

And Elohim Will Sh'ma Our Groaning¹

Introduction

In this week's *parasha* we begin the book of *Shemot*—"Names" with 40 chapters. *Shemot* is both the title for a new *Torah* portion and a new book of the *Torah*. The English-speaking world calls this book Exodus. The Hebrew title for the book follows the widespread ancient Near Eastern practice of naming a literary work by its opening word or phrase. In this case, *Shemot* is shortened for the more complete phrase, "ve eleh shemot," שְׁמוֹת וְאֵלֶּה meaning "And these are the names..."

Another ancient Hebrew name for this book was *sefer yetziat mitzrayim*, "The Book of the Departure from Egypt." This title clearly expresses the main theme of the book. This title was the one which the Jews of Alexandria in Egypt chose to translate into Greek when they made the Septuagint (LXX). Therefore, the Greek title was *Exodus Aigyptou*, which was simply shortened to Exodus. The Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, as well as many European versions (including English), have simply kept the title, "Exodus."

In the book of Exodus, we see the history of the children of Israel progress from being a family of seventy who descended into Egypt, to becoming a nation of about three million strong. The themes of exile and redemption come to the forefront. We learn that the first generation of Israelites to live in Egypt died. Then "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know of Joseph." This king put the children of Israel under harsh servitude. This was done in fulfillment of G-d's promise to Abraham when He said that He was going to take his descendants down to Egypt to be, "... aliens in a land not their own, they will serve them, and they will oppress them for four hundred years." (*Bereshit* 15:13)

This week's *Torah* portion begins to tell one of the most famous stories of all human history—the story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from *Mitzrayim* (Egypt.) In the *Torah* G-d gave us a helpful outline of the book found in *Shemot* 2:24-25: "During those many days it happened that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to Elohim. Elohim heard (*Vayishma Elohim*) their groaning, and Elohim remembered (*VaYizkor Elohim*) His covenant with Abraham, with Yitzchak, and with Ya'akov. Elohim saw (*Vayare Elohim*) the children of Israel; and Elohim knew (*Vayeda Elohim*)."

[כד] וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם
אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב:
[כה] וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּדַּע אֱלֹהִים:

And Elohim "Sh'ma" Their Moaning—*Vayishma Elohim* (וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים)

Sh'ma means to prove that one hears by doing what was asked (said). The "doing" comes first. If we are to *Sh'ma*, and we are, isn't it true that יהוה will also? Indeed, *vayishma* means "and Elohim will sh'ma..." The L-rd has always shown us (illustrated) the way to do something that He Himself has asked us to do...

Elohim's Apparent Silence

When is enough, enough? The answer, if you are יהוה, is when His will has been fully carried out. Through two whole chapters, the cries, moans, and groans of the people of Israel from the harsh Egyptian servitude have been screaming from the pages. What was the point of all this suffering among the children of Israel? Throughout the first two chapters, His name is not even mentioned. It is as if He had forsaken His chosen people!

The fact is, however, that *Elohim* meant exactly what He had told our father *Ya'akov* when he first came down to Egypt when He said, “*I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up...*” (*Bereshit* 46:4) Even amid the misery of their backbreaking labor, יהוה was there. Even though we do not read of יהוה speaking in the first two chapters, He was, nevertheless, listening. Indeed, He was silent, but in His silence He was accomplishing several important things.

When In Rome, Do Not Do As the Romans Do!

This has always been true for G-d's people—we are to be non-conformists. First, G-d was in the process of chastening His children. When *Ya'akov* first went down to Egypt, he went with the intention of merely sojourning there. It was supposed to be a temporary stay. But, as was observed in previous *parashiyot*, the temporary stay turned into a permanent dwelling. Israel began to be allured by whatever attractions Egypt had to offer. In short, they began to assimilate and lose their family distinctiveness. Thus, instead of settling down and buying houses, the children of Israel should have been making plans to leave Egypt as soon as possible. In all fairness, they were living in some of the most fertile land in all of Egypt, just on the eastern edge of the Nile River delta. In a time of famine, at least there was water and grazing land for their flocks. Nevertheless, Canaan was the Promised Land. The children of Israel should have left the land of temptation and come up (made *aliyah*) to their Promised Land.

