

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(office@etzion.org.il)

Two Chapters - Two Perspectives

By Rav Tamir Granot

Introduction

Sefer Shemot describes the beginning of the consolidation of *Am Yisrael* as a nation. The Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent Revelation at Sinai are two of the most formative of the nation's experiences. The Tribes of Israel existed prior to this, but there was no national life.

The creation of *Am Yisrael* as described in *Sefer Shemot* is not a normal, natural phenomenon. Nations generally come into being connected to a certain piece of land, whose inhabitants form an association of cooperation based on common interests; they go on to establish laws, set boundaries, and agree to some form of government. The birth of *Am Yisrael* does not follow this natural process of development. Rather, its origins reflect a singular Divine intervention in history, which has the effect of generating both its independence and its nationhood. *Am Yisrael* was not born in its own land, and the process of its formative stages is not a natural one.

The first chapters of *Sefer Shemot* are a sort of foreword and background to this great process, which is the essence of the Book.

* Chapter 1 is a detailed chronicle of the enslavement of Israel in Egypt. As we saw in the *shiur* on *Parashat Vayigash*, this chronicle actually starts with Yosef's actions during his lifetime, and it continues into the beginning of *Sefer Shemot*. Clearly, the Divine intervention in the Exodus, the transition from slavery to redemption, cannot be understood without the necessary background as to the history of this slavery.

* Chapter 2 presents the origins of Moshe. It ends with his marriage and settling in Midyan – i.e., before he becomes the leader. In Chapter 2, we come to know Moshe, starting at the very beginning of his life. The description of the origins of the leader must precede the description of the evolution of the redemption; this is clearly logical. The selection of Moshe as leader of the nation and as God's emissary is a necessary condition for redemption, for Moshe is the savior of Israel.

Hence, we may summarize the relationship between the first three chapters of *Sefer Shemot* as follows:

- Chapter 1: crisis, complication – the enslavement
- Chapter 2: the beginnings of a solution
- Chapter 3: solution – redemption

When we read Chapter 2, describing Moshe, we do not yet know the relationship between him and the contents of Chapter 1: there is no explicit indication that this boy, the hero of

Chapter 2, will be the savior of Israel. If we were not familiar with Chapter 3 and the continuation of all the rest of the Torah, we could perhaps think that the Torah is presenting another vignette of slavery, from a different perspective.

Chapter 2, then, preserves the "tension" created in chapter 1, which left us with an unsolved problem. The Torah could have introduced the second chapter with an introductory exposition telling us that we are about to read follow the birth of the savior and leader – but the text chooses to keep this a secret until it is revealed at the burning bush. Thus, another riddle is created for us, the readers, on the literary level: the question of the connection between the first two chapters. Attention should be paid to the fact that each of these chapters stands alone: chapter 2 is not the continuation of chapter 1, even though it assumes that the reader is familiar with the circumstances:

"A man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi... She saw him, that he was special, and she hid him for three months.' The reason for hiding the child is Pharaoh's decree that "Every son that is born....," with which chapter 1 concludes. This represents the connection between the two chapters, and therefore chapter 2 may also be read as part of the history of the enslavement.

On the other hand, the story of Moshe is an independent unit; it stands alone.

Let us describe chapters 1 and 2, each on its own, and question how each should be understood in light of our analysis.

Chapter 1:

As noted, this chapter describes the subjugation of *Bnei Yisrael*, which is presented as evolving from one stage to the next. There is a problem, and Pharaoh's decree is meant to solve it:

1. "Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is more numerous and mightier than we; let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply – and it shall be that in the event of war, they shall also join our enemies...." THEREFORE PHAROAH DECREES: "He appointed over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens."
2. "But the more they afflicted them, the more numerous they became, and they had had enough of the children of Israel." BECAUSE OF THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF PHAROAH'S FIRST DECREE: "You shall look upon the birth stones; if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, but if it is a girl, she shall live."
3. "But the midwives feared God, and they did not to as the king of Egypt had instructed them, and they saved the children alive." BECAUSE THIS NEW TACTIC HAS NO EFFECT, PHAROAH DIRECTS HIS DECREE TOWARDS HIS ENTIRE NATION: "Pharaoh commanded all of his nation, saying: every boy that is born – you shall cast into the river."

The Ramban notes that these three stages reflect no small measure of cunning:

1. The decree of servitude, with which the development begins, is acceptable to the Egyptians because slavery is quite legitimate in their world and there is considerable profit to be made from the enslavement of Israel.
2. The second decree is, of course, much more severe and extreme, but is not directed towards the entire nation; rather, it concerns only women of a defined role (midwives), and therefore Pharaoh believes that he has the power to enforce it on them.
3. Only as a third stage does Pharaoh dare to command his entire nation, "Every son that is born – you shall cast him into the river." Apparently, after the previous stages, the necessary groundwork and infrastructure of slavery and hatred had already been laid, such that Pharaoh can now permit himself to promulgate a decree of annihilation.

