

Setting the Scene:

Exodus 1-2 and the Seeds of the Liberation-to-come

Rachel Sharansky Danziger * February 15th 2022 * Exodus: The Ins and Outs of Liberty #1

Course description:

The book of Shmot follows the Israelites as they transform from an oppressed group of nameless slaves to a nation free and purposeful enough to form a covenant with God Himself. But what makes this transformation possible? And is it strong enough to withstand the challenges ahead? This course explores the different distinct experiences and trials that prepare the Israelites for the burdens of freedom, even as they introduce different strands of liberation into their social and private lives.

1: The road to slavery

Exodus 1:1-14

(1) These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: (2) Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; (3) Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; (4) Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. (5) The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. (6) Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.

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

(8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. (9) And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. (10) Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground."^a (11) So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. (12) But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites. (13) The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites (14) the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly^c they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

שמות א'-י"ד

(א) ואלה שמות בני ישראל הבאים
מצרימה את יעקב איש וביתו באו: (ב)
ראובן שמעון לוי ויהודה: (ג) יששכר זבולן
ובנימין: (ד) דן ונפתלי גד ואשר: (ה) ויהי
כל־נפש יצאי ירה־יעקב שבועים נפש ויוסף
היה במצרים: (ו) ומת יוסף וכל־אחיו וכל
הדור ההוא:

(ז) ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו
במאד מאד ותמלא הארץ אתם: {פ}

(ח) ויקם מלך־חדש על־מצרים אשר לא־
ידע את־יוסף: (ט) ויאמר אל־עמו הנה עם
בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו: (י) הבה
נתחכמה לו פו־ירבה והלה כִּי־תקראנה
מלחמה ונוסף גם־הוא על־שנאינו ונלחם־
בנו ועלה מו־הארץ: (יא) וישִׂמו עליו שרי
מסים למען ענותו בסבלתם ויבן ערי מסכנות
לפרעה את־פתם ואת־רעמסס: (יב) וכאשר
יענו אתו כן ירבה וכן יפרץ ויקצו מפני בני
ישראל: (יג) ויעבדו מצרים את־בני ישראל
בפרה: (יד) ומררו ואת־חייהם בעבדה קשה
בחמר ובלבנים ובכל־עבדה בשדה את כל־
עבדתם אשר־עבדו בהם בפרה:

2. Pharaoh calls the midwives

Exodus 1:15-17

(15) The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, (16) saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” (17) The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

שמות א':ט"ו-י"ז

(טו) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמִּיּוֹדוֹת הָעִבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה: (טז) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיֹדְכֶן אֶת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אִם-בֵּן הוּא וְהַמָּתָן אֹתוֹ וְאִם-בַּת הוּא וְחָיָה: (יז) וַתִּירָאן הַמִּיּוֹדוֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲזִין אֶת-הַיְלָדִים:

3. Egypt

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony and Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays*:

The journey to the Promised Land has to pass through Egypt because Israel was to construct a society that would be the antithesis of Egypt. Therefore they had to know Egypt, experience Egypt, feel it in their bones, carry it with them as an indelible memory that they would hand on to all future generations. They had to experience what it was like to be on the wrong side of power... The taste of that affliction was never to be forgotten. (173)

To the extent that the Torah is a deliberately contrarian work, a protest against and conscious alternative to the great civilizations of its day, it is worth reflecting more fully on who Ramses was and what he represented... No one in history constructed more monuments to his glory than Rameses II... It is clear that when Pharaoh responds angrily to Moses' request in God's name to let the Israelites go, saying, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let the Israelites go? I do not know the Lord," what he means is, "Here, I am God." (179-181)

The wealth of the royal court was astonishing...At the same time the population as a whole lived a wretched experience." (181-182)

Yoram Hazoni, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*:

Thus in the ethics of the ancient Near East, all action was ultimately directed toward the maintenance of the state since all goodness was seen as flowing from it. Indeed, whatever served to maintain the closed circle of farmer, tax collector, king, soldier and priest was on its face for the good, since it kept the clockwork of the state in motion for another day and another generation, maintaining the mass of people alive and protected. (129.)

