Shemot: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?



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The first parsha in the book of **Exodus begins with the Pharaoh deciding to enslave the Israelites**, ordering their midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. They refuse, and **the Pharaoh orders all Hebrew babies thrown into the Nile.**

A woman named **Yocheved gives birth to a baby boy**, and places him in a basket on the river as his sister, Miriam, watches over him. **The Pharaoh's daughter finds the boy and rescues him, raising him as her son and calling him Moses.**

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and learns of the Israelites' plight. When he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he kills the aggressor. The next day, he tries to break up a fight between two Israelites, and they reveal his deed from the day before, forcing him to flee to Midian. There, he rescues the daughters of a powerful man named Jethro, marries one of them—Tzipporah—and finds work as a shepherd for his father in law.

God appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foothills of Mount Sinai, **commanding him to return to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh set the Israelites free.** Moses's brother, Aaron, is appointed as his spokesman, and, back in Egypt, the brothers assemble the elders of Israel to tell them the time of redemption had come. **The people believe, but Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go.** God promises redemption is close at hands.

"“Let me turn away from what I am doing here in order to go there and see this remarkable sight. Why doesn't the bush burn?”"

Take a deeper dive

If the book of Genesis was primarily the story of one remarkable family—Abraham and his descendants—then **the book of Exodus is the story of us all, the story of how we became the Jewish people**. So it's a little shocking to learn that **the first time we're called a people, or *am*, the speaker is none other than our worst enemy, the Pharaoh:** "He said to his people, 'Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are. Get ready, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase, and a war befall us, and they join our enemies and wage war against us and depart from the land.'"

Long before the Israelites themselves see their collective destiny, long before they feel the thrust of peoplehood, **the Pharaoh understands their immense potential and historic role**. And, naturally, he's threatened. And so, a thoroughly wicked man, he comes up with new ways to make the lives of our enslaved ancestors all the more difficult. But none, perhaps, was harsher than the following decree: "So, on that day, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their officers, saying, 'You shall not continue to give stubble to the people to make the bricks like yesterday and the day before yesterday. **Let them go and gather stubble for themselves.'"**

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, a prominent 18th century Italian rabbi known as the Ramchal, taught us that this wasn't merely a knee-jerk reaction designed by Pharaoh to dishearten the Hebrews. "His intention was not merely to deprive them of all leisure so that they would not come to oppose him or plot against him," the Ramchal wrote of the Egyptian king, "but he strove to strip their hearts of all thought by means of the enduring, interminable nature of their labor…**This is one of the cleverer devices of the evil inclination — to mount pressure unrelentingly against the hearts of men so as to leave them no leisure to consider and observe the type of life they are leading.** For it realizes that if they were to devote even a slight degree of attention to their ways, there is no question but that they would immediately begin to repent of their deeds and that regret would wax in them until they would leave off sinning altogether."

So many of us are guilty of the same failing, of spending so much time in our busyness that we fail to take the time and stop and contemplate our actions. But not Moses. Let's return to that first encounter with the bush: "So Moses said, 'Let me turn now and see this great spectacle; why does the thorn bush not burn up?'"

The ability to say "let me turn now and see" is Moses's superpower. Only because he's able to veer from his path is he able to observe the great miracle right in front of his face. And only in times of great uncertainty and suffering can we test—and discover—our true abilities.

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