It should be noted that we also note here a syndrome very similar to the historical development of anti-Semitism that we have witnessed in later generations. In our times we have seen how decrees of annihilation are not the first step; they are preceded by laws enforcing humiliation and slavery; later, the work of annihilation is entrusted to professional bodies, and only as a final stage is all of this followed by a decree of annihilation.

Let us now examine the words and linguistic forms that the Torah utilizes in the chapter:

- (6) Yosef died, as well as his brothers and all of that generation.
- (7) Then the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty, and the land was filled with them.
- (8) Then a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yosef.
- (9) And he said to his people, "Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is more numerous and mightier than we.
- (10) Let us deal wisely with them, lest they increase, and it shall happen – in the event of war – that they shall also join our enemies and wage war against us, and go up out of the land."
- (11) So he appointed over it [the nation] taskmasters, to afflict them with their burdens, and they built treasure cities for Pharaoh – Pitom and Ra'amses.
- (12) But the more they afflicted it, the more they increased and the more they grew, and they had had enough of the children of Israel.
- (13) And they Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with rigor.
- (14) And they made their lives bitter with hard labor, with mortar and with bricks, and all manner of work in the field – all the labor which they imposed upon them, with rigor.
- (15) Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, the name of one of whom was Shifra, and the name of the other – Pu'ah,
- (16) and he said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see upon the birthstones, if it is a boy

– you shall put him to death, but if it is a girl – she shall live."

(17) But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had said to them, and they saved the children alive.

(18) So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing – to save the children alive?"

(19) The midwives said to Pharaoh: "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are lively: before the midwife reaches them, they have already given birth."

(20) Therefore God dealt favorably with the midwives, and the nation multiplied and grew very mighty.

(21) And it was, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses.

(22) Then Pharaoh commanded all of his nation, saying: "Every boy that is born – you shall cast into the river, and every girl you shall save alive."

A review of the highlighted words and phrases reveals the following:

The seven-fold mention of Pharaoh, or the "King of Egypt" as an alternative title, emphasizes the centrality of the King of Egypt as the character who pits himself against Israel.

Facing him are *Bnei Yisrael*, or "the nation" as an alternative title, mentioned five times, and another twice in the singular ("it" – i.e., the nation).

Finally, there are the expressions indicating the natural – or not so natural - reproduction of Israel: "grew numerous," "grew mighty," "multiplied." These words continue the verse that precedes the story of the enslavement, in which the astonishing growth of Israel is described using a long list of verbs. The use and repetition of the same verbs here highlights the continuity of this process, despite Pharaoh's repeated efforts to halt it.

The story of the enslavement is described in the national dimension. There are only two individual characters who are singled out: the midwives, mentioned for their merit. Aside from them, the text speaks only of the nation, the enslavement in its macro perspective, as though we are watching thousands upon thousands of characters running about and building, without our knowing the personal story of even a single one of them. The description of both the increase of *Bnei Yisrael* and the efforts to annihilate them is of national, rather than personal, proportions.

Chapter 2:

In this chapter the perspective changes completely. Let us borrow an analogy from the world of cinema or theater: in Chapter 1, the lens zooms out; we see only blurred figures, we distinguish only general processes. At the beginning of Chapter 2 the camera zooms in close: suddenly we see a close-up of what is going on; the camera approaches a certain house and shows a picture of a birth. A mother who is both overjoyed and terrified. A baby smiling and being hidden away so that he will not be found.

The entire story here is described, or "filmed," as it were – close up. We do not know, in Chapter 2, what is going on all around.

Chapter 1 describes the decree of annihilation as promulgated by Pharaoh to his nation. It applies to every Hebrew boy who is born.

In Chapter 2, the decree is discerned through the prism of Yokheved and Miriyam.

In Chapter 1, the text describes the decree of enslavement for all of Israel.

In Chapter 2, the enslavement is experienced through the eyes of Moshe, concerning whom we are told, "He saw their suffering," and through the image of the Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, one of Moshe's brethren.

There are things that we cannot know from Chapter 1 because they essentially belong to the micro dimension, the little stories. Thus, for example, the internal disputes amongst *Am Yisrael*, which are the result of their subjugation: "Behold, two Hebrew men were fighting...."

The transition from Chapter 1 to Chapter 2 is the change from a general, historiographical overview to a personal, biographical one. We may describe the same chronicle on two different levels. For the sake of clarification, imagine a television or cinema screen divided in half: on one side we see the picture at a distance – the national process; on the other side, we see the private story of Moshe. The descriptions parallel and complement one another. Each contains that which the other fails to convey. And here, I believe, lies the crux of the introduction to *Sefer Shemot*: the realization that both chapters are taking place at the same time, in parallel; that these are not events that are following one another, but rather occurring simultaneously – this changes our understanding of the relationship between slavery and redemption, between anguish and salvation.

