

A Thought on Parashas Shemos

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



In the process of Torah commentary our focus alternates between details and generalities, our interest moves from the parts to the whole, then back again to the parts. However, the Torah is not constituted of separate poles, with specifics and broader categories at opposite points. Rather, it is a great, complex engine of integrated, interdependent elements, each with a unique and vital function that contributes to the smooth operation of the entire machine. Alternatively, the Torah is as a living body, its cells, tissues, organs and systems working together in perfect unison for the benefit of the total being. Individual narratives and mitzvos provide profound insights into the Torah's broad themes, and from an understanding of those themes we can better appreciate the significance and relevance of individual pesukim or even words.

The experience of shifting from the particular to the universal, in the enterprise of Torah analysis, is expressed beautifully in the former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' introduction to 'Torah Studies.' Describing the unique style of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson זצ"ל, Rabbi Sacks writes:

"Time and again a *sicha* (talk) will be set in motion by a seemingly microscopic tension - a question or a comment by Rashi, perhaps, or a problem in understanding a halakhah, a practical provision of Jewish Law. Once in motion, however, the argument leads us into fresh perspectives, provisional answers and new questions, until we climb rung by rung to the most elevated of vantage points. From here, as we survey the ground beneath us in its widest of contexts, the initial question is not only resolved but also revealed as the starting point of a major spiritual search...

"A passage relating to the fruit of trees in their fifth year takes us through the levels of spiritual reality, an examination of the Baal Shem Tov's life, and a reversal of our normal understanding of holiness and sanctification. A meditation on the name of a sedra passes through the subjects of leprosy, repentance and personal identity. Each talk moves from the specific to the general, the finite to the infinite, and back again..."

(Torah Studies: 1986, Based on Excerpts of Talks by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson זצ"ל)

Having reached the end of Sefer Bereishis, and as we embark now on our journey through the magnificent book of Shemos, it is appropriate and worthwhile to pause on the rung to which we have climbed in order to gather a sense of where we are, an inkling of our progress so far and of what lies ahead. In order to do this we shall look at the broader characteristics of the books of Bereishis and Shemos as well as at the relationship between the two.

The Netziv, in his פתיחה (opening) to העמק דבר - 'HoEmek Dovor' - notes alternative names that the Rabbis give to Sefer Shemos. Ramban, in a closing poem at the end of his commentary to Shemos, calls the sefer, 'ספר הגאולה' (Sefer HaGe'uloh - the Book of Redemption), while the בה"ג (Ba'al Halocho Gedolos) calls Shemos 'ספר שני', 'the Second Book,' and 'הומש שני', 'the second fifth. This name, 'שני', also appears in Gemoro Sotah 36b. The Netziv explains that Shemos is 'שני לספר ראשית הבריאה' - the second and concluding part to the first 'Book of Creation,' which is Sefer Bereishis. That is, Bereishis and Shemos are the two volumes of the Book of Creation, and the content of Shemos constitutes the completion of סדר הבריאה - the order of Creation.

In what sense is Sefer Shemos the second and final part of the Book of Creation? How is Creation itself brought to completion in Shemos? The Netziv explains this as follows:

נמצא דמתן תורה הוא גמר הבריאה, והיינו הך דיציאת מצרים שאז היו ראויים ישראל לקבל התורה ולהשלים הבריאה ולבא בזה לתכלית יצירתם

Sefer Shemos represents the completion of Creation because it contains the Giving of the Torah, and, prior to that, Yetzias Mitzrayim. The Exodus from Egypt made it possible for the Jewish People to receive the Torah and thereby complete Creation through achieving both the purpose of their own existence and the goal of Creation itself. Furthermore, through accepting and taking on Torah and Mitzvos the Jewish People is to be 'as a light unto the nations' - and to bring them to the knowledge of Hashem.

The Netziv returns to this idea in his commentary on Shemos 12:51 -

וַיְהִי בַעֲצֵם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַל צְבָאָתָם:
It came to pass on that very day, that the L-rd took
the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions.

On the words, 'על צבאותם' the העמק דבר explains that each person is created for a particular purpose, and this is his 'צבא'. Bnei Yisroel, too, were created with a special role in the world, which was to be a light to the nations and bring them to the knowledge of Hashem. All the time the Jewish nation was in Egypt it was unable to fulfil this purpose, but יציאת מצרים finally made it possible for the fulfilment of its unique personal mission. The possuk above can therefore be understood as follows:

It came to pass on that very day, that the L-rd took the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt to fulfil their personal mission (of bringing knowledge of Hashem to the nations of the world).

Predating the Netziv by a little over 600 years, Ramban presents similar comments on the relationship between the books of Bereishis and Shemos to those we have seen in the העמק דבר. We have already seen that Ramban calls Shemos 'ספר הגאולה' (Sefer HaGe'uloh - the Book of Redemption). In his הקדמה - Hakdomoh (Introduction) to Sefer Shemos he refers to Sefer Bereishis as "ספר היצירה בהדוש העולם - "The Book of Creation of all the World and all Living Things." He writes that included in this book of Creation are the events in the lives of the Avos, which can be considered 'Creation' in relation to their descendants. The events in the Avos' lives hint to what will come to pass in the future, and Shemos contains the events that are the realisation and fulfilment of those hints. Shemos contains the first golus, exile, and the ge'uloh, redemption from it, and the ge'uloh is not complete until Bnei Yisroel have received the Torah, built the Mishkon, and Hashem has caused His Shechinoh (Divine Presence) to dwell among them.

In their respective introductions to Shemos, then, the Netziv emphasises the importance of מתן תורה in the completion of Creation, while Ramban emphasises the necessity for Hashem's Shechinoh coming to rest on the Mishkon to signify the end of exile and the completion of the redemption. This is why, writes Ramban, Sefer Shemos ends with the completion of the Mishkon and the Glory of Hashem descending upon it. For the Netziv, in the העמק דבר, the link between Bereishis and Shemos is in the latter being the second part in the account of Creation, with the respective purposes of Creation and the Jewish People becoming realised with קבלת התורה, the Receiving of the Torah on Har Sinai. For Ramban, Shemos takes up where Bereishis ends, with the descent of Yaakov's family into Mitzrayim. He points out in his הקדמה (Introduction) to Sefer Shemos as well as in his very first comment on Shemos1:1 that the descent of Yaakov's family is repeated at the beginning of Shemos, after it was already detailed at the end of Bereishis (see Bereishis 46:8-27), because it marks the beginning of the גלות - exile, and therefore opens the first key theme of Sefer Shemos.

From our elevated vantage point, in Rabbi Sacks' words, we now approach Sefer Shemos with a broad perspective on the significance of events that will be unfolding in the approaching chapters. For Ramban, we are entering 'ספר הגאולה' (Sefer HaGe'uloh - the Book of Redemption) and, although we need first to endure the harsh exile and the events leading up to that redemption, we know that the redemption will come and that at its pinnacle Hashem will place His Presence among the people. In that light, and with that optimistic anticipation, we approach the whole book. For the Netziv, we are entering the second of two parts that constitute ספר הבריאה; here, also, the exile and redemption are key themes, but they

are staging posts on the way to קבלת התורה, the Receiving of the Torah, the final point in the realisation of the very purpose of Creation.

As an endnote, יציאת מצרים - the Exodus from Egypt - appears in both the Netziv and the Ramban as an important event which leads to the ultimate goal (for the Netziv, Matan Torah, and for the Ramban, the Shechinoh descending upon the Mishkon), but we must be aware that יציאת מצרים is nevertheless considered intrinsically of great significance. There is a daily mitzvoh of זכירת יציאת מצרים - to remember and mention the Exodus from Egypt, as well as an annual mitzvoh of סיפור יציאת מצרים - recounting the story, which we fulfil at the Pesach seder.

The importance of יציאת מצרים is expressed by the Maharal as follows:

"ראינו ששמה התורה יציאת מצרים יסוד היסודות ושורש הכל,
ומצוות הרבה באו בשביל היציאה שעל ידן יהיה לעינינו יסוד הזה ואצלנו בל ימוט"
(שעבוד מצרים ויציאת מצרים, בכתבי מהר"ל מפראג)

"The Torah has placed Yetzias Mitzrayim as the foundation of all foundations and the root of everything, and many mitzvos emerge from the Exodus, through which we will remain cognizant of this foundation and it will not leave us."

The same ideas appear in the Sefer HaChinuch:

"It is not surprising that many mitzvos come to us due to this, both positive and negative mitzvos, for it is a great foundation and strong pillar in our Torah and in our faith."
(Mitzvoh 21, Mitzvas Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim)

With these thoughts in mind, let us embark upon our journey through Sefer Shemos, excited to stand at Har Sinai once again, and, ultimately, to witness the final redemption בימינו במהרה, speedily in our days.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy