

From Darkness to Light, From Slavery to Redemption

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The story of the Egyptian exile, recounted in *Sefer Shemot*, marks the commencement of a new period in the history of *Bnei Yisrael*, which culminates in their miraculous redemption, the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and the building of the Mishkan. This episode, however, had already begun at the conclusion of *Sefer Bereshit*, when Jacob's family descended to Egypt in chapter 46. Since all of the members of the patriarch's extended family were counted at that juncture, Rashi questions why there is a necessity in the first six verses of *Shemot* to enumerate them once again. Later medieval commentators, such as Rashbam and Ramban, presume that the repetition is a literary device to guide the reader to establish the thematic connection between the earlier episodes in *Bereshit* and the beginning of *Shemot*, where the active stages of exile are now implemented. Citing a midrashic interpretation, Rashi, however, assigns intrinsic significance to this recapitulation, viewing the repetition as *Hashem's* second counting of *Bnei Yisrael* as a display of His profound love for His people. In counting them by number and by name, *Hashem* expresses his double affection for them, as individuals and as members of a collective nation.

Even though Scripture has already enumerated them by name while they were living, it again enumerates them when it tells us of their deaths, thus showing how dear they were to Hashem. For they are compared to the stars, which Hashem also brings out and brings in by number and by name, as it is stated, "He brings out their host by number; He calls them each by name."

Rashi, Shemot 1:1

אף על פי שמנאן בחייהן בשמותן, חזר ומנאן במיתתן [אחר מיתתן], להודיע חבתן שנמשלו לכוכבים, שמוציאן ומכניסן במספר ובשמותם, שנאמר (ישעיהו מ כו) המוציא במספר צבאם לכולם בשם יקרא:
רש"י שמות א:א

In order to elaborate on this message, the midrash compares this event to the counting of the stars, which are enumerated in a similar fashion when they are brought out in the evening and brought in at dawn. The implication of this analogy is that while the beginning of *Shemot* paints a bleak picture concerning the destiny of Jacob's family which is entering into the darkness of

exile, they are like the stars. Their light is only hidden from view, but it will shine once again with the fulfillment of the divine promise of redemption and the establishment of the nation of Israel.

How will the “light” be discovered within the darkness of *galut*? This will be achieved through the able guidance of a leader, a savior, who personifies light itself: Moshe Rabbeinu. When Moshe is born, the Torah relates, “וַתֵּרָא אִתּוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא” (She saw that he was good) [Shemot 2:2]. Questioning the unique “goodness” that this newborn possesses which stands out among others, for generally all mothers consider their infants to be “good” in their eyes, Rashi applies a midrashic explanation, that when he was born, the house filled with light. Clarifying the intent of this statement, Ramban analyzes that Moshe’s mother discerned a special aura about this child, knowing intuitively that he would be saved from Pharaoh’s decree to kill all the newborn males and that he would be destined for greatness.

The midrashic source for Rashi’s explanation correlates “טוב” with the light of the first day of creation: “וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאֹר כִּי טוֹב - Hashem saw the light that it was good” [Bereshit 1:4]. While all of creation is designated as “טוב,” Rashi focuses on this first of all creations, paralleling the birth of Moshe to that light which would penetrate the thick darkness that enveloped the world initially [Bereshit 1:2]. Moshe represents the new beginning that would pierce the darkness of *galut*, rejuvenate the families of *Bnei Yisrael*, and lead them to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai. This culminating event has been anticipated since the creation of the world, as Rashi notes in his commentary on the first *pasuk* of *Sefer Bereshit*: “בראשית- בשביל התורה . . . בשביל ישראל”: The world was created for the sake of *Am Yisrael* who would eventually fulfill the Torah and mitzvot.

In his commentary on Rashi, the Maharal elaborates upon the parallel between Moshe’s birth and the creation of the world. Noting that the narrative in *Shemot*, chapter two, does not identify Moshe’s parents by name, the Maharal asserts:

Moshe was designated [to bring about] the redemption from the six days of creation; [therefore] his parentage was not essential by him.