Anyone looking only at the part of the screen displaying the general, panoramic picture, would see only a reality that is cruel, cyclical, merciless, and devoid of hope.

But the other camera reveals that in the midst of the abyss of slavery, there is also a ray of light. The first ray of light is not the result of Divine intervention, but rather arises from a man who, in contrast to all others, understands that something in this situation is not right. The picture of an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, which to everyone else – Egyptians and Hebrews alike – was an entirely normative one, indeed, the epitome of everyday routine, was to him unbearable. He cannot bear it, and he reacts. Moshe's reaction at this stage does not arise from any plan that has been coming together in his mind. He does not yet know what destiny awaits him; he has no political agenda. He simply cannot bear the injustice; he does not want it to continue. In this insane reality, Moshe Rabbeinu is an island of sanity. Were we to look from afar, we would have no idea that anything had happened. We would know nothing of his existence. It is quite probable that the great majority of *Bnei Yisrael* knew nothing of what took place around Moshe. They were truly devoid of hope. They were not aware of the beginning of the change. But we – with our additional "zoom" perspective – know that the change has already begun. We understand that in the very depths of slavery, the beginnings of redemption are hiding. The

redemption is not "after" the slavery; it is in the process of coming into being.

Moshe's actions in Egypt are not much more than a cry of pain and objection. They are also an expression of his courage: he is not concerned for himself when he responds. Nevertheless, redemption cannot come without this "awakening from below." God needs, as it were, someone within reality to act, to awaken the sleeping, painful reality. This is what Moshe achieves by his actions, and therefore the "awakening from Above" is not long in coming. As the Torah tells us, at the end of Chapter 2:

(23) It happened, during those many years, that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from their labor, and they cried out, and their imploring rose to God, from their labor.

(24) And God heard their sigh, and God remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak, and with Yaakov.

(25) And God saw *Bnei Yisrael*, and God knew.

These verses could have been placed at the end of Chapter 1, with its description of the slavery. They are not connected to Moshe's stay in Midyan, which precedes its appearance at the end of Chapter 2. But their location at the end of Chapter 2 connects them to two sources, both of which are necessary conditions to catalyze Divine action:

- a. The depths of the slavery and the cry of *Bnei Yisrael*, as expressed in verses 23-25.
- b. The appearance of Moshe as a person worthy of leadership and able to save Israel.

The early stories about Moshe

The Torah recounts three events in which Moshe takes part:

1. the killing of the Egyptian who is striking the Hebrew
2. his rebuke of the Hebrew aggressor who is striking his neighbor
3. his salvation of the Midianite shepherdesses who are driven away by the more powerful shepherds.

This represents a clear development:

In the first instance, the Egyptian is harming one of his brethren, and the moral motivation is mixed up here in fraternal love and responsibility. (In presenting the episode, the Torah describes the Egyptian as striking "a Hebrew man of his brethren.")

In the second instance, the dispute is between two Hebrews, such that Moshe takes the side of the one suffering an injustice; he acts here solely on the basis of moral obligation.

In the third instance Moshe is completely removed from his natural surroundings; he is in a foreign country, confronting foreign people, and he has no connection with them at all. He reacts to the injustice *qua* injustice.

Moshe is revealed here as possessing three main qualities:

- courage
- high degree of moral sensitivity
- fraternity and national responsibility

These three qualities are central to his leadership – and to leadership in general. Concerning the first, no more need be said. The second and third exist both in tension and as complements of each other. Nationalistic fraternity sometimes runs the danger of leading to moral deviations, to an overly lenient attitude towards injustices going on within the nation. On the other hand, there can be no leadership without the fundamental sense of empathy that a leader must inculcate in his nation. *Chazal* teach that the Hebrew who was striking his neighbor was the same man who had been beaten the previous day by the Egyptian. This must not be repeated. A leader must come to the assistance of his brethren even when the latter is not a righteous person. Two years ago the nation of Israel deliberated the dilemma of liberating dangerous prisoners in return for Elchanan Tannenbaum – who, it seems, was not a paragon of virtue. But true leadership must feel a fraternal love and concern even towards such a brother. (Obviously, I do not refer here to the question of the price; only to the actual obligation of concern.)

Moshe is not chosen for leadership because of his prophetic abilities. It is also not because of his uniquely inspired prayers. It is only later that these qualities manifest themselves. The Torah, in its narration, conveys only the kernel of those qualities on the basis of which Moshe is chosen to deliver Israel – and these are the qualities discussed above.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>