

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Later, as Moshe encounters God and then takes the Divine command to Pharaoh, we have another description of the nation: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let My people [*ami*] go.’” (Exodus 5:1) In this rendering, we are *ami*, God’s people. Not other – intimately connected to the Eternal.

Family. Outside threat. God’s cherished possession. Each of these is a part of the Torah’s view of Jewish peoplehood.

Family – Each of those named in the opening verses of the *parashah* was a part of the family of Jacob, the small group of people who traveled to Egypt during a crisis. Sformo’s (Italian, 15th century) commentary to Exodus 1:1 emphasizes that each of these people was noteworthy, each a luminary, keeping the rest of the people from assimilating to the culture that surrounded them. Part of belonging to a family is knowing the names and the stories of the people who came before you, acknowledging their influence and their part in shaping who you are today.

Outside threat – The *Or HaHayyim*, (Morocco/Israel, 17th century) explains that there were four reasons underlying *b’nei yisrael*’s demonization and ultimate enslavement: the deaths of Joseph, his brothers, and the entire generation of refugee Hebrews, and their extreme fertility. The first generation in Egypt, he explains, was welcomed as honored guests. After they were no more, at least in Pharaoh’s eyes, the people no longer had the same special character. Instead, *b’nei yisrael* became known for unusually high fertility, which was seen as a threat. These denotations of nationhood were imposed from the outside, by Pharaoh and the Egyptians. When others, particularly those in power, determine our character as a nation, we lose our agency as a people.

God’s cherished possession – Midrash Shemot Rabbah (5:14) imagines the scene when Moshe and Aharon go to Pharaoh. When they explain that they represent God, Pharaoh says he’s never heard of this god, and goes to look in his book detailing nations and their gods. As if to refute their demand, Pharaoh explains that he found no mention of God in his book. Moshe and Aharon respond in kind, saying: “Fool!...Those other gods you mentioned, they are dead; but our God is a living God.” To be so intimately connected with God is to tap into that which is eternal and beyond the limits of time, to be a part of that which lives and that which also gives life. When the Torah calls the Israelites *ami*, My people, God’s people, it is reminding us that a core feature of *b’nei yisrael* as a people is our connection to God through life.

However we view the essential nature of being Jewish – nation, religion, or something else entirely – we can apply the Torah’s instructions for how to understand ourselves. We must honor our history, the stories and influences of those who came before us. We must be mindful of our right to self-determination and avoid handing that right over to others. And we must assiduously pursue the power of life, remaining aware of the unbreakable link between ourselves and the Creator of all life.

Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Shemot

January 18, 2020 | 21 Tevet 5780

Annual | Exodus 1:1-6:1 (Etz Hayim p.317-341; Hertz p. 205-224)

Triennial | Bereshit 1:1-2:25 (Etz Hayim p. 317-326; Hertz p. 205-213)

Haftarah | Isaiah 27:6-28:13; 29:22-23 (Etz Hayim p.342-346; Hertz p. 225-228)

D’var Torah: We the [Jewish] People

Rabbi Marci Jacobs, Conservative Yeshiva Alum & Jewish Studies Faculty at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, MD

One of the conversations from my youth spent in a Jewish Day School that sticks most in my memory is the debate we had about whether Judaism was a religion or a nationality. Middle-schoolers on all sides of the issue passionately spoke up for their particular viewpoint. “We’re *am yisrael* – we must be a nation!” “What about Shabbat, holidays, believing in God?! We’re a religion!” Attempting to find an argument that would both sound sophisticated and win the debate, we never came up with a clear answer. As a college student, I learned about Mordecai Kaplan’s concept of folkways, his idea that individuals could choose religious and cultural practices as a way into the tradition, as markers of identity and connection with Judaism and the Jewish people. Kaplan’s ideas provided another lens through which to view Judaism, that of a civilization.

The essential question of what it means to be Jewish has cropped up with great controversy of late, and it is also deeply woven through the fabric of *Parashat Shemot*. In the eyes of the Torah, *b’nei yisrael* are unmistakably a nation, but what that means takes different shapes at various points in the *parashah*. At the start of the *parashah*, the term *b’nei yisrael* refers to the literal children of Israel, Jacob’s sons and their families, who went to Egypt in search of food and stayed. We quickly jump ahead in time – there is a new Pharaoh, whose view of *b’nei yisrael* is quite different. “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.” (Exodus 1:9) Here, *b’nei yisrael* are not just a family of refugee Hebrews, but *am b’nei yisrael*, the Israelite nation, and they are a threat.

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

D'var Haftarah: Sound the Great Shofar

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

For Isaiah, who prophesied during the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, exile was a living experience. His fellow countrymen, the ten [lost] tribes, were forcibly transferred out of the country, never to return to their homeland. Those not transferred avoided the onslaught by taking refuge in Egypt. These events made an enormous impression on him and prompted his yearning for God to right this tragedy: “And it shall come to pass on that day, that **a great shofar will be sounded (*yitaka b’shofar gadol*)**, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria shall come, and those who were dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they shall worship on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.” (27:13)

God was to sound the shofar as a clarion call for all of the exiles, both from the north and the south, to return home. This inspirational prophecy rang true not just for those in his own generation but some six hundred years later became the foundation for the beginning of the tenth blessing of the weekday Amidah – the rabbinically ordained silent prayer recited thrice daily: “**Sound the great shofar (*tika b’shofar gadol*)** for our freedom; raise a banner to gather our exiles, and bring us together from the four corners of the earth into our land. Blessed are You Lord, who gathers the dispersed of His people Israel.”

In one midrash from around the 9th century, two important transformational events involving the shofar – the giving of the Torah and the future redemption – were linked with another foundational story, the Akedah (the binding of Isaac): “Rabbi Zechariah says: The very same ram which was created at twilight [on the sixth day of creation] came forth to be sacrificed in place of Isaac... and became caught by its horns amongst the trees... what did the ram do? It put forth its paws to reach Avraham’s garment. Avraham looked and saw the ram and took it and released it [from the trees] and offered it in place of Isaac... Its two horns were shofarot. From the left one was heard the Holy One Blessed be He at Mount Sinai and the right one, which was larger than the left, will in the future be used to sound the blast for the ingathering of the exiles, as it says: And it shall come to pass on that day, that **a great shofar will be sounded.**” (adapted from Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer ch. 31 end)

Linking Creation and the Akedah with the giving of the Torah and the ultimate redemption establishes an interdependence among many of the major theological events which shape Jewish existence. It turns the redemption into an integral part of the “Jewish” natural order, thereby making it tangible and realistic and less fantastic – something not just prayed for but also attainable. We can only hope.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

Parashah Study: Creeping Persecution

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Text: Shemot 1:8-10

(8) *A new king arose over Egypt who knew not Joseph. (9) And he said to his people: ‘look, the People of Bnei Yisrael is more numerous and vaster than we. (10) **Let us be shrewd with them**, lest they multiply, and should war occur they will join our enemies and fight against us and go up from the land.*

- Pharaoh is the first to call us a People. Why would he do that?
- Why should they deal shrewdly, rather than straight forward, with the people?

Commentary: Ramban (Nachmanides) Shemot 1:10

Let us be shrewd with them – Pharaoh and his advisors did not want to smite them by sword for it would be a great betrayal to smite without cause the nation that came to the land on the command of the first king; and also the people of the land will not permit the king to do such evil; and the children of Israel are a numerous and vast nation and would fight back.

Rather, he said that they should act shrewdly so that Israel would not feel that they are being treated with animosity. Therefore, he levied a tax on them, as is common for foreigners in the land...then he commanded the midwives secretly to kill the boys... then he commanded his people “every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile”. For he did not want to command his own henchmen to kill them... so if the father of the child would cry to the king or minister [for justice]... he would be told to bring witnesses and they would take revenge for him. And once the rule of the king was loosened, the Egyptians would go searching in the houses...

- This is the meaning of those who tell Moshe “you have made us repugnant in the eyes of Pharaoh and his servants, putting a sword in their hand to kill us” (5:21) for now they will grow in their hatred of us and have an excuse that we are disloyal... and will no longer need to do by trickery.
- Ramban gives 3 reasons as to why Pharaoh chooses not to act openly against Bnei Yisrael. What are they? What seems to be his main concern? (Note his assumption about the basic decency of most Egyptians.)
- How does the creeping persecution work according to Ramban’s reading of the events in the chapter? What effect does the creeping persecution have on both the Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians (especially the common people)?
- What is the place of “the State” in all this?
- What points of Ramban’s analysis of the situation of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt resonate with other periods of persecution of Jews?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

© 2019, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism