

# פרשת שמות Parashas Shemos

## Background

The Book of *Exodus* begins with the death of Joseph and his generation and the start of the Jewish people's gradual enslavement. The enslavement was a ruse; in truth, Pharaoh sought nothing less than the annihilation of the Jewish people, whom the Egyptians perceived as a threat.

ואֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם  
And these are the names of the Children  
of Israel who were coming to Egypt (1:1).

The Torah refers to the Jews as those *who were coming*, but since they had arrived years before, it would seem more accurate to say *who came*. The truth is otherwise. In all the years that the Children of Israel were in Egypt, they never lost the emotional and psychological feeling that they had just recently arrived. They lived with a deep yearning for *Eretz Yisrael* and refused to allow

themselves to feel established in Egypt.<sup>[1]</sup> It was only when that generation died, and there arose a new generation that never knew the Land of their forefathers, that the real subjugation began (*R' Yissachar Dov of Belz, Ksav Sofer*).



**R**ashi notes that although the names of the tribes had been mentioned during their lifetime, the Torah repeats them upon their death as an expression of endearment.<sup>[2]</sup> They are likened to the stars, which God brings out in numbers and by name (see *Isaiah 40:26*).

Stars seem smaller than they really are because they are so far away. Every Jew must know that he is really a source of phenomenal light; it is only because he is far from God that he fails to illuminate the world. If he would only come closer, he would really begin to shine (*Zekan Aharon*).



**1. Unwelcome Upstarts.** According to *Chizkuni*, the phrase *who were coming* refers to the attitude of the Egyptians, and aptly captures the spirit of exile. Wherever Jews go, they remain strangers and outsiders. Even if they live somewhere for an extended period of time, become well established, and add to the prosperity and welfare of their host country, they will always be perceived as foreigners who have only recently arrived.

**2. How Dear.** To whom exactly does God want to express how dear He holds the Jewish people? To the Jews themselves. Every Jew must know how precious he is to God and how much God loves him. We can be compared to the stars. Just as God created the stars in order to illuminate the darkness, so He created the Jewish people to spread His light in the spiritually darkest places and situations.

Every Jew has his own name. Much like the angels whose names define their unique mission, every Jew has a unique mission in life — one that only he can fulfill. We must therefore search to discover our uniqueness and strive at all costs to remain authentic rather than seeking to copy someone else (*Sfas Emes*).

Why does the Torah speak of the *names* of the Children of Israel who were coming to Egypt? Let the verse state simply that *these were the Children of Israel*, and then list their names, without stressing the word “names.”

R' Yehudah Leib Fein explained with a parable. In every large city in Poland there was a prison specifically meant to hold those who did not sweep the patch of street in front of their homes. In order to spare these “criminals” from being held with thieves and murderers, the government established separate sanitation prisons. Shrewd people who were supposed to be incarcerated there bribed the wardens to write their names in the prison roster, as being present. When their sentences were over, the wardens would simply erase their names and be done with it. Thus, the “names” served out the sentence, while the transgressors were free.

The family of Jacob went into exile in name only; in their essential selves, they remained free men. Strongly attached to God and His values, their souls were never shackled by the chains of exile. Thus the Torah speaks of the *names* that went to Egypt. At the very outset, the Torah teaches us that every Jew, regardless of the physical exile in which he lives, is imprisoned in name only. By remaining deeply attached to God and Torah study, he remains internally free, the master of his soul and destiny. Only in name will he be in exile, while his spirit roams free in the world of Torah.<sup>[3]</sup>

את יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ  
With Jacob each man and  
his household came (ibid.).

Why does this verse stress that *each man and his household* came with Jacob, when the Torah makes specific mention of them in the next verses? Chafetz Chaim explained: The tribes would never have agreed to come with their families to the morally decadent climate of Egypt if Jacob had not agreed to come along with them. Only when the tribes realized that their father Jacob would accompany them were they ready to go, confident that his influence would protect them and their children from the spiritual contamination of Egypt. Thus the Torah teaches that *with Jacob* they were ready — that *each man and his household came*.<sup>[4]</sup>

HaDrash V'Halyun elaborates: Generally, when a person leaves a small town with a solid Torah atmosphere for a large city with looser standards, he retains the standards he absorbed in his childhood, but his children are often casualties of the move, since they slowly but surely adapt to the standards of their new home. Here the Torah teaches the secret of maintaining familial standards in exile. Although the Children of Israel moved from their sanctified home to Egypt, they came as a unit with a vibrant intergenerational connection: *a man and his household came* — with no generation gap.



**3. Essential Torah.** Exile can obliterate one's essential character and spiritually absorb one into the prevailing culture. Thus one loses his name (symbolic of his essence) in exile. The essential character of a Jew is his burning desire to fulfill the will of God and leave its imprint on his surroundings. Thus, as the Jews went into their first exile, God indirectly divulged the secret of retaining their names. *These are the names of the Children of Israel.*

Many commentators note that the word שְׁמוֹת, *names*, is an acronym for שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר מִקְרָא וְאַחַד תַּרְגּוּם, the halachic obligation to read the text of the weekly *sidrah* twice, and the *Targum Onkelos* translation once. (See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 285). By reading the *sidrah* twice, deeply internalizing the lessons of Torah and then translating them into everyday life, we can survive the exile with our names, and essence, intact (*Simchas Aharon*).

**4. Sagacious Restraint.** In his later years, the Chafetz Chaim wanted to leave Poland and move to Eretz Yisrael. Preparations were made in both locations; in fact, a special synagogue was built for him in Petach Tikvah, but his wife's health prevented his departure.

Fearing that the communities and the yeshivos would suffer in his absence, R' Chaim Ozer Grodzenski spoke in the name of the great *roshei hayeshivah* and rabbis imploring him to stay. The Chafetz Chaim replied, “As long as I still had the strength, I was ready to wage the battle for the supremacy of Torah. Now, however, I'm an old man, and I'm no longer able to wage the fight. My absence will not cause any harm.”

R' Chaim Ozer responded, “R' Yisrael Salanter would often say, ‘As long as the grandfather sits at the table, the little ones behave themselves.’ ”

The verse refers to the Jews as the *Children of Israel*, yet it speaks of their father as *Jacob*, rather than *Israel*. *Shem MiShmuel* sees the two names as a prescription for national survival. The name *יִשְׂרָאֵל* (*Israel*) spells *לִי ראש*, *the head is mine*, for the Jewish people must stand head and shoulders above all others in their spiritual and moral standards. Only when Jews recognize their potential for spiritual supremacy can they avoid the plague of assimilation. On the other hand, we must always remain *יַעֲקֹב* (related to *עֵקֶב*, *heel*), humble in our relationship to God. By combining humility with pride, and fusing firm resolve with patience, we can survive any exile.

**וְיוֹסֵף הָיָה בְּמִצְרַיִם**

*And Joseph was in Egypt* (ibid. 5).

Why does the Torah mention something so obvious? *Rashi* explains that this teaches us that Joseph retained his righteousness, whether as his father's shepherd and student or as the viceroy of Egypt. Whether tested with poverty and humiliation as a shepherd or with grandeur and wealth as a statesman, Joseph remained loyal to God.

Poverty can be debilitating, causing one to (God forbid) question Divine fairness, while wealth can lead to an arrogant denial of God. One must emulate Joseph, for he withstood both tests. This ability to remain true to oneself under all circumstances is the real sign of greatness.<sup>[5]</sup>

**וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל אָחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא**

*Joseph died and all his brothers and that entire generation* (ibid. 6).

**O**hr HaChaim views this verse as a description of the spiritual downward spiral that precipitated the exile and enslavement. Joseph's passing

meant that the Jews were no longer regarded with respect by the average Egyptian; rather, the Egyptians viewed them as equals. Once all the brothers had died, the Egyptians began to display scorn toward the Jews. But it was only after the death of that entire generation that they felt ready to begin the enslavement.

*R' Chaim Shmulevitz* explained that although the Egyptians had no ethical qualms about subordinating others, they could not bring themselves to do so as long as they still admired the Jews as prestigious and honorable people. Only when their prestige declined to the point that they looked down on them were the Egyptians emotionally able to enslave them.

The relationship between respect and enslavement works both ways. An oppressor cannot enslave a nation unless he views it with disdain and even contempt. Similarly, a nation will not submit passively to subordination unless it views itself as inferior to the oppressor. The Jews became vulnerable only when they saw themselves as inferior to the Egyptians.<sup>[6]</sup>

**וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פְּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ . . .  
וַתִּמְלֵא הָאֶרֶץ אֹתָם**

*The Children of Israel were fruitful, teemed . . .  
and the land became filled with them* (ibid. 7).

According to *Binah L'Itim*, this verse signals a radical departure from Jacob's exile-survival strategy. He told Pharaoh that his children were shepherds, so that the Egyptians — who worshiped sheep — would not want to have any connection with them. As a result, Pharaoh agreed to Joseph's desire to settle the Jews in Goshen, effectively curtailing social contact between Jews and Egyptians. Once Joseph died, however, *the Children of Israel multiplied . . . and the land became*

5. **Forever Joseph.** *R' Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev* put it succinctly: Although Pharaoh gave him the Egyptian name Zaphenath — Paneah, Joseph remained Joseph, even in Egypt.