Maharal, Shemot 1:15

משה היה מתוקן לגאולה מששת ימי
בראשית- לא היו אבותיו עיקר אצלו.
גור אריה שמות א:טו

The absence of names shifts the reader’s focus to Moshe himself, highlighting, in the Maharal’s view, that his divine mission as a redeemer of Israel was preordained from creation, regardless of the identities of his parents.

The profound implication of the juxtaposition between Moshe’s birth and the light of the first day of creation becomes apparent through the commentators’ understanding of the uniqueness of this first light. As Rashi explains, this light was not the physical light that shines forth from the luminaries, which were created on the fourth day. It was a spiritual, divine light, which was hidden for the righteous in the future.

Hashem saw that the wicked were unworthy of using the light. He therefore set it apart, reserving it for the righteous in the future.

Rashi, Breishit 1:4

ראהו שאינו כדאי להשתמש בו
רשעים והבדילו לצדיקים לעתיד לבא.
רש"י בראשית א:ד

Abarbanel, however, interprets that this hidden light is not reserved only for the far distant future, but is brought forth and “shines upon” select individuals at certain periods throughout Jewish history in times of need.

This light was hidden so that Hashem may use it in times of need for those whom He loves and who observe His mitzvot, according to what His wisdom determines.

Abarbanel, end of Parshat Pekudei

נגנז אותו האור כדי להשתמש בו ה' בעתות
הצורך לאוהביו ולשומרי מצוותיו כפי מה
שתגזר חכמתו
אברבנל סוף פרשת פקודי

Therefore, when Moshe's birth caused the house to fill completely with light, one may understand that *Hashem* enveloped Moshe with a special divine light, which would dissipate the darkness that surrounded *Bnei Yisrael* in the Egyptian exile. It is this divine light, says Abarbanel, which later radiated from Moshe when he descended Mt. Sinai with the *luchot* in his hands. [Shemot 34:29-35].

The Light of Fire

The motif of light is continued in another scene involving Moshe as he is initiated into his role as a national leader, but it is now revealed in the form of fire. While Moshe sees a bush ablaze with fire without being consumed, the reader is apprised that an angel of *Hashem* appeared to him in a blaze of fire from within the bush. [Shemot 3:2]. Although there is disagreement among commentators as to whether the angel was itself in the form of fire or only appeared from within a fire, the essential point is that the medium of fire is chosen for this divine manifestation.

Midrashic interpretations on this scene expose a double symbolism surrounding the image of the fire in this context. Fire not only has the power to give light and heat, but it has the power to destroy and consume. Questioning why *Hashem* chose this unusual means for a divine revelation, the midrash answers:

Because Moshe was pondering that perhaps the Egyptians would succeed in destroying Israel, Hashem showed him a fire that burns but does not consume. He said to him, "Just as the bush burns in fire and is not consumed, so, too, the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel."

Shemot Rabbah 2:5

לפי שהיה מחשב בלבו ואומר שמא יהיו
המצריים מכלין את ישראל, לפיכך הראהו
הקב"ה אש בוערת ואיננו אוכל, א"ל כשם
שהסנה בוער באש ואיננו אוכל, כך
המצריים אינן יכולין לכלות את ישראל
שמות רבה ב:ה

The image of fire represents the destructive forces of Egypt the persecutor, which is described as an iron crucible (כור ברזל) in Devarim 4:20. *Hashem* reassures Moshe that ultimately, the fire of Egypt will not succeed in destroying Israel.¹⁰⁹

Hashem intimates to Moshe: Fire will be fought with Fire. The fire, representing the divine presence, will combat the fire of Egypt, the thorniness of the *sneh* of Egypt, through the

¹⁰⁹ Similarly, the *sneh*, the thorn bush, represents the symbol of suffering and affliction. Therefore, Rashi explains that *Hashem* appears from within this tree in order to send His nation the message that He is with them in their suffering. [Rashi, Shemot 3:2].

mediation of Moshe,¹¹⁰ who himself is the embodiment of light. Moshe's light will push back the fire of Egypt; his light will prevail to ensure the *geulah*.

Redemption, however, does not come easily. It is a process requiring preparation. How will *Bnei Yisrael* achieve redemption, not only in body but in mind and soul? How can the light of redemption pierce the deep recesses of the soul of Israel which is languishing in the darkness of exile?

On the verge of redemption, *Hashem* commands *Bnei Yisrael* with the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon [Shemot 12:2], and, as Rashi explains, Moshe is perplexed.

Moses was perplexed regarding the Molad (the exact moment when begins) the new moon- how much of it must be visible before it is proper to consecrate it as a new moon. Hashem therefore pointed it out to him in the sky with a "finger" and said to him, "Behold when you see it like this, consecrate it." And how did He show it to him, for He would only speak to Moshe during the daytime. . . but, when it was close to sunset, this portion was told to him; He showed him with the coming of darkness.

Rashi, Shemot 12:2

נתקשה משה על מולד הלבנה
באיזו שיעור תראה ותהיה ראיה
לקדש, והראה לו באצבע את
הלבנה ברקיע, ואמר לו כזה ראה
וקדש. וכיצד הראהו, והלא לא היה
מדבר עמו אלא ביום ... אלא סמוך
לשקיעת החמה נאמרה לו פרשה
זו, והראהו עם חשכה:
רש"י שמות יב:ב

Why is Moshe bewildered about this mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon? Moshe exemplifies the symbol of light; he saw *Hashem* through a clear vision and during the daytime. Moshe perceived that in order to bring about the state of redemption, all darkness needed to be erased, and light needs to fill its void completely. *Hashem*, however, responds that redemption can only be accomplished if one sanctifies the light, but the light that originates from the darkness.¹¹¹

Am Yisrael needs to remember the humble origins of its greatness, how it emerged from the darkness of exile into the light of freedom. The darkness must be consecrated by looking for the small speck of light within the darkness. As time progresses, the light spreads and saturates. But, the moon's light is cyclical. Eventually, the light wanes, and the darkness prevails, until the light is made visible again. *Hashem* teaches *Am Yisrael* that when darkness seems to predominate in different periods throughout Jewish history, they must continue to search for the light. They must remember their suffering, but this memory should not serve as an obstacle; it is a stepping-stone for the bright future that lies ahead. The collective memory of the past acts as a bridge to the future. *Am Yisrael's* new beginning is characterized by acknowledging the darkness and then searching for that small fragment of light which breaks through the darkness.

Accordingly, in order to be redeemed, *Hashem* demands that *Am Yisrael* demonstrate absolute and unconditional loyalty to Him through the fulfillment of the commandment of the *Korban*

¹¹⁰ Accordingly, in an extension of the symbolism of this scene, Rashi expounds that just as the bush fulfills its divine mission and is not harmed by the fire, so, too, Moshe is assured that he will fulfill his divine mission to Pharaoh and emerge unscathed, succeeding in bringing about the redemption of his nation.

¹¹¹ This can perhaps explain why so many of the mitzvot on *Pesach* take place at night, such as matza and sippur yetziat Mitzrayim.

Pesach. To appreciate how this sacrifice serves as a prerequisite for redemption, one must analyze the symbolism of the rituals involved.

The Bein Ha'arbaim: The In Between Time

The *Korban Pesach* is slaughtered "bein ha'arbaim - an "in-between time" which is neither fully day nor completely night. As Rashi explains,¹¹²

The period beginning at six hours and forward is called bein ha'arbaim because the sun then inclines in the direction of the place of its setting to become darkened. It appears to me that the language of bein ha'arbaim refers to the hours between the darkening of the day and the darkening of the night. The word, erev, is an expression for gloom and darkness, as in Isaiah 24:11, "All joy is darkened"

Rashi, Shemot 12:6

משש שעות ולמעלה קרוי בין הערבים, שהשמש נוטה לבית מבואו לערוב. ולשון בין הערבים נראה בעיני אותן שעות שבין עריבת היום לעריבת הלילה, עריבת היום בתחלת שבע שעות מכי ינטו צללי ערב (ירמיהו ו ד), ועריבת הלילה בתחילת הלילה. ערב לשון נשף וחשך, כמו (ישעיהו כד יא) ערבה כל שמחה: רש"י שמות יב:ו

The *Korban Pesach* is slaughtered during an ambiguous period of time within the twenty four hour cycle; it is a time that hovers between day and night, between light and darkness. In order to elucidate further this understanding of "bein ha'arbaim," Rashi cites a *pasuk* from the book of Isaiah, which applies the meaning of *erev* in a figurative manner. Since the reader of the Torah surely knows the meaning of *erev* from the creation story, one wonders how this supporting text from Isaiah clarifies the import of the timing of the *Korban Pesach*, especially since that chapter in Isaiah does not speak about redemption, but highlights the mourning and grief which Israel will endure during its suffering in exile.

On the threshold of redemption, *Am Yisrael* hovers between darkness and light. This is not a time of complete light, but a time of confusion and ambiguity. *Hashem* confronts His people and challenges them to decide where their loyalties lie once and for all. Will they look for the light and set their sights on a bright, new future, or will they remain steeped in the darkness of exile and assimilation?

Hashem stipulates that if Israel performs the *Korban Pesach*, then He will fulfill "ופסחתי" (12:13). What is the definition of that term?

I will have mercy... and I say it refers to leaping and jumping ... as it says (1Kings 18:21) "How long will you continue to jump between two posts?"

Rashi, Shemot 12:13

ופסחתי – וחמלתי ... ואני אומר כל פסיחה לשון דלוג וקפיצה ... כן (מלכים א' יח כא) פוסחים על שתי הסעיפים ... רש"י שמות יב:יג

In order to support his interpretations, Rashi cites a text in which Eliyahu challenges *Bnei Yisrael* of his time at Mt. Carmel. Eliyahu confronts the people with the moment of decision, chastising them that they are leaping between two loyalties, a condition that can no longer persist. They must choose between *Hashem* or *Baal*. In a similar fashion, Rashi intimates that on the eve of *Yetziat*

¹¹² Some of the following insights on Rashi's commentary were taught to me by Rav Daniel Epstein.

Mitzrayim, Bnei Yisrael have not demonstrated steadfast loyalty to *Hashem*. They exist figuratively in a state of confusion, *bein ha'arbaim*, and the time has come to prove that they intend to follow *Hashem* and his mitzvot. In turn, *Hashem* asserts that if Israel performs the *Korban Pesach*, He will have mercy over them, "skipping over" the strict standard of justice in order to redeem them.

While the animals of all sacrifices must be unblemished, in this sacrifice, Israel is commanded to take the paschal lamb four days prior to its slaughter and to keep watch over it. [Shemot 12:6]. *Hazal* seek out the profound significance of this unusual aspect of the Pesach sacrifice.

R. Matya b. Cheres explained (based on Ezek. 16): "And I passed over and I saw you and behold, it was a time of love": the time had arrived to fulfill God's promise to Abraham that his children would be redeemed. But, they did not have commandments to perform in order to be redeemed, as it is stated, "You were naked" - naked from all commandments. *Hashem* gave them two commandments to perform so that they could be redeemed: the blood of the *Korban Pesach* and the blood of the circumcision. Therefore, the Paschal animal is taken four days prior to its slaughter, for reward is only gained through action. *R. Eliezer ha-Kapar*, however, responded: Did not Israel have four commandments which they performed, that make them more than worthy? For they were not promiscuous; they did not speak maliciously; they did not change their names or their language. If so, why did they have to take the Paschal animal four days before its slaughter? This is because Israel was steeped in the idolatry of Egypt, and the sin of idolatry is weighed against all of the commandments. Therefore, Moshe said to them, "Pull your hands from idolatry and cleave to the commandments" (12:21).

