

PARASHAT SHEMOT

Exodus 1:1–6:1

Parashat Shemot begins by mentioning the *shemot*, or “names,” of Jacob’s sons and telling us that after they died a new pharaoh, who did not know Joseph, comes to power. Fearing the Jewish people, the new ruler orders taskmasters to enslave them and drown their male children in the Nile River. Defying that order, one mother places her son in a basket and casts the basket into the river. Pharaoh’s daughter who was bathing nearby rescues the child and adopts him as her own. She names him Moses. Some time after Moses has grown up, he sees an Egyptian beating a Jew. Defending the Jew, Moses strikes the Egyptian and kills him. When Pharaoh hears what has happened, he orders Moses put to death. So Moses flees from Egypt. When he arrives in Midian, he is welcomed by Jethro, a local priest, whose daughter, Zipporah, he later marries. While Moses is shepherding Jethro’s flock, God speaks to him out of a burning bush, promising that Aaron, his brother, will help him liberate the Israelites from oppression. Moses then returns to Egypt where he and Aaron go to Pharaoh to demand freedom for their people. Pharaoh refuses and imposes hard labor upon the people, who blame Moses for making their situation worse. When Moses complains to God, he is told, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might.”

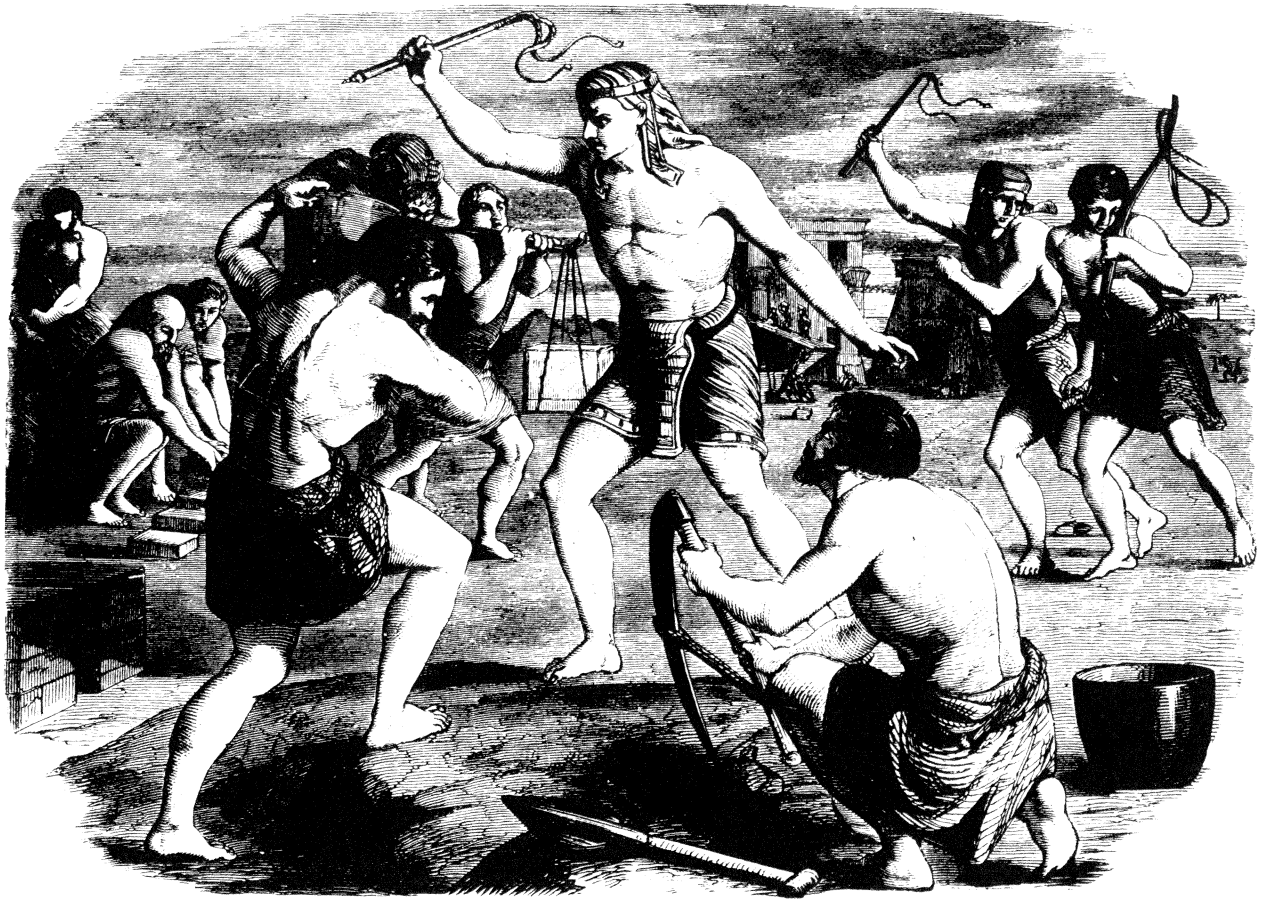
OUR TARGUM

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The second book of the Torah is called *Shemot*, or “names,” since it begins with a list of the names of Jacob’s sons. It is also known as Exodus because it relates the history of

the Jewish people’s liberation from Egyptian slavery.

