

Shemot | The Enslavement of Israel



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30.03.2017

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I. OPENING SECTION

The opening story of Sefer Shemot describes two opposing processes, one of which leads to the other. The first process is the astonishing multiplication of Bnei Yisrael; a family of seventy souls becomes, in a relatively short time, a great nation. This process of strengthening – the size of the nation and its rate of growth – is perceived by Pharaoh as a threat to the Egyptian nation, and this gives rise to the second process, aimed at halting their continued growth. And so a family that was close to the Egyptian throne and which had, as a result, enjoyed special favor, quickly becomes an oppressed and enslaved minority facing a real threat of annihilation.

In this shiur we will examine the structure and style of this opening story, and we will then explore the dynamic relationship between these two processes.

Sefer Shemot actually opens with a short section (1:1-7) which serves as an introduction to the entire story of exile and redemption, as well as a bridge between Sefer Bereishit and Sefer Shemot. It repeats certain fundamental facts which we learned at the end of Sefer Bereishit (and which represent the historical basis for the events that take place in Sefer Shemot), but also moves us forward in time and presents us with a new reality characterizing Sefer Shemot.

Although there are many differences between the parallel accounts at the end of Bereishit and the beginning of Shemot, two differences in particular indicate the new setting of Shemot. (For an examination of some of the

other differences, see last year's shiur by Rav Yonatan Grossman, available at www.vbm-torah.org/thisp.htm.)

1. [Bereishit \(50:26\)](#) - "And Yosef died, at a hundred and ten years;" [Shemot \(1:6\)](#) - "And Yosef died, AND ALL HIS BROTHERS, AND THAT WHOLE GENERATION." These few words bring us forward a whole generation.
2. [Bereishit \(47:27\)](#) - "And Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt in the land of Goshen and they took possession of it, and they were fruitful and they multiplied greatly." [Shemot \(1:7\)](#) - "And Bnei Yisrael were fruitful and they increased abundantly and they multiplied and they grew exceedingly mighty, and the land was filled with them." The process described in Shemot is far more intense: compare "And they were fruitful" to "And they were fruitful and they increased abundantly"; "and they multiplied greatly" to "and they multiplied greatly and grew exceedingly mighty." As a result of their huge increase in Sefer Shemot, the geographical boundaries of their settlement in Goshen are overrun: "And the land was filled with them."

II. BOUNDARIES OF THE STORY OF THE DECREES

After the transitional section in the first seven verses, verse 8 opens a new story and a new era: "And there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Yosef." This begins the story of the decrees against the Jewish People. Where does this section end? Verse 22 reads, "And Pharaoh commanded his whole nation, saying: Every boy that is born you shall throw into the river, and every girl you shall let live." Although we don't know to what extent this decree was obeyed, this verse stands as a sort of open-ended conclusion to this section, since 2:1 clearly introduces a new subject: "And a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. And the woman



conceived and bore a son..." The difference between the collective character on center stage in chapter 1 – Israel as a "nation" – and the individual character who stands in the spotlight in chapter 2 is discussed by Nechama Leibowitz z"l in her "Studies in Sefer Shemot" as follows:

"The image of Israel conveyed in this chapter (chapter 1) is cold and gray, with no description of nature or appearance, without any individual characters, with no outstanding personality – simply an oppressed, suffering mass devoid of heroes. Chapter 2 is the opposite. Here, against the background of this colorless and faceless mass, one family stands out – a father, mother, daughter. Although at first they are anonymous, they have some character, some uniqueness. And here the hero of the chapter is born."


Indeed, the story of Moshe's birth is clearly narrated against the background of chapter 1, for his parents had to protect him from Pharaoh's decree. However, although Pharaoh's decree serves as its background, the decree is no longer the subject; here we find different characters and a different atmosphere. This division is also indicated by the traditional division of these chapters in the Torah text into three "open" parashiyot: 1:1-7 (transition), 1:8-22 (decrees), 2:1-22 (Moshe's birth).

III. THE FIRST HALF OF THE STORY

How is our story structured? Two types of decrees are easily distinguishable: one decree attempts to deal with the increasing numbers of Bnei Yisrael through forced labor – in other words, it attempts indirectly to halt their increase; the second decree is the death sentence for all newborn boys – a direct means of limiting them through murder. This cruel turning point in Pharaoh's decrees takes place in verse 15, dividing the story into two parts: a) verses 8-14, i.e. 7 verses, and b) verses 15-22, i.e. 8 verses. Before examining the parallelism of these two halves of the story, let us examine look at the content of each half.