Mekhilta Bo 5

היה רבי מתיא בן חרש אומר הרי הוא אומר ואעבור עליך ואראך והנה עתך עת דודים (יחזקאל טז:ז). הגיע שבועתו שנשבע הקב"ה לאברהם שיגאל את בניו ולא היה בידם מצות שיתעסקו בהם כדי שיגאלו שנאמר שדים נכונו ושערך צמח ואת ערום ועריה וגו' (שם טז:ז) ערום מכל מצות נתן להם הקדוש ברוך הוא שתי מצות דם פסח ודם מילה שיתעסקו בהם כדי שיגאלו ... לכך הקדים הכתוב לקיחתו של פסח לשחיטתו ד' ימים שאין נוטלין שכר אלא על ידי מעשה רבי אליעזר הקפר ברבי אומר וכי לא היה בידם של ישראל ארבע מצות שאין כל העולם כדאי בהם שלא נחשדו על העריות. ולא על לשון הרע ולא שנו את שמם. ולא שנו את לשונם ... ומפני מה הקדים לקיחתו של פסח לשחיטתו ד' ימים לפי שהיו ישראל שטופין בע"ז במצרים וע"ז שקולה כנגד כל המצות ... אמר להם משכו ידיכם מע"ז והדבקו במצות
מכילתא פרשת בא פרשה ה

Hazal indicate that while *Bnei Yisrael* retained some aspects of their tradition and heritage, nevertheless, they also assimilated to the idolatrous forms of worship in Egypt, particularly the worship of the sheep (as noted by Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:46). The foreign influence on the religious ways of Israel is evident as well in Ezekiel, 20:7, which indicates that *Bnei Yisrael* did not abandon the corrupt ways of Egyptian idolatry.¹¹³

Accordingly, when Moshe communicates the mitzvah of the *Korban Pesach* to *Bnei Yisrael*, he modifies *Hashem's* original wording and states, "Pull and take for yourselves a sheep - משכו וקחו [Shemot 12:21]. Since the act of pulling can be accomplished in one of two directions, toward or away, Moshe reiterates that now is the time to decide the direction in which they want

¹¹³ Similarly, see *Shemot Rabbah*, 1:8, which indicates that Israel did not perform the mitzvah of circumcision after Joseph died. Compare as well *Shemot Rabbah* 15:4, where *Hashem* asserts that only because of the patriarchs' merits was Israel redeemed.

to go: pull away from the sheep, the symbol of Egyptian idolatry, by transforming it into a mitzvah, a symbol which demonstrates loyalty to Hashem through the offering of this sacrifice.

If Israel performs its own act of taking of this sheep with the intent of demonstrating absolute devotion to Hashem, then Hashem will carry out a reciprocal act of taking, as promised to Moshe:

I will take you to me as a nation, and I will be to you a God | וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעַם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים
Shemot 6:7 | שְׁמוֹת ו: ז

With the active demonstration of their intent to commit themselves completely to Hashem, Israel can cross the threshold, leaving behind the darkness of exile and embarking on a new path as the chosen nation.

The symbol of light, in the form of fire, reappears at the culmination of the redemption, the giving of the Torah.

Mt. Sinai was all in smoke, for Hashem had come down upon it in fire | וְהָרַם סִינַי עָשָׁן כִּלּוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ
Shemot 19:18 | שְׁמוֹת יט: יח

And the sight of the Glory of Hashem was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain | וּמֵרָאָה כְבוֹד ה' בְּאֵשׁ אֲכָלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָר
Shemot 24:17 | שְׁמוֹת כד: יז

The goal of redemption is not only physical freedom, but ultimately, it is for the purpose of becoming Hashem's servants, in order to fulfill the Torah- the luminary *par excellence*, which lights the way of Am Yisrael to fulfill their mission as the chosen nation, as was declared by Hashem to Moshe at the sight of the burning bush.

