

The Book of Exodus

ספר שמות

Torah in Motion/929

Martin Lockshin

The New Episode

בראשית מו: וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּכֹר יַעֲקֹב
רְאוּבֵן . . .

Genesis 46: These are the names of the sons of Israel, Jacob and his descendants, who came to Egypt. Jacob's first-born Reuben . . .

שמות א: וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֵת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ
בָּאוּ. רְאוּבֵן שְׁמֵעוֹן לֵוִי וַיהוּדָה . . .

Exodus 1: These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah . . .

Ramban on the theme and beginning of Shemot

ונתייחד ספר ואלה שמות בענין הגלות
הראשון הנגזר בפירוש ובגאולה ממנו,
ולכן חזר והתחיל בשמות יורדי מצרים
ומספרם, אף על פי שכבר נכתב זה
בעבור כי ירידתם שם הוא ראשית
הגלות.

The book of Shemot is devoted to a description of the first exile, which had been explicitly decreed, and the redemption from it. It is for this reason that Scripture backtracks and opens with the names and number of those who descended into Egypt. Scripture does this, even though this was already written, for their going down into Egypt is the beginning of the exile.

Structure of Exodus

1-15 Egypt: enslavement, plagues, exodus, Sea of Reeds

15-18 First stories in the wilderness

19-24 Revelation at Mount Sinai and first laws

25-31, 35-40 The Tabernacle

32-34 The Golden Calf and some more laws

Ramban on the end of Shemot

והנה הגלות איננו נשלם עד יום שובם
אל מקומם

Actually, the exile did not really
finish until they returned to their
place

The Covenant Between the Pieces (Gen 15)

וַיֵּרֶד הָעֵיט עַל הַפְּגָרִים וַיִּנְשֹׁב אֹתָם
אֲבָרָם.

Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

רד"ק: וראה שהיו יורדים הדורסים
על התר והגוזל לאכלם ולכלותם,
ואברם היה מנשב אותם ומפריחם
מעליהם, רמז לו בזה כי בכל דור ודור
אומות העולם עומדים עלינו לכלותינו
והקב"ה מצילנו מידם בזכות אברהם

Rabbi David Kimhi: . . . The symbolism in this is that in all generations the gentile nations attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. But God always saves us from their hands, because of the merit of Abraham.

Children of Israel/Israelites

שמות א 1-2: וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ
בָּאוּ. רְאוּבֵן שְׁמֵעוֹן לֵוִי וְיְהוּדָה . . .

Exodus 1:1-2 These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah . . .

שמות א 7: וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ
וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאדָּ בְּמֵאדָּ וַתִּמְלֵא
הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם

Exodus 1:7 But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

Stages in Exodus Chapters 1 and 2

1. Pharaoh: work them hard “lest they increase (פֶּן יִרְבֶּה).” But (vs. 12): “The more they were oppressed, the more they increased (כִּן יִרְבֶּה).”

2. Midwives ordered to kill the baby boys at birth: frustrated by midwives.

וַתֹּאמְרוּן הַמִּיֻּלְדֹת אֶל פַּרְעֹה כִּי לֹא כַנְּשִׁים הַמִּצְרִית הָעִבְרִית כִּי חַיֹּת הֵנָּה בְּטָרָם תָּבוֹא
אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּיֻּלְדֹת וַיִּלְדוּ.

The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous (חַיֹּת). Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”

3. All baby boys thrown into Nile: Baby Moses *placed* in the Nile.

4. Moses saved by Pharaoh’s daughter!

Dramatic Ironies

1. היליכי את הילד הזה והינקהו לי ואני אתן את שכרך

“Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.”

רש"י: נתנבאה ולא ידעה מה נתנבאה הי שליכי

2. ותקרא שמו משה ותאמר כי מן המים משיתו.

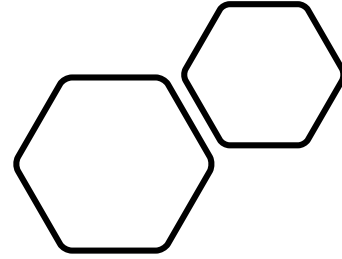
She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

ספורנו: ותקרא שמו משה – ממלט ומושה את אחרים מצרה

The Question of Genre



Two Models of Interpretation



Theological (God-centred)
Moral (people-centred)

Theological Lessons (I)

עַתָּה תֵּרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפָרְעָה כִּי בִיד
חֲזָקָה יִשְׁלַח וּבִיד חֲזָקָה יִגְרֹשׁם מֵאֶרְצוֹ
(ו' 2)

לְמַעַן יֵדַע כִּי אֵין כֵּה' אֶ-לֵהִינוּ (ח 6)
לְמַעַן יֵדַע כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ (ח 18)

בְּעִבּוֹר זֹאת הָעֲמִדְתִּיךָ בְּעִבּוֹר הָרְאִיתְךָ
אֵת כְּחִי וְלְמַעַן סִפֵּר שְׁמִי בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ (ט 16)

You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land (6:2)

that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God (8:6)

that you may know that I the Lord am in the midst of the land (8:12)

I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My fame may resound throughout the world (9:16)

Theological Lessons (II)

מי כַּמֹּכָה בְּאֱלֹהִים ה' (טו 11)

Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods/the mighty? (15:11)

וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ בְּרוּךְ ה' אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם
מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל
אֶת הָעָם מִתַּחַת יַד מִצְרַיִם. עַתָּה
יָדַעְתִּי כִּי גָדוֹל ה' מִכָּל הָאֱלֹהִים (יח
10-11)

“Blessed be the Lord,” Jethro said,
“who delivered you from the
Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and
who delivered the people from
under the hand of the Egyptians.
¹¹Now I know that the Lord is
greater than all gods”

Theological Lessons (III)

אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם
וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל כְּנָפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבֹא
אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי. וְעַתָּה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ
בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְהֵייתֶם לִי
סֻגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ
וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֹת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי
קָדוֹשׁ (יט 4-6)

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (19:4-6)

Theological Lessons (IV)

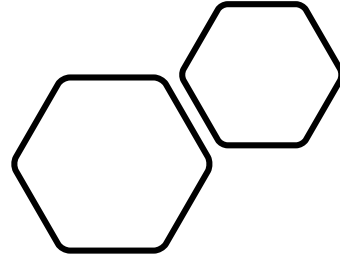
אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים

לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי.
לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר
בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת
וְאֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ. לֹא
תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם (כ 2-5)

I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them (20:2-5)

How Do We Translate the Decalogue?



Buber-Rosenzweig translation (1929):

Ich bin dein Gott, der ich dich führte aus dem Land Ägypten, aus dem Haus der **Dienstbarkeit**. . . . neige dich ihnen nicht, **diene** ihnen nicht

Everett Fox translation (1983):

I am YHWH your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of **serfs** . . . You are not to bow down to them, you are not to **serve** them

Theological Lessons (V)

וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי
אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְשִׁכְנִי בְּתוֹכָם (כט
(46)

אבן עזרא פירוש קצר: הוצאתים לעשות
לי מקדש ואשכון בתוכם

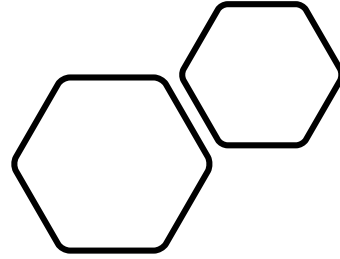
אבן עזרא פירוש ארוך (יג 8): לא
הוציאנו ממצרים רק לעבדו,

And they shall know that I the Lord
am their God, who brought them out
from the land of Egypt that I might
abide among them (29:46)

Ibn Ezra (shorter commentary): I
took them out so that they would
build me a temple and then I would
dwell among them.

Ibn Ezra (longer commentary to
13:8): The only reason He took us
out of Egypt was that we should
serve Him.

Theological Lessons (Summary)



In Exodus, *but not in Genesis*:

- God intervenes in history, and in a grand manner
- God legislates
- God speaks out against idolatry
- God wishes to be worshipped, and gives instructions for that worship
- God establishes a place for that worship
- And all of these points are connected to the Egypt story

Moral Lessons (I)

Before God gets involved:

- The midwives resist the tyrant and defend the defenceless. (1:15-19)

Then (following Martin Buber) Moses is introduced to us as the person who intervenes on behalf of the underdog:

- Israelite being beaten by an Egyptian (2:11-12)
- Two Israelites fighting (2:13): “He said to the offender: Why do you strike your fellow?” (וַיֹּאמֶר לְרֹשֵׁעַ לָמָּה תִּכֶּה רֵעִי)
- Midianite males harassing Midianite female shepherds: וַיִּזְשַׁע מֹשֶׁה מֵאֲנָשֵׁי מִדְיָן—Moses arose and **delivered** them. Cf. 14:30: the Lord **delivered** Israel (וַיִּזְשַׁע ה') that day from the Egyptians.

Moral Lessons (II)

וְאִלֵּה הַמְשֻׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׂיִם לְפָנֶיהֶם.
כִּי תִקְנֶה עֶבֶד עִבְרִי שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים יַעֲבֹד
וּבְשִׁבְעַת יֵצֵא לְחֻפְשֵׁי חֲנָם (כא 1-2)

When you acquire a Hebrew slave,
he shall serve six years; in the
seventh year he shall go free,
without payment. (21:1-2)

Moral Lessons (III)

וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ. כִּי גֵרִים
הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (כב 20)

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשׁ
הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (כג
9)

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (22:20)

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. (23:9)

Moral Lessons (IV): Ramban on 22:20

כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים – לא הוכשרו
כל הגרים בעבור היותנו גרים בארץ זמן,
ואין טעם שיהיו מובטחים לעולם בעבור כן. . .

והנכון בעיני כי יאמר לא תונה גר ולא
תלחצנו – ותחשבו שאין לו מציל מידך, כי
אתה ידעת שהייתם גרים בארץ מצרים
וראיתי את הלחץ אשר מצרים לוחצים
אתכם ועשיתי בהם נקמה, כי אני רואה
דמעת העשוקים אשר אין להם מנחם ומיד
עושקיהם כח, ואני מציל כל אדם מיד חזק
ממנו.

All strangers did not automatically become protected because, for a time, we were strangers. There is no reason that they should all feel protected because of that . . .

In my opinion, the correct interpretation is “do not wrong or oppress strangers,’ thinking that there is no one to protect them from you. For you know that you were strangers in Egypt, and I saw the way the Egyptians oppressed you and I took vengeance. For I see the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them, and the power of their oppressors. And I save every person from the hands of those more powerful.

Moral Lessons (V)

וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ. כִּי גֵרִים
הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. כָּל אֲלֻמָּנָה וְיִתּוֹם
לֹא תַעֲנוּן. אִם עֲנִה תַעֲנֶה אֹתוֹ כִּי אִם
צָעַק יִצְעַק אֵלַי שָׁמַע אֲשַׁמַּע צַעֲקָתוֹ.
וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהִרְגַתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּחָרֵב וְהָיוּ
נְשֵׁיכֶם אֲלֻמָּנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יִתְּמִים (כב
(20-23)

You shall not wrong a stranger or
oppress him, for you were
strangers in the land of Egypt.
²¹You shall not ill-treat any widow
or orphan. ²²If you do mistreat
them, I will heed their outcry as
soon as they cry out to Me, ²³and
My anger shall blaze forth and I
will put you to the sword, and
your own wives shall become
widows and your children
orphans. (22:20-23)

Moral Lessons (VI): commentaries on 22:23

רשב"ם: מידה כנגד מידה Rashbam: Measure for measure

רמב"ן: וכן האלמנה והיתום לא תענו
כי אשמע צעקתם, שכל אלה אינם
בוטחים בנפשם, ועלי יבטחו.

Ramban: So also the widow and the orphan [just like the stranger] you must not oppress. For I hear their cry. All of these do not rely on themselves, but they rely on Me.

Summary

Theological and moral messages come together.

God worries about the stranger and about the underprivileged. God did it in history and will do it in the future.

You, who were once underprivileged and are no longer, have a legal/religious responsibility to do the same, to be like the midwives in chapter 1 and like Moses in chapter 2. (Again, this message not in Genesis; cf. Abraham [chapter 18] and Rebekah [chapter 24].)

This message is NOT the message of the Haggadah, a book produced when Jews were, for all intents and purposes, powerless.

It is the message of the book of Exodus, directed to people who were about to become sovereign in their own country and who might be tempted to misuse that power.