Instead, by remaining in Egypt, the people made themselves completely vulnerable to all of Egyptian culture, which, apparently they may have begun to participate in. Because of this, G-d was in the painful process of disciplining His children. Accordingly, Israel's sin lay in imitating the ways of the surrounding people and attempting to lose their identity.

Throughout our history, every time Israel fell into the sin of assimilation, it always ended up in slavery, as it did in Egypt (e.g., like in the days of *Ahashverosh* and *Chanukah*). The Jews of Germany were, perhaps, one of the most assimilated of all Jewish generations. All of us know the horrible outcome resulting in slavery in the death camps. Assimilation therefore invariably leads to moaning and groaning.

No Pain, No Gain!

A second reason for יהוה's apparent silence is that He was causing some deep spiritual growth in the people of Israel, as a people. This *Torah* portion is the first time in the *Torah* since the story of *Adam* that a single individual is not at the center of the story. That changes later in chapter two where *Moshe* comes to the forefront. But in the beginning of *Shemot*, it is not an individual, but a *people* who are in the limelight—the descendants of our father Abraham. *Shemot* tells how יהוה prepares Israel for His Redemption and for His planned nationhood for them. This process is described by Scripture as a refining process. It pictures the children of Israel as a piece of precious metal such as gold, and the harsh servitude as the metal refiner where impurities are burnt away and the pure precious metal is left. Other Scriptures also refer to the slavery story by these terms. For example, “*He brought you out of the iron furnace of Egypt to be His people.*” (*Devarim* 4:20) Isaiah also expresses it in a similar manner: “*Behold, I have refined you, not with silver, I have chosen you out of the furnace of affliction.*” (*Isaiah* 48:10) (♪ ‘*For in the furnace of much affliction, I have chosen thee behold, and so for iron I'll give you silver and for brass I'll give thee gold. Awake O Israel...*’ ♪) Hence, there *had* to be moans and groans for Israel. It was יהוה's way of preparing our people to be a nation. It was as many would say today, NO PAIN, NO GAIN!

The *B'rit Chadasha* puts it this way: “*Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” (*James* 1:2-4) Is there anything new under the sun?

Experience, the Best Teacher

There is, yet, a third reason for the slavery. This one is more of a positive one—education! Through their slavery in Egypt, יהוה was teaching our people Israel many "object lessons" which will be used to teach profound spiritual truth. There are many such lessons throughout the *Torah*. One such object lesson is found in the concept of being a "stranger" or a "ger." For example, *Adonai* tells our people: "Do not wrong a stranger and do not oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20) How was Israel to know how to treat a stranger? One very poignant and assured way would be by remembering what it was like when they were strangers in Egypt.

A Redemption (*Yeshua*) Picture

Finally, a fourth reason for the slavery is that יהוה was preparing the children of Israel for redemption. They would never know the depth of *Elohim's* mercy if they did not experience the hopeless bondage of slavery. They would not fully understand the freedom of redemption if they never experienced the shackles of servitude.

In this servitude and the preparations for redemption, יהוה was beginning to paint a carefully crafted portrait of the person and work of *Yeshua*, our Deliverer and our Redeemer, who set us free from the slavery of personal sin. In Egyptian slavery, יהוה was busy painting the picture of the hopelessness, the horrors, the bondage, and the futility of slavery to self and sin. This is needed to help convince sinners of their need for personal redemption found in the One who is greater than *Moshe*—*Yeshua*.

Our Jewish people's moaning was further exacerbated by יהוה's apparent silence. But even though it seemed like יהוה was staying aloof during the Israelite servitude in Egypt, He was not inactive. He told us that He, indeed, heard the moaning of their suffering in slavery. Consequently, He was accomplishing significant redemptive things that most would not have noticed.

And *Elohim Yizkor* (Remembered His Covenant)—*Va Yizkor Elohim* (וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים)

A most important aspect of being His people is that we are "the people of His covenant." No wonder the psalmist said: "ADONAI relates intimately with those who fear him; he makes them know his covenant." (Ps 25:14) (♪ 'The secret of the L-rd is with those who fear Him. He will make them know His covenant...' ♪)

What did G-d do after He heard the moaning of the children of Israel? It says that He "remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Yitzchak, and with Ya'akov" Of course, He never forgot that covenant! The writer is simply writing from the human perspective, trying to express with human terms an infinite concept!