The first half (following verse 8, which serves as the backdrop to the story) contains three issues:

1. Pharaoh's words to his nation (9-10);
2. the decree to build the treasure cities, and its failure to halt the nation's growth (11-12);
3. the decree of hard labor (13-14).

 Is this then one decree or two? A careful examination reveals that there are in fact two decrees, but they have something in common: labor. In the description of the first

decree the labor is not mentioned; the important word there is "affliction," which appears twice. This "affliction" refers to the enslavement of formerly free people (see my shiur on parashat Lekh Lekha regarding Sarah's "affliction" of Hagar), placing taskmasters over them and forcing them to build treasure cities. But the enslavement of Bnei Yisrael, which reversed their status in Egypt and demanded prolonged, back-breaking work, did not achieve its objective: "And the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they grew."

The failure of the decree of "affliction" leads to a new decree of "hard labor" ("avoda kasha"); five times in the space of two verses (13-14) we find the root "a.b.d." This is certainly an expansion of the original decree: it is no longer clearly-defined labor with a beginning and an end, like the construction of the treasure cities, but rather "hard labor" in many spheres: "in mortar and in brick and in all types of labor in the field." No longer is it only the taskmasters who are responsible for collecting this "labor tax" from Bnei Yisrael; now "Egypt made Bnei Yisrael serve," i.e. all of Egypt.

Is the new decree more effective? The text offers no explicit answer, but Pharaoh's apparent need to appeal to the midwives would seem to indicate that once again his measures were to no avail.

IV. THE SECOND HALF

Let us now turn to the second half of the story (15-22). Here, too, there are three separate issues:

1. Pharaoh's directive to the midwives and their refusal to obey him (15-17);
2. Pharaoh's question and their answer, and their reward from God (18-21);
3. Pharaoh's command to the entire nation (22).

Does this half contain one decree or two? Again we have two decrees which are in fact the same thing. Pharaoh's first attempt to bring about the death of all male babies is made by addressing the midwives. Apparently, this appeal was made secretly, not in the form of an official command. Therefore, even if the midwives had done as the king of Egypt commanded them, they would not have killed all the boys. But in fact they did not obey him at all: "They let the children live." In their response to Pharaoh's interrogation ("[The Hebrew women] are quick; before the midwives arrive, they have already given birth"), they describe to him the astounding power of life contained in

this nation, a vital force, quite unlike the nature of the Egyptians: "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women." This only serves to further fuel Pharaoh's anxiety and fear of the threatening force of Bnei Yisrael.

Nevertheless, the process of increase continues unabated: "And the nation multiplied and grew very mighty;" as a result, Pharaoh's decree becomes even more oppressive: "And Pharaoh commanded HIS WHOLE NATION, saying: Every son that is born you shall throw into the river, and every daughter you shall let live." This is no longer a quiet word to two midwives, but rather an explicit command to the entire Egyptian nation; no longer the killing of some of the male children "upon the birthstones," but rather the drowning of every male newborn in the Nile.

Does the decree work this time? Again we find no explicit answer in the text, but the next story makes us think that the decree was in fact fulfilled and therefore represented a real threat to the continued increase of Bnei Yisrael. Who would want to bring children into the world, knowing what awaits them if they are male? On the other hand, the story of Moshe's birth illustrates an example of a Hebrew family that managed to prevail against the decree.

The root y.l.d. (in various forms, meaning either midwife, birth, or boy) serves as the leading word in the second half of the story, appearing a total of twelve times. The word "yeled" appears no less than seven times in the story of Moshe's birth (2:1-10). This would seem to hint to us that Moshe's birth represents the negation of the

decree, "Every male child that is born you shall throw into the Nile," just as the action of the midwives – "and they let the boys live" – was a negation of the decree "If it is a son, you shall kill him."

Another important root that appears five times in the second half of the story is ch-y-h ("to live"). In response to Pharaoh's decree permitting only the girls to live ("im bat hi va-chaya"), the midwives give life ("va-techayena") to all the children, including the boys. They explain themselves to Pharaoh by pointing to a quality inherent in the Hebrew women – "for they are lively (chayot)."