And He said: For I will be with you and this is the sign that I have sent you: When you will bring the nation out of Egypt, you will serve Hashem on this mountain. | וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֲהִיָּה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי
Shemot 3:12 | אֲנִי כִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם
תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים קִיָּם עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה:
שְׁמוֹת ג: יב

Explaining Hashem's intent, Ramban clarifies that the incontrovertible sign of Moshe's success in fulfilling his mission will be when he sees the fire smoking on top of Mt. Sinai. That very sight which Moshe will behold at the giving of the Torah will remind him of the fire of the burning bush. Only then will he understand that the climax of redemption has been achieved.

Nevertheless, Ramban indicates in his introduction to *Sefer Shemot* that in actuality, the process of redemption was not completed until the building of the Mishkan in the latter part of *Shemot*.

The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the Glory of God filled the Tabernacle | וַיִּכַס הָעָנָן אֶת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' מְלֵא
Shemot 40:34 | אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן:
שְׁמוֹת מ: לד

The redemption is complete only when *Hashem* rests His *Shekhinah* among *Bnei Yisrael*, returning His nation to the spiritual heights of the patriarchs and experiencing His constant and open presence. As Ramban declares,

Now the exile did not end until [Israel] returned to their place and they were restored to the [spiritual] heights of their forefathers. Yet, when they arrived at Mt. Sinai and built the Tabernacle and the Holy One Blessed is He returned and manifested His presence among them, then they returned to the high stature of their forefathers . . . and they were considered redeemed.

Ramban, Introduction to Shemot

והנה הגלות איננו נשלם עד יום שובם
אל מקומם ואל מעלת אבותם
ישובו... וכשבאו אל הר סיני ועשו
המשכן ושב הקב"ה והשרה שכינתו
ביניהם אז שבו אל מעלות אבותם ...
ואז נחשבו גאולים
רמב"ן שמות הקדמה

The history of *Am Yisrael* is progressive, but in actuality, it is also circular. The pinnacle of *Am Yisrael's* existence is when we achieve once again the spiritual stature of the *Avot* and *Hashem* “resides among us” continuously, as it says, “Make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell within them.” [Shemot 25:8]

What is the message that we can learn for our survival in *Galut* today? In his commentary on *Shir ha-Shirim*, which we read on Pesach, Rashi expounds how Shlomo Ha-Melech reflects allegorically upon the relationship between *Hashem* and *Bnei Yisrael* in the periods of exile throughout Jewish history. In *galut*, Israel exclaims: "שחורה אני ונאווה" [Song of Songs, 1:5]. As Rashi interprets, Israel declares to the nations of the world: We may be blackened by our sins that keep us in exile, but the darkness of our appearance is only skin-deep. Underneath, we are glorious because we have the enduring merit of having accepted the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

Rashi elaborates that Israel asks within the dialogue of *Shir ha-Shirim* how to survive the torment and darkness of exile, and it receives the answer that it must present itself to the world as a "חומה" [Song of Songs, 8:9], a wall, steadfast in its belief and loyalty to *Hashem*. For if Israel acts like a door ("ואם דלת היא" - 8:9), which swings back and forth on its hinges, wavering in its commitment to Torah and mitzvot, then it will leave open the possibility that all will be lost through assimilation. When faced with this challenge, Israel responds fervently: "אני חומה" (8:10). Israel is that “wall,” which demonstrates its consistent devotion to *Hashem* through prayer and Torah learning in the confines of exile. This persistent loyalty to *Hashem* will eventually earn Israel the merit of the final redemption in the future, when our nation will emerge for the last time “from darkness to light, from servitude to redemption.”