Jewish commentators often assert that when good things are done to us it is because we merit them. But in *Shemot* the situation is quite different. There is no merit here. The children of Israel, having swallowed the pill of assimilation, are now crying out to the L-rd for mercy. Then *Shemot* 2:24 says that *Elohim sh'ma* their cry and came to their rescue. There is no merit involved. Whatever *Elohim* did for them was purely for two reasons. First, it was out of His grace and mercy. Secondly, as this verse points out, it was because of His promise to the patriarchs, not because of Israel's merit. Thus, a covenant is a covenant—it is a legally binding agreement between two or more parties. In all cases the solemn engagement of one party to another and the promise of fidelity were fundamental. *Elohim* made such agreements with our forefathers and in essence, pledged His immutable Will and if you please, His life (if it were possible! He did in *Yeshua*! See *Bereshit* chapter 15) as a token of His promise to fulfill His promises. Despite all the cruelty of Egypt and all the assimilation or complacency of Israel, *Elohim* promised to give the land of Canaan to them and to bring them up from Egypt. Thus, it is on the basis of those solemn promises that He now acts.

And Elohim Yareh (Saw) the Children of Israel—VaYareh Elohim (וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים)

Another important aspect is that our people already knew that “*Adonai Yireh.*” No wonder that *Moshe* said in Haazinu: “*And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward generation, children in whom is no faith.*” (Deut 32:20)

Exodus 2:25 says that “*Elohim saw the children of Israel.*” What did He see? Simply, the first two chapters told us what He saw. In *Shemot* 1:1-6, *Elohim* saw the first generation of the children of Israel arrive in Egypt and disappear from the scene. In verses 7-14, *Elohim* saw the extraordinary fertility and suffering of the second and subsequent generations. Then, in verses 15-23 *Elohim* saw the episode of the midwives.

Finally, in chapter two and onward, *Elohim* saw (*Yireh*—provided) *Moshe*. Stating it somewhat differently, in chapter one, He saw the people, in chapter two and onward, He provided (saw) *Moshe*. *Adonai* saw these physical things. It was a sad and messy sight of miserable beaten slaves in complete subjection to the Pharaohs. But these things anyone could see. What did He see which no one else saw? He sees the heart (of *Moshe*!).

And Elohim Yed'a (He Has Intimate Knowledge)—VaYeda Elohim (וַיַּדַּע אֱלֹהִים)

Is there something in the universe that has ever existed about which G-d had no knowledge? What does it mean in Exodus 2:25 when it says, “*And G-d knew*”?

The Hebrew word translated “knew” is from the root *yodea*, יָדַע, which although meaning “to know,” hints at more than mere intellectual knowledge. It is a word, for example, which is used in connection with a marriage relationship, specifically the sexual part of it. Thus it often speaks of a deep intimate personal knowledge. When we read that “G-d knew” we are to understand that there were some things about the situation of which only G-d had intimate knowledge.

In addition, the phrase comes after the previous words, “G-d saw.” There is a ‘vav *Conversive*’ used to connect it with the previous thought. Therefore, it would mean something like this: Whatever it was that G-d saw, it prompted Him to know in an intimate way that certain actions were now ready to be performed. On the one hand, these actions would be based on an intimate knowledge of the people whom He knew. On the other hand, these actions would be based on the nature of the situation in which they found themselves.

Moshe needed to know G-d Himself Thus, in chapter three, we see one of the greatest moments of revelation which ever happened between G-d and man. It was in this passage that G-d revealed His personal name to *Moshe*. In doing so, G-d revealed His personal character to *Moshe* as well. In Jewish mind and thought “name” is shorthand for character. (♪ ‘*Certainly I will be with thee...*’ ♪)

Not only do we see that the whole history of Israel is foreshadowed in these words: G-d *heard, remembered, looked upon,* and *knew* them, but the whole history of the new creation is also summarized in the same manner. G-d heard us, He remembered His promise to save us, He looked upon us with pity, and He knew us, that is, He entered into a personal relationship with us.

ⁱ Portions adapted from FFOZ’s Torah Club – Parashat Shemot, FFOZ, CO, 2002