Biblical ethics proposes to evaluate human action from a completely different point of vantage .. a point of vantage associated with the life of the nomad, who observes and evaluates all that goes on in human life from a perspective that is outside the political state and free of any prior commitment to it... If the state can play a role in assisting the individual to fulfill his responsibilities and obligations, which are prior to the state and entirely independent of it, then the machinery of the state and its laws can be seen as having a purpose and a reason to exist. But when the state cannot or does not serve this end, the state and its laws cease to have a claim on the individual. (133)

4: Fear as bondage

Yoram Hazoni, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*:

Independence of judgement and action, then, depends on an ability to resist the creeping advance of justified fears and unjustified commitments to human beings and their institutions – which together work to deprive the individual of his freedom to discern what is right and to act in its name. A vigilant maintenance of one's ability to resist these justified fears and unjustified commitments is thus basic to the ethics of a shepherd, the ethics of the History of Israel. (135)

...mighty though Joseph may be, he is not free. No longer a shepherd like his fathers, he is instead a servant to Pharaoh in the house of bondage. There is no question, of course, but that this house of bondage remains one of the great political and economic powers on earth, with the ability to give life and take it away. And there is likewise no question but that a man such as Joseph necessarily feels himself free as he gives out orders to others... But compelling as this experience may be, it is an illusion. The first among slaves may be powerful, but a slave he remains, subject to annihilation by his master at a moment's notice, at Pharaoh's house no less than in that of Potifar... when once he is faced with the prospect of Pharaoh's wrath and a possible loss of favor, Joseph is struck with the selfsame terror of the Hebrew slaves facing that other Pharaoh generations later. (127-128)

..a story that alerts us to the fear of Pharaoh's might that operates on the Jews in Egypt, to the point that they could no longer do what they knew to be right...It is this fear itself, rather than any action of Pharaoh or his ministers, that is to be seen as the cause of Israel's enslavement... Indeed, **the physical works of mortar and brick is really nothing more than the concrete expression of an inner enslavement...** (135)

Genesis 50:4-6

(4) and when the wailing period was over, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court, saying, "Do me this favor, and lay this appeal before Pharaoh: (5) 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan.'" Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return.'" (6) And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath."

בראשית נ"ד:ו'

(ד) ויעברו ימי בכיתו וידבר יוסף אל-
בית פרעה לאמר אם-נא מצאתי חן
בעיניכם דברו-נא באוני פרעה לאמר:
(ה) אבי השביעני לאמר הנה אנכי מת
בקברי אשר כריתי לי בארץ כנען שמה
תקברני ועתה אעלה-נא ואקברה את-
אבי ואשובה: (ו) ויאמר פרעה עלה
וקבר את-אביה באשר השביעה:

5: The Nile

Exodus 1:22

(22) Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

שמות א':כ"ב

(כב) וַיִּצְוֶה פַרְעֹה לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לְאמֹר כָּל־
הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוֹד הַיְאָרֶה תִשְׁלִיכוּהוּ וְכָל־הַבַּת
תְּחַיֶּה: {פ}

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership*:

Pharaoh saw these beautiful cows devoured. The civilization of Egypt, in his vision, could produce wealth, plenty, pleasantness, beauty, prosperity and security, but it also had within it satanic elements that wanted to destroy every institution to which the same Nile gave birth. Civilization, no matter how successful it is in its attempt to ease man's burden, is also capable of destroying him and everything for which he stands. The curse imposed upon Adam by the Almighty – that the environment will display hostility towards man – is a reality. It will yield its produce to man and yet conspire to destroy him. Outwardly, the environment appears to be cooperative. Clandestinely it is out to defeat man, to trample over him. Man pays the toll of the road. Each discovery to the advantage of man makes the life of man more precarious than before. ... pollution... malignancy... The possibility of destroying life on our globe in a few seconds... what are they if not the seven other cows... (24)

From the river – the source of civilization, abundance and prosperity – emerge beautiful creatures and also the ugly cows... The blessings of the human civilizing experience may be completed by the demonic forces which man the genius sets free. Some philosophers have questioned whether the dream is worthwhile. Perhaps it would be more beneficial to man to inactivate rather than accelerate the process. Pharaoh was troubled in the morning, but his advisers didn't comprehend his dilemma. They did not grasp that the dream cast doubt upon the whole civilizing enterprise. (25)

6. A wedding and a baby

Exodus 2:1-2

(1) A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. (2) The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months.

שמות ב':א'-ב'

(א) וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־
לֵוִי: (ב) וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֵּרֶא
אֹתוֹ כִּי־טוֹב הוּא וַתִּצְפְּנֵהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה
יָרְחִים:

Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, 153:

Sooner or later, in any attempt to explore the deeper patterns which shape storytelling, we are brought up against one central, overwhelming fact. This is the way in which, through all the millions of stories thrown up by the human imagination, just two endings have far outweighed all others. In fact we might almost say that, for a story to resolve in a way which really seems final and complete, it can only do so in one of two ways. Either it ends with a man and a woman united in love. Or it ends in death.

7: The Judges version

Judges 19:1-3

(1) In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a Levite residing at the other end of the hill country of Ephraim took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. (2) Once his concubine deserted him, leaving him for her father's house in Bethlehem in Judah; and she stayed there a full four months. (3) Then her husband set out, with an attendant and a pair of donkeys, and went after her to woo her and to win her back. She admitted him into her father's house; and when the girl's father saw him, he received him warmly.

Judges 2:10

(10) And all that generation were likewise gathered to their fathers. Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced [the deliverance of] the LORD or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel.

שופטים י"ט:א-ג'

(א) וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וּמִלֶּךָ אֵין בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיְהִי אִישׁ לְוִי גֵר בְּיַרְכְּתֵי הַר-אֶפְרַיִם
וַיִּקַּח-לוֹ אִשָּׁה פִּילְגֶשֶׁת מִבֵּית לְחָם
יְהוּדָה. (ב) וַתִּזְנֶה עָלָיו פִּילְגֶשֶׁת וַתֵּלֶךְ
מֵאִתּוֹ אֶל-בֵּית אָבִיהָ אֶל-בֵּית לְחָם
יְהוּדָה וַתְּהַיָּשֶׁם יָמִים אַרְבָּעָה חֳדָשִׁים.
(ג) וַיָּקָם אִישׁוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרֶיהָ לְדַבֵּר עִל-
לָבָה (להשיבו) [להשיבה] וַיַּעֲרֹ עִמּוֹ
וַצְמַד חֲמָרִים וַתְּבִיאָהוּ בֵּית אָבִיהָ
וַיֵּרְאָהוּ אָבִי הַנְּעֻרָה וַיִּשְׂמַח לְקִרְאָתוֹ.

שופטים ב':י

(י) וְגַם כָּל-הַדּוֹר הַהוּא נֹאֲסָפוּ אֶל-
אֲבוֹתָיו וַיָּקָם דּוֹר אַחֵר אַחֲרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר
לֹא-יָדְעוּ אֶת-יְהוָה וְגַם אֶת-הַמַּעֲשֵׂה
אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. {פ}

8: Siblinghood

Exodus 2:3-4

(3) When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. (4) And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

Genesis 42:21

(21) They said to one another, "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us."

שמות ב':ג-ד'

(ג) וְלֹא-יָכְלָה עוֹד הַצִּפְיֹנוֹ וַתִּקַּח-
לוֹ תֵבַת גֹּמָא וַתַּחְמְרָהּ בַּחֲמֶר
וּבַצֹּפֶת וַתָּשֶׂם בָּהּ אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וַתָּשֶׂם
בְּסוּף עַל-שִׁפְתַי הַיָּאֵר. (ד) וַתִּתְצַב
אֲחֻתוֹ מֵרָחֵק לְדַעַה מַה-יַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ.

בראשית מ"ב:כ"א

(כא) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו אֲבֹל־
אֲשֶׁמִּים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ
צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהַתְּחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ
עַל-כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת.

9: Freedom and compassion

Exodus 2:5-6

(5) The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. (6) When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew child.”

שמות ב':ה-ו'

(ה) ותרד בת־פְּרֹעָה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וַנְּעֹרְתֶיהָ הִלְכֹת עַל־גֵּד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתִּבְיָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ: (ו) וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה־נֹעֵר בֶּכֶה וַתַּחֲמֵל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִיֶּלְדֵי הָעִבְרָיִם זֶה:

Exodus 1:21

(21) And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

שמות א':כ"א

(כא) וַיְהִי כִּי־יָרְאוּ הַמִּזְלֹדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים:

10: Motherhood

Exodus 2:7-9

(7) Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” (8) And Pharaoh's daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child's mother. (9) And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.

שמות ב':ז-ט'

(ז) וַתֹּאמֶר אַחֲתוֹ אֶל־בַּת־פְּרֹעָה הַאֵלֶּה וְקִרְאתִי לָהּ אִשָּׁה מִיִּלְדֹת מִן הָעִבְרָיִת וַתִּינַק לָהּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד: (ח) וַתֹּאמֶר־לָהּ בַת־פְּרֹעָה לָכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ הָעֵלְמָה וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־אִם הַיֶּלֶד: (ט) וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַת־פְּרֹעָה הֲיִלְכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינִקְהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֵּן אֶת־שְׂכָרָהּ וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּנְיַקְהוּ:

11: What's in a name?

Exodus 2:10

(10) When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

שמות ב':י'

(י) וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבִאֶהוּ לְבַת־פְּרֹעָה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׂיתָהוּ:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Ceremony and Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays:

Moses – in the form Mose, Mses or Messes – is in fact an Egyptian word. It figures in the names of several Pharaohs... most significantly Ramses himself. The word means “child.” Understanding this we stand before one of the Torah's boldest and most revolutionary strokes. years later, two men are to be involved in a monumental confrontation: Ramses and Moses. Their names tell us what is at stake. Ramses means “child of the sun god Ra.” Ramses...saw himself as a god... Moses was simply, anonymously, “a child”... It is not one man, a supreme ruler, who is in the image of God, but every man, woman and child on the face of the earth. (187)