6. **Sinful Self-Debasement.** *R' Chaim Shmulevitz* continues: This lack of self-respect opens the door for the evil persuader to ruin man's life. Initially he does not seek to cause a good person to sin; rather, he tries to make him lose his self-respect within the confines of permitted behavior. Once a person feels cheapened, he is fair game for the evil inclination. Held captive by his own desires, man can be brought to the lowest of sins.

Conversely, the most effective counterattack against evil is to view oneself as too honorable and prestigious to give up his exalted status by sinning. Out of fear of demeaning himself and his royal station in life, man can find the strength to resist degrading temptation.

filled with them. Discarding their low profile, they were seen all over the land, seeking to socialize with the Egyptian upper class. Suddenly the Egyptians were exposed to the financial success of the Jews, and in foreshadowing many oppressors to come, the Egyptians imagined that the foreigners were succeeding at their hosts' expense. This mentality spawned tremendous Jew-hatred, and the masses began to claim that "the Jews are numerous and strong at our expense" (see verse 9).<sup>[7]</sup>

וּבְאֶשֶׁר יַעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ בֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ  
But as much as they would afflict it,  
so it would increase and so it  
would spread out (ibid. 12).

The phrase *וּבְאֶשֶׁר יַעֲנוּ*, *as much as they would afflict it*, is in future tense. According to *Orach Chaim*, this is a promise regarding the benefits of future exiles. Whenever and wherever the Jews will be oppressed, the oppression will ultimately yield positive results. Throughout their bittersweet history, the Jewish people always emerged from their torment, strengthened and toughened by the experience.<sup>[8]</sup>

*Maharal* views this concept in spiritual terms. The blessing implied in this verse is not merely a reward for having borne the torment of the Egyptians;

rather, it is a direct result of the physical oppression. The physical and spiritual elements that compromise man constantly vie for supremacy in his life. When one's physical dimension is diminished it makes his spirit ascendant, and vice versa. The physical oppression of the Jews set in motion a process that began to purge the physical, so that the spiritual would dominate. Thus the more the Egyptians would afflict the bodies of the Jews, their souls and sanctity would increase and expand.

It is true in all generations that physical oppression brings out the beauty of the Jewish spirit. The greatest elucidation and development of the Oral Torah occurred in the darkest periods of exile. For example, the Sages explain the verse *He has placed me in darkness like the eternally dead* (*Lamentations* 3:6) as referring to the Babylonian Talmud (see *Sanhedrin* 24a). It was in the darkness of the Babylonian exile, when the light of the world, the Temple, lay in ruins that the Jewish people created the Talmud. Whether Germany and France during the Crusader period, Spain before the Inquisition, Provence with its bloodbaths, or Russia's rampant anti-Semitic pogroms and oppression, they all spawned great outpourings of Torah literature. *For as they would afflict it, so it would increase and so it would spread out* (*R' Yitzchak Hutner, R' Chaim Zimmerman*).<sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[10]</sup>

**7. Invasion = Isolation.** *Yalkut Shimoni* comments that when the theaters and entertainment spots became filled with Jews, the Egyptians instituted apartheid decrees to segregate them. *Maayana Shel Torah* adds: The more Jews seek to infiltrate the cultural world of non-Jews, the greater the latter's hatred becomes. They seek to promulgate laws to isolate Jews and distance them. *R' Elchanan Wasserman* put it this way: "People say it is hard to be a Jew; it is even harder to be a gentile," because our non-Jewish countrymen resent it.

**8. Exile Tough.** *R' Meir Shapiro* interpreted the custom to eat hard-boiled eggs at the Seder as reflective of this idea. The longer one boils an egg the harder it becomes. This mirrors the Jewish people, whose commitment to God becomes stronger and more fierce in direct proportion to the "hot water" of exile.

**9. Gain with Pain.** Personal success in Torah study is also linked to the travail that accompanies it. The *Rashash of Vilna* encountered difficulty in understanding the comments of a particular *Tosafos* in the tractate of *Yevamos*. For many years he was unable to penetrate its meaning. Once the *Netziv of Volozhin* was in Vilna and visited the *Rashash*. The *Rashash* was overjoyed and, in the course of the visit, presented the *Netziv* with the difficulty. The *Netziv* read and reread the *Tosafos* a few times and arrived at an explanation that satisfactorily resolved the *Rashash's* questions.

On one hand, the *Rashash* was thrilled to have an answer; on the other hand, he was upset that while he had unsuccessfully struggled with the *Tosafos* for years, the *Netziv* was able to grasp it in such a relatively short time. The *Netziv* sought to comfort the *Rashash* and said to him, "You are, thank God, a very wealthy Jew who learns Torah without the oppressing worries of making a living, while I study Torah in poverty and have to worry about meeting the budget of the yeshivah, as well. It is for this reason that I merited to answer your question."

**10. Local Development.** According to *Chida*, one of the reasons for our protracted exile experience is that there are ideas in the Torah that must be developed within particular locations. Once the Torah of a particular locale is developed, the Jews have no reason to remain there and in fact are exiled. The Talmud in Babylonia, the Geonim

וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

*And they became disgusted because  
of the Children of Israel (ibid.).*

This disgust was a blessing in disguise. According to *Sfas Emes* and others, the Egyptians suddenly felt an intense hatred toward the Jews. It overtook their emotions almost against their will, for this was the manner in which Divine Providence sought to guarantee that the Jews would remain isolated from the Egyptians and not assimilate. Regarding this, King David writes *הִפְךָ לָבָם לִשְׂנֹא עַמּוֹ*, *He turned their hearts to hate His nation (Psalms 105:25).*<sup>[11]</sup>

*R' Mordechai Gimpel of Ruzinai* adds: When God told Abraham that his children would be sojourners in a land *not their own*, He blessed the Jews with the ability to remain outsiders in Egypt. No matter how long they would live there, they would always feel that Egypt is not really their place.

שֵׁם הָאִחָת שְׁפָרָה וְשֵׁם הַשְּׂנִית פּוּעָה

*The name of the first was Shifrah and the  
name of the second was Puah (ibid. 15).*

According to the Sages (*Sotah* 11b), these midwives were really Jochebed and Miriam, the

mother and sister of Moses. One was called Shifrah for she beautified, *מְשַׁפֶּרֶת*, the newborn babies, while the second was called פּוּעָה for she would coo to them, calming them when they cried.

Jochebed and Miriam were prophetesses, women of supreme spiritual stature. Nevertheless the Torah praises them for their nurturing skills rather than for their spiritual qualities.

According to *R' Shmuel Rozovsky*, the Torah means to emphasize that the power to nurture children is a blessing and a privilege that God grants women. Jochebed and Miriam did not seek to become great *men*; they became great *women* and utilized their Divinely given instincts and skills to serve others. The Torah underscores this by giving them names that signify their special ability as child-rearers.<sup>[12]</sup>

*R' Yerucham Levovitz* sheds light on a different aspect of these names. In the Torah, names indicate essence. Those characteristics that we view as important are often not the truly defining character of a person. His essence may find expression in what seems to us to be an insignificant detail. When the Torah calls Jochebed and Miriam by the new names of Shifrah and Puah it teaches us that the kindness they exhibited in their role as midwives is their defining quality, the one that made them great.<sup>[13]</sup>

in Iran-Iraq, *R' Yitzchak Alfasi* in North Africa as well as the Rishonim in Spain and the Tosafists in France and Provence are all examples of this phenomenon.

**11. United by Hate.** In a small town in New Jersey, populated by many Holocaust survivors, vandals painted a swastika and other anti-Semitic epithets on the wall of the synagogue. Contrary to popular sentiment, the rabbi left the offensive writing on the wall for a few days before having it removed. When Holocaust survivors protested that the daily visual reminder of their loss was too painful, he explained, "You are right! But it is important for our children to know that there is anti-Semitism in the world. It sensitizes us to our role in life and unites us, forcing us to realize who we really are."

**12. Insulted Identity.** People tend to become jealous of who and what *others* are, and they fail to appreciate their own God-given uniqueness. How ironic that those who seek to turn women into men in a quest for "equality" are called feminists. Everyone understands that an orchestra must be comprised of many different instruments and that it would be ridiculous if the violinist were to resent the kettle drum because its sound is much louder and more prominent. Yet some groups measure women's unique qualities by a male yardstick, and seek to denigrate that which is uniquely feminine in favor of masculine characteristics and attitudes.

**13. Big and Little.** A wise man once said that big people are big in the little things in life; it is man who makes things big or small. A great person utilizes seemingly little things in important ways, while spiritual midgets can debase even the most significant things. Money, which is often a lethal spiritual poison, can be the source of intense love of God, in the spirit of *You shall love Hashem your God . . . with all your resources (Deuteronomy 6:5)*. When the Roman emperor, Turnus Rufus, asked *R' Akiva* why God created paupers, *R' Akiva* answered, "In order to save the givers from *Gehinnom*" (*Bava Basra* 10a), by giving them the opportunity to dispel the gloom of poverty from the needy. The very same money that can destroy a person can also offer salvation for his soul.

Similarly, the selfsame drive which can make man a partner with God in creating new life (see *Kiddushin* 30b)

וַתִּירֹאן הַמִּיּוֹלֶדֶת אֶת הָאֱלֹקִים . . . וַתַּחְיֶינָה אֶת הַיְלָדִים  
*But the midwives feared God . . .*  
*and they caused the boys to live (ibid. 17).*

Even though murder is a crime for Jews and non-Jews alike, the midwives are praised for not killing the boys. R' Shlomo of Lutzk submits that Jochebed and Miriam could have refused the royal appointment to serve as the Jewish midwives, but they were afraid that someone else who accepted the job might not have the strength of character and the tenacity of spirit to stand up to Pharaoh and ignore his directive. They therefore

willingly placed themselves in jeopardy in order to thwart Pharaoh's diabolical design. This was fear of Heaven at its best.<sup>[14], [15]</sup>

R' Elyah Lopian notes the Torah's priorities in describing the greatness of Shifrah and Puah. The public acclaim awarded a person who has saved thousands of people is fantastic. If someone were to ask, "Is he a God-fearing person?" the reaction would be, "What difference does it make when he saved so many people?" In contrast, the Torah sees Jochebed and Miriam's fear of God as their primary virtue; the saving of so many Jewish lives was simply the tangible expression of that fear.<sup>[16], [17]</sup>

can be degraded to become nothing more than base, sensual indulgence.

It is man who either makes the small big or, unfortunately, turns the big into small. [See Rambam, *Shemoneh Perakim* 5] (R' Yerucham Levovitz).

**14. Afraid to Ruin the Love.** Fear of Heaven does not mean only fear of sin. One motivated to prevent an occurrence that, while not technically a sin, would not be pleasing to God, also displays fear of God.

R' Asher of Stolin became the Rebbe at a very young age. A close friend of his, who now found himself a *chassid*, suddenly felt very awkward with the relationship. Once R' Asher asked him directly, "Are you afraid of me?" When the *chassid* did not reply, R' Asher asked again. Finally the *chassid* blurted out, "I am afraid of doing anything which might ruin the love between us." R' Asher was angered. "*Sheigitz* (scoundrel)! That is the true definition of Fear of Heaven."

**15. Cautiously Competent.** R' Yisrael Salanter recommended to a young man that he accept a rabbinical post that was offered to him. The young man was hesitant, claiming to be fearful of issuing inaccurate halachic decisions. Said R' Yisrael, "Who then should accept rabbinic posts; those who are not afraid?"

**16. Unique Roles.** Just as one's efforts to acquire material security are the fulfillment of an obligation [that one must work for a livelihood], and one may never think that success is due to his strength and the might of his hand, so it is with regard to securing children's spiritual "safety." All of our efforts are in order to fulfill our mitzvah to try; but we must remember that in reality we cannot achieve anything [on our own]. It is through our efforts that we open the gates of Divine mercy so that our actions be blessed and achieve their objective. One who prays and supplicates intensively regarding other people's spiritual improvement can be more effective than one who is tangibly involved.

Nevertheless, the question of how to proceed, whether through prayer or practical effort, must be weighed carefully. For if practical efforts are called for, then one who refrains from action transgresses the prohibition of *you shall not stand aside while your fellow's blood is shed* (Leviticus 19:16).

One who sees a friend drowning and, rather than actively diving in to save him, stands aside and prays for him, is nothing short of a murderer. On the other hand, if he is unable to physically rescue his friend yet does not pray on his behalf, he is considered among those who have restrained someone who wishes to save a life . . .

Just as the human body and its limbs are divided according to function, with the eyes to see, the ears to hear and the arms to act, so the national corpus is like one body, with every individual a separate part. Each person has to fill his particular function and role. If the Torah students were to truly toil in Torah, they would, through their outpouring of sanctity, rescue many children and adults from sinful thoughts, heresy and the like through the spirit of purity with which they imbue the world. Anyone who has been in close proximity to a true Torah personality knows that there is visible evidence of his exceptional influence upon many people. This degree of influence could never be achieved by practical measures. Furthermore his impact is felt even far from his actual physical location although due to its subtlety it remains invisible to the eye (*Chazon Ish, Collected Letters* 3:62).

**17. Reverent Deterrent.** The Torah stresses the fear of God that brought the midwives to defy Pharaoh's decree. The moral ugliness of ignoring God's will is compounded by the fact that it is He Who grants us the ability to act contrary to His will. This itself is sufficient reason to refrain from doing that which He forbids. One therefore deserves no special reward for not transgressing His word. Rather, one earns reward for cultivating the Fear of Heaven that makes one realize the audacity of sin (R' Elazar M. Shach).

כָּל הֶבֶן הַיָּדוּר תִּשְׁלִיכֵהוּ  
 “Every son that will be born — into the  
 River you shall throw him! . . .” (ibid. 22).

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת בַּת לֵוִי  
 A man went from the house of Levi  
 and he took a daughter of Levi (2:1).

Although the verse does not specifically mention Jewish boys, *Targum Onkelos* translates the verse as “Every son born to the Jews shall be cast into the River.” Where did Onkelos see that the decree was exclusively meant for the Jewish boys?

While *R’ Meir Shapiro* was rav of Lublin, he also served as a deputy in the Polish Sejm (parliament). Once he discussed the fact that while the law ostensibly grants Jews equal rights, in practice the laws are interpreted in ways that effectively strip the Jews of their constitutional privileges. “This practice is an old one. Pharaoh officially decreed death on all male babies yet those in charge of implementing the law understood full well that the idea was to kill only the Jewish boys.”

Onkelos, who was a proselyte and a relative of the Roman emperor, knew from his experience that official edicts might be phrased in general terms, but in practice the Jews are to be singled out.

## Background

In the face of the terrible edict of infanticide, many Jewish couples separate out of despair, among them Amram and Jochebed. Their daughter Miriam convinces her parents to remarry. She argued that their “decree” was even worse than Pharaoh’s, since Pharaoh’s was directed only against the boys, but if Jewish couples were to divorce, no girls would be born. Her parents acknowledged that she was right and they remarried. From their renewed union, Moses is born. Thanks to the intervention of Pharaoh’s daughter, he is saved from drowning and grows up in the royal palace.

Why does the Torah speak in such a cryptic fashion rather than clearly stating that Amram and Jochebed remarried? *Kehillas Yitzchak* suggests that the Torah mentions Moses’ parents anonymously in order to emphasize that the greatest of all prophets, the man of God, was born to “ordinary” flesh and blood parents. Let no one claim that he was some kind of heavenly creature; he was born to corporeal parents, yet he rose to be the messenger of Hashem, to redeem His people and give them the Torah.

*R’ S.R. Hirsch* adds: While Amram and Jochebed were obviously great people, the Torah omits this fact when portraying Moses’ birth. Any child born in sanctity and purity can strive to reach the highest levels of spiritual achievement. As *Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah 5:1-2)* writes: “Do not entertain the thought . . . that God decreed on a person from conception whether to be righteous or wicked. This is not so. Rather any person could be fit to be as righteous as Moses our teacher . . .”<sup>[18]</sup>

וְלֹא יִכְלֶה עוֹד הִצְפִּינוּ  
 She could not hide him any longer (ibid. 3).

*Ibn Ezra* writes that while God could have helped Moses’ family to hide him successfully, He wanted the child to grow up among royalty so that he could emotionally rise above the slave mentality of the Jews in bondage. Furthermore, living in the palace would grant him the self-confidence to kill the Egyptian for having abused a Jew (see *Exodus 2:12*). Even at the well in Midian he had the strength of character and conviction to stop the shepherds from taking advantage of Jethro’s daughters (ibid. 17).

Yet another reason why it was crucial that he not

**18. Believing in the Future.** The story of the remarriage of Amram and Jochebed conveys a lesson which Jews learned and relearned throughout their history. In the worst of times, when political conditions and anti-Semitism made the chances for Jewish survival very slim, Jews never refrained from marrying and bringing children into the world. *R’ Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg*, who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto, testified that despite the subhuman conditions in the ghetto and the daily deportations to the human slaughterhouses, Jews continued to marry and have children. Tragically, most of those parents and children were sent to the death camps. They sanctified God’s Name in life and in death.

grow up among his brothers was so that when he would eventually come to free them, they would respect and revere him rather than see him as “just” another Jew.

R' Zalman Sorotzkin suggests a different approach, based on a comment of his mother. When her other son, R' Yoel, was a student at Volozhin, he was inducted into the army. An assiduous student and already an accomplished and God-fearing scholar, it was truly a tragedy that he would have to spend his best years in the military. Rebbetzin Sorotzkin said: “I am sure that he will be freed. The *Mishnah* (*Pirkei Avos* 3:6) guarantees that whoever accepts the yoke of Torah upon himself will be freed from the yoke of the government. The only reason he was inducted in the first place is because, as a future leader of the nation, it is imperative that he experience, even temporarily, the bitter taste that all the other young men are forced to swallow.”

Concluded R' Zalman: Although God could have saved him in many ways, Moses had to be thrown into the river temporarily in order that he share, and thus identify with, the experience of the nation. He too had to taste the bitter experience of Pharaoh's decree.

וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ  
 Her sister stationed herself at a distance to  
 know what would be done with him (ibid. 4).

The *Chafetz Chaim* invoked this verse when discussing the miraculous survival of the *yeshivos*.

In the story of the *מְקַשֵּׁשׁ עֵצִים*, the Jew who gathered wood on the Sabbath, the Torah writes that he was temporarily jailed for it had not been clarified what should be done to him (*Numbers* 15:34). *Rashi* (ad loc.) explains that they knew that he was subject to the death penalty, but were unsure which of the four forms of capital punishment was to be administered. Here, too, Miriam had no doubt that her brother, born to save his people, would survive. She stationed herself nearby in order to see how this would happen.

“The *yeshivos*,” concluded the *Chafetz Chaim*, “are the key to the survival of the Jewish people. Their survival is not in question. However, in what way God will bring it about — that we don't know.”<sup>[19]</sup>

וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ  
 she sent her maidservant  
 and she took it (ibid. 5).

*Rashi*, citing *Sotah* 12b, explains that she extended her arm in order to retrieve the basket. Although it was too far away for her to reach it, her arm stretched miraculously until she was able to pull the basket in. Why did she stick out her arm when she could not reach the basket? *R' Menachem Mendel of Kotzk* learns from this that when seeking to do the right thing, one should not reckon with “natural” limitations. One must do his best — and then leave the rest to God. Action is our duty; accomplishment is in the hands of God.<sup>[20]</sup>

**19. Our Share.** When the few surviving *roshei yeshivah* came to Israel after the Holocaust, they called an emergency meeting to discuss how to resuscitate the charred remains of the great European citadels of Torah, whose best sons went up to Heaven in flames.

*R' Yosef Kahaneman*, the *Ponevezher Rav*, addressed the gathering. “Dear colleagues!” he said. “We are gathered here for naught; it's a shame to waste our time and strength. What do we want to do? Save the Torah? God already promised us that it will not be forgotten from the mouths of our offspring (see *Deuteronomy* 31:21). Do we have to save it?! Does God need our help in keeping His promise? If this is our goal, let us adjourn now.”

“With one word, however, we can turn this into a practical and productive meeting. The question is not how to save the Torah. Torah will flourish; God's promise will become a reality as the *yeshivos* will fill up with students. We must gather to figure out how we will merit to become part of that wondrous world of Torah that will rise here. How will we be able to have a share in a reborn Torah world?”

**20. Major Generals.** We often fall into the trap of thinking that if we can not be perfect, then we should do nothing. Many *yeshivah* students think that if they cannot become *roshei yeshivah*, then their efforts are worthless.

An Orthodox Israeli taxi driver, who was fortunate to have driven the *Steipler Gaon*, related the following incident: “Once, the *Steipler* asked me if I find time to learn or attend a *shiur* (Talmud class) after a long, tiring day of driving. I told him that I regularly attend a *Daf Yomi* class, but it pains me to admit that I usually fall asleep within a few minutes and wake up only when the lecturer finishes the *shiur*. I explained to him how painful it is to



וְהִנֵּה נֶעֶר בֶּכֶה וְתַחֲמַל עָלָיו  
וְתֹאמַר מִלְּדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה  
and behold! a youth was crying.  
She took pity on him and said,  
"This is one of the Hebrew boys" (ibid. 6).

**H**ow did she know that the child was Jewish? And once she realized that he was, why did she take pity on him when her own father had decreed that all Jewish boys be killed? The answer lies in the order of what transpired. First Pharaoh's daughter took pity on the child. Realizing that his cry aroused in her an unnatural compassion, one that ran contrary to her home and upbringing, she concluded that it must be a reflection of the natural sense of mercy that is the heritage of the Jews. The crying child aroused a spark of mercy inside her that came to fruition when she converted to Judaism (*R' Aharon of Sanz*).

*R' Mordechai Chaim of Slonim* offered a different approach. A non-Jew cries with a sense of despair, but when a Jew weeps, there is hope behind the tears. When the Egyptian princess heard the baby's cry, and recognized the hope within it, she realized that he was one of the Hebrew boys.<sup>[21]</sup>

אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקַת מִן הָעִבְרִית  
a wet nurse from the Hebrew women (ibid 7).

**R**ashi explains that Moses refused to nurse from the Egyptian women. "Shall I, who will converse with the Divine Presence, ingest impure

milk?" he said. Although it was permitted for him to nurse from an Egyptian mother, Moses refused to do so. He had such a clear sense of himself as a Jew and as one with whom the Divine Presence would converse that he could not bring himself to demean such a soul by nursing from an Egyptian wet nurse.

We too are Hashem's precious children; we too speak with the Divine Presence, every day. When we in our prayers say, "Blessed are You," we address God Himself. Were we to realize how elevated an existence we enjoy, we would never demean ourselves by seeking impure or meaningless desires.

*R' Yaakov Kaminetsky* offers further perspective. *Rema* (*Yoreh Deah* 81:7) rules that it is preferable that Jewish children nurse only from Jewish women, since "milk of a non-Jewish woman contaminates the heart of the child, imbuing him with a negative nature." Citing *Rashba*, the *Vilna Gaon* points to the case of Moses as the source of this ruling. This source would seem to be inappropriate, however, since Moses' reticence was based on his particular set of circumstances. He knew that he was destined to converse with the Divine Presence. If so, then why must all Jewish children refrain from digesting the milk of a non-Jewish mother?

The answer is that parents must view every Jewish child as someone with the potential to converse with the Divine Presence. We must therefore educate all our children toward this goal — that they be fit to converse with God.

me that I can't remain awake, nor do I ever get to understand the *daf*.

"The Steipler smiled to me and encouraged me. When he was leaving the taxi he caressed my face and said, 'Know that in this world you don't consider yourself to be significant, but I can assure you that in Heaven you are a major general. Do your best; you can't do more. Keep going to the *shiur*, even if you fall asleep over the *Gemara*. In Heaven they consider you a great and righteous person.' "

God does not demand of us any more than we are capable of doing. If we make our utmost efforts, then in God's eyes we are major generals.

We must do ours and then He will make it happen!

**21. Return to the Crib.** *R' Dov Ber of Lubavitch* was so engrossed in his learning the he did not hear his crying baby, who had fallen out of his crib in the next room. *R' Dov Ber's* father, *R' Schneur Zalman of Liadi*, the *Baal HaTanya*, lived on the floor above his son. He, too, was engrossed in learning, yet he heard the child's cries. He went downstairs, lifted the child, soothed him and put him back to sleep in the crib. Later he told his son: "Even when one is totally involved in his own learning he must never be oblivious to a child's cries."

*R' Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch* expounded: "Even if a person is totally preoccupied with his own spiritual growth he may never become callous or oblivious to the cry of a Jewish child who needs help. The Jewish child who is lost among the nations must be picked up, soothed and returned to his crib. How many Jewish children, in our times, have fallen out of the crib?!"

## Background

Moses assumes the role of shepherd for Jethro's sheep, which was the training ground for his future role as "the loyal shepherd" of God's flock. While he is in the desert with the sheep, God appears to him in the Burning Bush.

וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת צֹאן יִתְרוֹ  
*Moses was shepherding  
 the sheep of Jethro (3:1).*

The Midrash relates that one of the sheep once strayed from the rest of the flock. Moses ran after it, searching until he was able to find it and bring it back.

How did Moses allow himself to chase after

a solitary sheep thereby abandoning the entire flock?<sup>[22]</sup>

Moses knew that the unity among the rest of the flock would protect it from danger. The lost sheep lacked that advantage, and therefore it was truly in jeopardy. Furthermore, he knew that the loss of even one sheep could potentially create dissension within the entire flock. Lastly, Moses knew full well that it was not the poor sheep's fault that it had wandered off; rather, the shepherd was to blame.

Unity among Jews protects every individual; when a Jew is cast asunder from his fellow Jews he is in spiritual jeopardy. Every effort must be made to reunite him with the rest of the flock. Concomitantly, the loss of any individual undermines the strength of the nation. Finally a true leader knows that if a Jew leaves the fold the ultimate responsibility lies with the leader (*Sfas Emes*).<sup>[23]</sup>

**22. Individualistic Unity.** Authentic Jewish leadership recognizes that it is unacceptable to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the group. No individual may be written off to serve the needs of the group.

R' Ozer Kesserman suggests an allusion to this concept in the less-famous ending of a well-known comment. Regarding the unity of the Jewish people at Sinai, *Rashi* comments that they were כָּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד, as *one man with one heart*, says *Rashi*. He continues: *However, all the other encampments* [of the Jews in the wilderness] *were fraught with strife and arguments*. Why does *Rashi* besmirch the Jewish people? Explained R' Ozer: While unity is important, the differences of opinion that reflect individuality are crucial to maintaining a spiritually healthy nation.

**23. Never Alone.** When the masses are not loyal to Hashem and His Torah, the Torah leader sees himself responsible and does whatever he can to bring the stray members back into the fold. When a Jew is all alone he is spiritually vulnerable. Everything possible must be done to bring him back to his spiritual home.