V. COMPARING THE TWO HALVES

The parallels between the two halves are obvious. We have here two decrees designed to diminish the number of Hebrews - the first through hard labor and the second by killing male babies. Both decrees go through the same stages: 1) an initial decree, 2) the failure of this initial stage (i.e., the nation continues to multiply), 3) the decree

in its second, more intensified form, and 4) an open-ended conclusion that does not tell us whether the second stage was successful. Furthermore, the relationship between the second stage of each decree and its initial stage is the same in both halves. Although the second stage is meant to achieve the same objective that was set for the first stage (halting the Hebrews' natural increase in the first half, and active depopulation in the second half), utilizing the same means ("labor" in the first half and the killing of newborn boys in the second), it is intensified in two ways: it inflicts more comprehensive harm on Bnei Yisrael, and it reflects a transfer of the implementation of the decree from a select group appointed to harm Bnei Yisrael (taskmasters, midwives) to the entire Egyptian nation. This may be summarized as follows:

First Half:

1. Affliction through the introduction of a "labor tax" for a defined purpose: construction of treasure cities.

Implemented by: taskmasters ("sarei misim" - tax officers)

2. Hard labor, enslavement to Egypt, labor in ALL spheres.

Implemented by: ALL of the Egyptian nation.

Second Half:

1. (Secret?) killing of male newborns by the midwives (and if indeed in secret, then selected murder).

Implemented by: midwives

2. (Public?) killing of ALL male newborns.

Implemented by: ALL of the Egyptian nation.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF STRUCTURE

What is the idea behind this structure of the story? We mentioned above that two opposite processes take place in our narrative: first, the process of internal increase of Israel, and in contrast, the process of Egyptian oppression forced upon them with a view to halting their increase. The first process, although dynamic by definition, is static from the point of view of its appearance in the

story: it remains almost unchanging from the beginning of the story until the end. There are seven expressions of multiplicity of Bnei Yisrael throughout the story – three mentioned by Pharaoh at the beginning, in the framework of his opposition and his desire to nullify it:

1. (9) Behold, the nation of Bnei Yisrael are MANY ("rav")
2. and MIGHTIER ("atzum") than we.
3. (10) Let us then deal wisely with them lest they MULTIPLY ("yirbeh").

Four more expressions appear as part of the narrative, two in each half, and they come to negate Pharaoh's words and his actions that follow:

4. (12) And the more they afflicted them, the MORE THEY MULTIPLIED ("yirbeh")
5. and the MORE THEY GREW ("yifrotz").
6. (20) And the nation MULTIPLIED ("va-yirev")
7. and grew VERY MIGHTY ("va-ya'atzmu").

The text ironically contrasts Pharaoh's words, "pen yirbeh" (lest they multiply), with the description, "ken yirbeh" (the more they multiplied) - as Rashi (1:12) points out. There is also an ironic echo of Pharaoh's fearful declaration, "Behold, the nation of Bnei Yisrael is bigger and mightier ('rav ve-atzum') than we," in the Torah's subsequent statement, "And the nation multiplied and grew very mighty ('va-yirev ha-am va-ya'atzmu me'od)." All of Pharaoh's efforts throughout the story, the whole process of oppression which became increasingly sophisticated and increasingly harsh, failed to achieve its objective; the process of multiplication and strengthening prevailed. The dynamic process of oppression was no match for the "static" process of multiplication.

The test of true victory in the Torah is represented by the ability of the victor to prevail over his opponents in two rounds. This demonstrates that the first victory was not merely coincidence but rather properly deserved. But the second victory also demonstrates more than that, because it is always more difficult, more challenging, and therefore indicates a greater victory.

In both decrees, the failure of the first round (i.e. the Jews' continuous multiplication) brings about the decree's intensification in the second round. The test of the victory of Bnei Yisrael's miraculous increase will be complete only for another round – another cycle of decrees, even more oppressive, which will actively attempt to diminish the numbers of Bnei Yisrael. Only with the failure of this second round of decrees will there be final, conclusive

proof of the victory of the hidden Victor who stands behind the astounding, unstoppable increase.

APPENDIX - FRINGE BENEFITS

By revealing the story's structure, we can gain added insight into a host of other issues. Let me cite just two added benefits accruing to us from a proper understanding of the story - one from the realm of peshat, and one from the realm of derash.

1. The Midwives

An ongoing debate among the commentators concerns the question of whether Shifra and Pu'ah Hebrews or Egyptians. (A detailed summary of this debate, with a well-founded conclusion, are to be found in Nehama Leibowitz's study on the words "midwives.") Based on our analysis of the structure of the story, it would seem that they were in fact Egyptian. The fulfillment of the decree in stage 1 of each half is entrusted to specially appointed personnel, while in stage 2 it passes to the hands of the entire Egyptian nation. Which personnel correspond to the midwives in the first half of the story? The taskmasters ("tax officers"). Since these latter personnel were unquestionably Egyptian, it would seem that so were the midwives.

A similar hypothesis, based on the language of the text (rather than on its structure), is proposed by Prof. Meir Weiss in his "Ha-mikra Ki-fshuto:" "From the verse (22), 'And Pharaoh commanded HIS WHOLE nation,' we learn that the midwives were Egyptian, for the phrase 'his WHOLE nation' only makes sense if the midwives were also of his nation." This point is strengthened by the parallel occurrence in the tale of the second decree.

Further with regard to the midwives: The commentators battled with the question, How was it possible for just two midwives to cope with the volume of work represented by all the Hebrew women? The Ibn Ezra answers as follows: "[Shifra and Pu'ah] were officers appointed over all the midwives TO GIVE A TAX TO THE KING from the payment (by the women who gave birth); and I have seen similar (systems) today in many places." We can corroborate this hypothesis: the personnel corresponding to these "officers" over all the midwives, who were responsible for giving a tax to the king, were the "tax officers." The latter officers collected the tax for the king from the men's labor, while the former collected their tax for the king from the births of the women.

However, while the "tax officers" (taskmasters) cooperated with Pharaoh, the midwives subverted him. The failure of Pharaoh's plan in the first half (decrease via hard labor) was a result of the nation's inner strength, which prevailed over the affliction and allowed them to continue to increase. But in the second half, when the decree was meant to affect the newborn babies, the internal strength of the nation would not have been sufficient to overcome the decree. Here something else was needed: Pharaoh's agents for the fulfillment of the decree, women of his own nation, themselves exchanged allegiance and joined themselves to Bnei Yisrael, aiding the process of their increase. The victory here is all the greater - the very enemy has become a supporter.

2. Salvation Via the Hebrew Women

Some Midrashim provide explanations that appear, at first glance, far from the intended meaning of the text. From our story we see that Pharaoh's decrees were a dismal failure in terms of achievement of their objective - the diminishing of the nation. But there is a famous Midrash which views the situation quite differently:

"R. Akiva taught: Through the merit of the righteous women who were of that generation, Israel was redeemed from Egypt.... What did they do? When they would go and draw water, God would bring small fish to their pails and they would draw (pails) half (full) of water and half (full) of fish. They would go to their husbands and pour them two bowls - one of warm water and one of fish, and they would feed them and wash them and anoint them and give them drink and have relations with them ... and when they conceived they would return home." ([Sota 11b](#), [Shemot Rabba 1:12](#))

According to this Midrash, it would appear that Pharaoh's decree very nearly did achieve its aim, and that it was only thanks to the initiative and action of the women that the nation of Israel was saved and continued to multiply. What is the basis for this view?

A hint at the answer is to be found in the "open ending" of the first half of the story. The second stage of the decree of labor appears not to have ended in failure like the first stage. This indicates to us that the hard labor indeed broke the men's spirit: it embittered their lives and removed their will to live and their desire for continuation.

Pharaoh was successful. But if so, why was there a need for a second round of decrees, concerning the killing of the newborn babies? Here the Midrash comes to fill in the

missing part of the story and to solve the contradiction: the decree of hard labor did indeed achieve its aim with regard to the men, but the women, by their efforts and great bravery, saved the nation and ensured its continued existence.

We read in another midrash:

"Amram was the greatest authority of the generation. When the evil Pharaoh decreed 'Every boy born you shall throw into the river,' he said: 'We are laboring in vain.' He then divorced his wife. All the men (then followed his example and) divorced their wives. His daughter said to him, 'Father, your decree is more harsh than that of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's decree concerns only the boys, while yours affects male and female children. Pharaoh's decree is fulfilled only in this world, while yours has ramifications also for the world to come. Pharaoh is an evil man and it is not certain whether his decree will indeed be fulfilled or not; you are a righteous man and your decree will certainly be fulfilled.' He then remarried his wife, and likewise all (the other men) remarried their wives." ([Sota 14a](#), [Shemot Rabba 1:19](#))

What is the basis for this midrash? Here again the answer is to be found in the "open ending" of the story, this time the story of the second decree. Unlike the first stage of the decree concerning the killing of the boys, where we are told "And the people multiplied and grew very mighty," stage 2 is left with no conclusion. We may therefore deduce that this decree was indeed successful in affecting the increase of the nation. On the other hand, the story which follows immediately from this one testifies to exactly the opposite: a man from the house of Levi goes and marries a daughter of Levi, and the woman conceives and bears a son, despite the decree. How are we to resolve this contradiction? Again, the Midrash comes to explain the missing details and to provide our solution: Pharaoh's decree did indeed achieve its aim with regard to the men, but the bravery of one girl saved the situation. The rehabilitation of one family and its return to the cycle of birth and increase indeed symbolizes the national process that prevailed over the terrible decree and led to continued life and existence.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)



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