

THE BOOK OF CHALLENGE AND TRIUMPH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The reading of the book of Shemot concludes this Shabat. The entire drama of the birth of the Jewish family as a nation is contained in the narrative portion of this book. In a series of almost unimaginable events, the Jews begin a golden exile in Egypt, which eventually turns into a nightmare of persecution and slavery. At great cost and staggering losses, the Jews are miraculously redeemed and a great leader, Moshe, appears to deliver them from Egyptian bondage. Once again miraculously saved from annihilation at Yam Suf the Jews come into the desert of Sinai. There they are sustained by heavenly manna and the waters of the well of Miriam. With great drama, the Torah is given to them at Mount Sinai. But with equal fanfare, the people worship a golden calf, a sin that affects all of the balance of Jewish history. Finally, the Jews construct an elaborate structure - a mishkan - that is to be the center of spiritual revelation to them. Aharon and his sons are chosen to be the kohanim - the priests - who are to serve in the mishkan and special garments are created for them to wear during their service in the mishkan. The book of Shemot ends with the spirit of the Lord, so to speak, descending into the confines of the mishkan and thereby challenging Israel to become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. Well, what are we to make of all of this series of bewildering and momentous events? How does this narrative affect us and guide our present and future course of action and behavior?

I think that we have here a pattern and outline of Jewish life throughout the ages. Just as the stories regarding our patriarchs and matriarchs that appeared in the book of Bereshith were seen by our rabbis as being the guideposts to all future Jewish history, so too the events of the book of Shemot are a further lesson as to the future of Israel throughout the ages. The illusion of "golden exiles," the impatience of the people of Israel with obstacles and challenges, the easy willingness to pursue golden calves and false ideals and currently popular gods, are all clearly outlined in the book of Shemot. The challenge of building a painfully difficult and intricately detailed house of spirituality is laid before us. Being the chosen people is to be seen as a constant challenge fraught with enmity from outside and weakness of spirit from within. The goal of having the presence of God's spirit, so to speak, within us individually, within our families and communities is clearly stated. The book of Shemot therefore becomes the book of all of us in all of our ages and climes, in all of our difficulties and triumphs. It is no wonder therefore that at the conclusion of our reading this book we invoke the blessing and challenge to ourselves *chazak chazak vnitchazeik* - be strong, be strong and strengthen others with us. Only in our inner strength and steadfast devotion to the Torah and its ideals will we see again the spirit of God, so to speak, resting within our camp and our hearts.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Text Copyright © 2006 by [Rabbi Berel Wein](#) and **[Torah.org](#)**