We are told that, after Joseph’s death, the Jewish population in Egypt increases, and a new pharaoh, who does not know Joseph, comes to power. Suspecting the loyalty of the Jewish people, the new pharaoh fears that, if Egypt is attacked, the Jews



will side with his enemy. So he orders the Israelites enslaved and puts them to work building the cities of Pithom and Raamses. Yet, the more the Israelites are oppressed, the more they increase in numbers.

Pharaoh speaks to Shiphrah and Puah, the Jewish midwives, and orders them to kill all male Jewish babies, but they refuse. Pharaoh then orders that all Jewish male babies be drowned in the Nile.

Hoping to save her son, one Jewish mother places him in a basket and floats it in the Nile near the place where Pharaoh's daughter is bathing. When Pharaoh's daughter rescues the child, the woman's daughter rushes forward and asks if she might find a mother to nurse him. Pharaoh's daughter agrees. She treats the child like a son

and names him Moses, which means "drew" him out of the water.

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As a young man, Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Jew. When he notices that no one is looking, Moses strikes the Egyptian and kills him. Afterwards, he buries him. The next day he comes upon two Jews fighting. When he tries to stop them, one of them says to him, "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses realizes that others know what he has done and that he is in danger. When Pharaoh learns that Moses has killed an Egyptian, he orders him put to death.

So Moses flees Egypt. He travels to Midian, which is located in the southern part of the Negev desert. In Midian, Moses is taken in by Jethro, a

local priest and shepherd. He marries Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and they have a son whom Moses names Gershom, meaning "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

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One day, while caring for Jethro's flock, Moses sees a strange sight: a bush that burns but is not consumed. When Moses approaches the bush, God speaks to him from the flames, telling him to return to Egypt to free the Israelites from bondage. Moses wonders how he will be able to prove to the Israelites that God has sent him.

"When they ask me, 'Who sent you?' what shall I say?" he says to God.

And God tells him, "Say that *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* [which means 'I will be what I will be'] sent you. The Lord, the God of your people, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you."

Because Moses still has his doubts, he asks God, "What if they do not believe me or insist on proof that God has spoken to me?" God then turns Moses' staff into a snake and makes his skin white with leprosy. God tells Moses that, if the Israelites do not believe him after seeing both these signs,

he is to take water from the Nile and pour it on the ground, where it will turn to blood.

Moses still hesitates about taking on the task of freeing the Israelites. He tells God that he is "slow of speech and tongue," meaning that he is no public speaker. God tells him that his brother, Aaron, will be appointed to speak to Pharaoh and to the Israelites.

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Moses returns to Egypt and is met by Aaron. Together, they go to Pharaoh to request that he allow the Israelites to celebrate a festival. Pharaoh refuses and accuses them of troublemaking. He orders the taskmasters to increase the work of the slaves and to beat those who fail to produce. Finding themselves in trouble, the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron.

Their complaints stir up new doubts in Moses. He turns to God and asks, "Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not freed Your people at all."

God promises Moses that the people will be liberated.

THEMES

Parashat Shemot contains three important themes:

1. Pharaoh's war against the Jews.
2. Civil disobedience.
3. Moses' self-doubt and humility.

PEREK ALEF: *Pharaoh's War against the Jews*

The Book of *Shemot*, or Exodus, continues the history of the Jewish people. Jacob and his family follow Joseph to Egypt, settle in Goshen, and increase in numbers. A new pharaoh comes to power. He has forgotten Joseph's role in saving Egypt and decides to enslave the Israelites.

Why? What brings the Egyptian ruler to such a decision? Does he worry that the loss of slave labor will ruin Egypt's economy and his plans for building great cities and monuments to himself? Does he calculate that if he liberates the Israelites

others will demand their freedom? Or is it possible that the Jews themselves bring on their own persecution and enslavement?



Sarna

Biblical scholar Nahum M. Sarna speculates that the new pharaoh feared an invasion of foreigners from the East. Like many Egyptian leaders, he knew of his country's national humiliation and defeat by the invading Hyksos during an earlier