֲלֶה מִן הָאָרֶץ

“A new king arose...who did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). Alarmed at Israel’s proliferation, he fears that in the event of war an Israelite nation even more numerous than what it was at that point might join the enemy and succeed in accomplishing וַעֲלֶה מִן הָאָרֶץ (“they shall rise from the ground” [v. 10]). Some have conjectured that this latter phrase may express the fear that the Israelites, presumably a valuable economic resource, will “leave the land,” in order to return to their own country. However, despite the fact of their Asiatic origin, as the Israelites had not yet been enslaved and had lived in Egypt for an extended period of time, proliferating and having “taken hold in it” (Gen 47:27), why should they be suspected of wishing to leave?

Some suppose that the king fears future enemies, in conjunction with the Israelites, might force the Egyptians to leave the land. Superstitiously, he speaks of his fear in the third person, וַעֲלֶה (“they shall rise”), a once-common form of speech, illustrated in Dathan and Abiram’s taunt to Moses, “Do you intend to gouge out their eyes?” (Num.16:14). However, Egyptian history does not reflect grounds for such a fear and the biblical narrative does not contain any indication of it.

The NJPS translates וַעֲלֶה מִן הָאָרֶץ as “rise from the ground,” with the following footnote: “Meaning perhaps from their wretched condition, cf. Hos. 2:2; or ‘gain ascendancy over the country.’”

It is unreasonable to interpret the king as fearing Israel’s merely “rising from its wretched condition.” Israel was not yet in such a lowly state to speak of it in such a manner and there is nothing so threatening about such a result. The king cannot be imagined to be saying, “they will join our enemy, battle with us and improve their condition.”

However, to “gain ascendancy over the country” fits the context well. In Hosea 2:2 – in the only other scriptural attestation of this phrase – it states: “The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall assemble together and appoint one head over them וַעֲלוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ (and shall rise from the ground).” That passage speaks of Judah and Israel who were in their land and were surely being envisioned to remain in

their land. Thus, “rise from the ground” appears to connote ascendancy and triumph in the land.

The Israelites in Egypt apparently maintained their distinctiveness as a separate “nation” and as Asiatics. The fear that they might join warring foreigners and become ascendant was very understandable given the traditions that undoubtedly were handed down within governmental and educated circles during the time frame we are dealing with. This would be not many centuries after the Egyptian experience with the Hyksos, the Asiatic Semitics whose princes ruled in north Egypt from the beginning of the middle third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. for little over a century. They had risen to power after several centuries of migrations to the eastern Nile delta and having consolidated their power there. (Some scholars have placed the account of Joseph’s rise to power, the immigration of Jacob and his family and their settlement in Goshen within the Hyksos period. However, there are a number of textual and historical difficulties with that hypotheses.)

## 3. On the Word *Perekh*

The Egyptian strategy of subduing the Israelites began with drafting them into national service as a type of corvée or labor-tax and having them build storehouse cities for Pharaoh. But despite the increasing level of servitude and affliction, the Israelites continued to multiply. The Egyptians worked the Israelites בְּכַבֵּד (with *perekh*, vv. 13 and 14). For centuries this word has been translated in accordance with *Targumim Onqelos* and *Jonathan*, who rendered it בְּקִשְׁיוֹ (“with harshness”). Thus Rashi, Rashbam and others commenting on verse 13 explain it as “work that breaks the body.” This appeared to have some basis in Semitic languages. Our Exodus context, which stated, “they embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and bricks and with all types of labor in the field” (v. 14) lent support to this translation. Modern commentators generally followed suit. Thus, Fox and Alter translate it as “with crushing-labor”; JPS and Koren, “with rigor”; NJPS, “ruthlessly.” Ibn Ezra interprets *perekh* as “placing more work upon the individual than the usual portion for a slave.”

Recent work on ancient Near Eastern languages, however, has recognized *perekh* as the Hebrew equivalent of the Akkadian *pirku*. This was a legal

term with the meaning of “unjust and unreasonable demands” and, as applied to nonslaves, “extended forced labor,” in effect transforming free men into a category of slaves. *Pirku* was never used for slaves, as it had no meaning when speaking of people who already were enslaved. Ancient Egyptian documents attest to the king’s right to press his free subjects into forced national labor for a limited time, within reasonable parameters; beyond that limit would violate his subjects’ natural rights and would be *perekh*. This translation fits the two attestations of the word in our Exodus context eminently well (see *Olam HaTanakh, Shemot* p. 22 and on Ezekiel p. 175). There are four more attestations of the *perekh* root in *Tanakh*.

In Leviticus 25 the word (as בְּפִרְךָ) appears three times (vv. 43, 46b, 53) and in all three instances the context reads more smoothly with the *pirku* translation. In one instance it is only understandable with that translation. We will elaborate on this topic in our comments on *Parashat Behar Part III*. It will be seen that the laws pertaining to the non-Israelite slave mentioned there do not contain any implication that he may be worked with “crushing-labor.” There is thus no inconsistency with the revolutionary humane laws of Exodus 21 that tended to limit a master’s harsh treatment of his non-Israelite slave.

The final *bepharekh* is in Ezekiel 34:4. The context is one of complaints against Israel’s leaders, viewed as shepherds, who tended to their own needs and exploited their flock. “You eat the fatty meat, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the fatling; you do not tend the flock. You did not sustain the weak, heal the sick, bandage the injured, return the strayed or seek the lost, you ruled them with might and בְּפִרְךָ, so they have become scattered without a shepherd and prey for wild beasts” (vv. 3-5). Ruling with harshness does not fit the context of sheep and neither does it lead to their being scattered. It is the lack of proper shepherding that allowed them to become scattered, which may be termed “unjust” shepherding, thus calling for the word *perekh*.

In the next verses in Ezekiel 34 G-d declares that He will rescue His flock from the places where they were scattered and will shepherd them properly. After providing some details He states that, “I will seek the lost, return the strayed, bandage the injured, heal the

sick...and אָרְעָנָה בְּמִשְׁפָּט (“shepherd it [the flock] with justice” [v. 16]). Clearly, following the series of reversals that parallel the shepherds’ violations, “with justice” is the opposite of בְּפִרְךָ, which obviously should translate as “with injustice.”

#### 4. The Midwives

When oppressive labor and affliction did not slow the Israelite population surge, the Egyptians resorted to progressively crueler, more drastic measures, still without success. The king did not choose to outright kill a large number of slaves on some pretext, as he is known to have had the power to do, as that would presumably harm the economy and tarnish his reputation. He decided to work through the midwives who attended to the birthing Hebrew women. (“Hebrew” is often used as the foreigner’s designation of “Israelite.”)

The king ordered the midwives to engage in male infanticide. When they saw the baby while the mother was still on the birth-stool or, alternatively, as the infant was deposited in the receiving container (it is not clear what the Hebrew הַאֲבִיבִים refers to), if it were a boy they were to kill him, thus providing a gradual solution to the king’s fears. Perhaps he meant that the deaths should appear as stillbirths or accidents, to prevent the possibility of a slave rebellion. Females would be permitted to live, as they did not constitute a military threat and would be of value as maidservants and as mates for slaves of other ethnic groups, thus producing slaves to replace the Hebrew males. (Ironically, the king is strictly focused on the males; the early stages of salvation, however, as described in the unfolding narrative, ensue through females: midwives, the mother and sister of Moses, and daughter of Pharaoh.)

Although the king believed that the midwives would obey his orders to kill the boys, and surely the population at-large would do so, at that point he did not propose public infanticide. Perhaps he did not want to besmirch his nation’s civilized image. But the midwives feared G-d and defied the king’s orders time and again and the Israelites continued to burgeon. (Cassuto suggests that deployment in successive verses of the attested forms of “see” וַיִּרְאוּ and “feared,” וַיִּירָאוּ, being anagrams, is intended to reflect the irony in the case.)

Frustrated, the king then proclaimed that all males born [to the Israelites] were to be cast into the Nile. The narrative does not offer further details about this decree; it speaks for itself. The chapter is concluded on the note that the new nation was on the verge of extinction. Thus, one of the major themes that courses through the Book of Genesis continues into the Book of Exodus. Just as barren wives, famines and rivalries jeopardized the very existence of the founding family that was to become the nation of G-d, the continued existence of the nation is now threatened. Israel is to be a nation that relies on G-d's ongoing favorable intervention for its survival.

As the midwives endangered their lives to save the lives of the baby boys, G-d rewarded them by "making them homes" (v. 21). It is possible that professional midwives were women who did not have children of their own; in a "measure for measure" reward, G-d intervened, enabling them to have their own families.

Of what nationality were the midwives? The pivotal phrase *hamyaledot ha'ibriyot* (v. 15), with slight variation of accentuation, can either be translated "Hebrew midwives" or "midwives of the Hebrews."

However, it is much more likely that the midwives were non-Hebrews (as was rendered in the ancient Greek translation of the Bible [the Septuagint]; also see Abarbanel). Firstly, how could the king have taken for granted the cooperation of Hebrew midwives for such ongoing barbarity? Common sense would advise that it is at least a problematic matter; many examples are known from history of individuals circumventing and resisting authority when they were ordered to kill innocent members of their own nationality or ethnic group. Secondly, when Pharaoh discovered that the midwives were not complying with his wishes, it is inconceivable that he would not interpret their behavior correctly, had they been Hebrew, realizing that they would not kill their own kin. His very asking for and listening to an explanation indicates that he was dealing with non-Israelite midwives. Finally, the midwives' answer to Pharaoh, "for unlike Egyptian women are the Hebrews, for they are animal-like" (or perhaps "lively"), is more consistent with the speakers not being Hebrew women. Had they themselves been Hebrew they would not so consistently speak of

Hebrew women in the third person but would inevitably have used some first person term.

Their names – Shiphrah and Puah – although Semitic, might be translations from the Egyptian or, more likely, an indication that they derived from non-Hebrew Semitics, who had migrated to Egypt through the years, a phenomenon well known from Egyptian history.

Thus, the midwives resisted the king's orders, jeopardizing their personal welfare, to save the lives of another nationality's children. This is an ever-inspiring example of moral fortitude to "fear G-d" even in defiance of the highest temporal authority in the land. It is significant that the Torah highlights an aspect of the survival of the Israelite nation as brought about by such valiant behavior; undoubtedly it is meant to etch unto the consciousness of future generations that such values must ever be honored and that such admirable characteristics may be found in all nationalities.

## Endnotes

\* It surely is significant that Noah was the tenth generation from creation and Abraham the twentieth. This reflects set periods of time, indicating the Deity's governance of the world and His patience with man before He decides on a major intervention. He brings about the establishment of Israel as His nation through Moses, the twenty-sixth generation from creation, most probably in association with His revealing His Tetragrammaton name Y-H-V-H, which is symbolically represented by its *gematria* of twenty-six (see our study *Parashat Vaera Part I*).

\*\* In a foreshadowing of sorts, Abimelech described Isaac's growth, and commanded him to leave his land, because *עצמתך ממנוי מאד* ("you have grown much more mighty than we" [Gen. 26:16]). Here, two verses after *ויעצמו* is mentioned as an element in Israel's growth, the Egyptian king expresses his concern with it and introduces his decrees to cope with it, employing a phrase similar to Abimelech's, *רב וְעִצּוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ* ("are more numerous and mightier than we" [Exod. 1:9]).