

THE MOMENT OF THE DECREE

by Shlomo Katz

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Shemos

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Today's Learning:

Uktzin 3:9-11

Begin the new Mishnah cycle on Monday

Orach Chaim 38:1-3

Daf Yomi: Yoma 5

Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 20

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l introduces the Book of Shmot as follows: "With this second book, the history of the Jews as a nation starts. We are led out of the history of the individuals and families into that of the Nation by a list of those men [i.e., the twelve sons of Yaakov] who are already known to us as the "main stem" of the Jewish people. It is out of these men, with their different individualities and characteristics, that the Jewish Nation developed. But there was one basic trait which they all had in common, and this formed the foundation of Jewish nationality: 'Each one with his household came with Yaakov' [Shmot 1:1].

"Later on, when the national body, dismembered by Pharaoh's mishandling, appeared to lie helplessly on the ground as a welcome feast for the vultures of history (as it had appeared in the prophetic vision of the ancestor [i.e., Avraham - see Bereishit 15:11]), and, at the call of G-d, was to

arise 'in its blood' [Yechezkel 16:6 - i.e., through the mitzvah of milah] to immortal life, G-d began the building up of His people on the rock-like foundation of 'homes' - 'a lamb for a household' [Shmot 12:4 - i.e., the Korban Pesach] - on the bond of children to parents and parents to children. And here we are told that this foundation of the immortal People of G-d - even if it had been forcibly and violently crushed and disturbed [by Pharaoh, as described in this parashah and in various midrashim] at the time of the redemption - was implanted in them when the Children of Israel originally moved down into the Egyptian womb, out of which, through suffering and woe, they were to be born into a nation. (Commentary on the Torah)

"These are the names of the sons of Yisrael who came to Egypt, with Yaakov, each man and his household came." (1:1)

R' Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l (1891-1982; Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav) taught: There is a difference between the name "Yisrael" and the name "Yaakov." When the angel told the patriarch, "Your name will no longer be called 'Yaakov,' rather 'Yisrael'," he was not changing the patriarch's name but, rather, supplementing it with a new level. [Generally, "Yisrael" refers to the Jews on a more advanced spiritual level than "Yaakov."]

In this parashah, we begin to encounter different names for both the Jewish people and for G-d. The Torah also has different names. Indeed, Chazal say, "The Holy One, Blessed Be He, Yisrael and the Torah, are all one," and one manifestation of this relationship is that each of these entities has seventy names [See Ba'al Ha'turim to Bemidbar 11:16; Bemidbar Rabbah 14:12]. The essential nature of the Jewish people is to cling to G-d [through the Torah. The different names that G-d, Israel and the Torah each have allude to different aspects of the relationship between the three.] "You are the ones who cleave to Hashem, your G-d" [Devarim 4:4] - this is the essence of our existence.

"You are sons to Hashem, your G-d" [Devarim 14:1] - this fact begins to be revealed in this parashah. There is movement toward the appearance of a G-dly nation in the world, and the names of Hashem's nation begin to appear. The revelation of the nation of Israel and of Hashem are two sides of one coin; therefore, we see here the revelation of Hashem's Name to the world. This happens through Moshe, who asks (Shmot 3:13), "When they say to me, 'What is His Name?' what shall I say?" (Sichot Harav Zvi Yehuda: Shmot p.20)

"He said to his people, 'Behold! The people, the Children of Israel, are more numerous and stronger than we [literally: 'from us']." (1:9)

R' Shmuel di Ozeida z"l (16th century; author of Midrash Shmuel) explains that Pharaoh wanted to make his evil plot more palatable to the Egyptians. He said: "All these years, Yosef ruled over us and protected his people while they multiplied and grew stronger. Who is to blame for this? We are; it is

_'from us' _! Wouldn't we have shown sufficient gratitude to Yosef if we had just released him from jail, rather than appointing him to be the viceroy?! Didn't we strengthen the Jews by mourning Yaakov for 70 days?! Now, therefore, it is time to turn the tables." (Derashot Rabbi Shmuel di Ozeida)

"But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them; rather, they caused the boys to live." (1:17)

R' Chaim Elazar Shapira z"l (died 1937; the "Munkatcher Rebbe", also known as the "Minchas Elazar") explained this verse in light of the following story involving the early chassidic master, R' Elimelech of Lyzhensk z"l:

At some point late in the 18th century, the Austrian government decreed that beginning on the following January 1st, no man could marry until he had completed army service. It also was decreed that applicants for marriage licenses would have to pass a test of their proficiency in German. Obviously, these decrees were devastating for the Jewish community, and R' Elimelech prayed for hours on end that the decrees be revoked. Nevertheless, he sensed that his prayers had not been answered.

It was R' Elimelech's custom to sleep from 10 p.m. to midnight every night, and then to arise for Tikkun Chatztot, i.e., to cry over the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash. As he lay down to sleep on December 31st before the decree was to take effect, he realized with a heavy heart that G-d's Attribute of Strict Justice would soon be brought to bear against the Jewish people.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in town, several of R' Elimelech's disciples had raised money to marry an orphaned bride and groom, and they had scheduled the wedding ceremony to take place at midnight, the precise moment when such a ceremony would become illegal. Unaware of this, R' Elimelech awakened at midnight, as was his wont, and he immediately sensed that the Attribute of Strict Justice had retreated and had been replaced by the Attribute of Kindness. The Heavenly decrees which were manifested through the government's decrees had been rescinded!

R' Elimelech sent for his students to share the good news, but they were not in their lodgings. When, eventually, they were found dancing in the wedding hall, R' Elimelech understood that the disciples' determination to defy the decrees had succeeded where his holy prayers had failed. Their mitzvah of marrying two orphans precisely at the moment when the decree was to have taken effect "prevented" G-d from carrying out the decree.

Similarly, explains the Minchas Elazar, "the midwives . . . did not do _as the king of Egypt had spoken to them_; rather, they caused the boys to live." "As," i.e., "at the exact time," Pharaoh had said the decree to kill the newborn boys was to have taken effect, they did not obey. Rather, at that very hour, they defiantly caused the boys to live and even gave the boys milk and warm blankets. In this way, they prevented the decree from taking effect. (Divrei Torah I, No. 33)

"So said Hashem, the G-d of Yisrael, 'Send out My people . . .'

"Pharaoh replied, 'Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice?'

"So they said, 'The G-d of the Hebrews happened upon us . . .'" (5:1)

Why does Pharaoh seem to know the "G-d of the Hebrews," but he does not know "Hashem, the G-d of Yisrael"? R' Yehuda Leib Maimon z"l (1876-1962; rabbi of several European towns and Israel's first Minister of Religious Affairs) explains as follows:

Rashi to Bereishit 12:6 writes that Eretz Yisrael originally belonged to Noach's son, Shem, ancestor of the Jews and other "Semitic" peoples. We also are taught that there, Shem and his grandson, Ever (from whom the word "Ivri"/"Hebrew" originates), taught about The One G-d. In Avraham's time, however, the land was conquered by the Canaanites, descendants of Shem's brother, Cham.

R' Maimon writes: The Egyptians knew Canaan as the "Land of the Ivrim" (as Yosef calls it in Bereishit 40:15), and they therefore had heard of the "G-d of the Ivrim." Indeed, when Hashem first commanded Moshe to appear before Pharaoh, He did not tell Moshe to identify himself as a messenger of the G-d of Yisrael. Rather, Hashem expressly told Moshe to speak to Pharaoh of the G-d of the Ivrim (Shmot 3:18). Only to the Jews was Moshe to mention the G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov (3:15). (Yisrael, Torah, Zion p.33)

Letters from Our Sages

Beginning this week, we replace our biography section with a new feature, excerpts from the correspondence of Torah scholars throughout the ages. The letters offered here will address a wide range of subjects, sometimes halachic, sometimes hashkafic (i.e. regarding our system of beliefs), and sometimes of historical interest, but, hopefully, always edifying. Each letter will be accompanied by a brief biographical, and, where necessary, historical, note.

We begin this series with an excerpt from a famous letter, the "Iggeret Ha'Ramban." The letter's author was the Torah commentator and Talmudist, R' Moshe ben Nachman ("Ramban/Nachmanides"), who was born in Gerona, Spain in 1194 and died in Akko, Eretz Yisrael in 1270. This letter was written from Eretz Yisrael to Ramban's adult son, Nachman, in Catalina, Spain in Ramban's last years. (The complete letter has been reprinted many times, including in English.)

"Heed, my son, the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the teachings of your mother" [Mishlei 1:8]. Accustom yourself, always, to speak gently to all people at all times, and you will thus be saved from anger, which is a bad trait that causes people to sin. Our rabbis z"l taught [Nedarim 22a], "When one becomes angry, all manners of Gehinnom attain power over him, as it is written [Kohelet 11:10], 'Banish anger from your heart and remove evil from your flesh.' [The gemara

continues:] The evil referred to here refers to Gehinnom, as it is written [Mishlei 16:4], 'The wicked are destined for the day of evil.'

"Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This quality is the best of all good traits, as it is written [Mishlei 22:4], 'On the heels of humility comes the fear of Hashem.' . . .

"After you think about these ideas [i.e., those set out above plus others omitted here due to space constraints], you will stand in awe of your Creator and will be guarded against sin. With these traits, you will be happy with your lot . . .

"Read this letter once a week, not less, in order to fulfill it and to always walk with it after G-d, so that you will succeed in your ways and merit the World-to-Come, which is hidden away for the righteous. On any day on which you read this letter, Heaven shall answer your heart's desire, forever - Amen, Selah!

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.
