

Parshat Shemot Dvar Torah

What's in a name

Not only is the sefer we are opening this week called "Shemos - names", but it also enjoys several appellations itself. Of the lesser known labels, Ramban elucidates the title, "Sefer Geula - the book of redemption." Ramban in his introductory comments to Sefer Shemos, explains that the sefer does not merely tell a story that includes redemption. Rather the volume is entirely dedicated to redemption and its antecedents. In other words, redemption is not complete with the miraculous splitting of the sea even though our masters remain vanquished. Nor is redemption satisfied with the receiving of the Torah, despite the fact that it entirely transformed our anonymous and meaningless existence into a deliberate, elevated and missionized life. Jewish redemption is about coming back, regaining the ground of the Patriarchs, the coexistence with the spiritual, with all of its profound meaning and awesome responsibilities. That return only became real with the construction of the Mishkan, welcoming Jews to feel the closeness of Shechina. Thus the entire book describes redemption, with the last chapter describing Hashem residing in the Mishkan as the climactic completion to geula.

A different angle is offered by the Beha"g who simply calls this sefer "volume two." This is noteworthy because he does not refer to any of the other five volumes by their numerical position. To them he accedes their more descriptive labels with which we are familiar. That is why the Netziv in his introductory comments to Shemos dwells on this otherwise unremarkable title. He suggests that the Beha"g wants us to realize that at its core, Sefer Shemos is the inseparable sequel to Breishis in more ways than one. Shemos is not only the actualization of many of the patterns of Breishis but it gives purpose to all that has been recorded. Of course, the sequence of events from famine to displacement to a plagued Pharaoh to wealthy redemption comes to fruition. Of far more lasting significance is the choosing of our people, the revelation of Hashem's plans and practices, and the centrality of His place in this world, all of which are intimated in the medrashic comments on the word "Breishis", and all of which give purpose to creation. Consequently, it is Book Two that in fact makes Bereishis into Book Number One.

Yet isn't the most intriguing designation of this second book the name that we are most accustomed to, i.e. "Shemos"? Why should we refer to the entire narrative of the formation of our people as the "record of names"? Moreover, a correct translation of our pronunciation has us calling the sefer, "names of", a rather dangling title. Furthermore, the title becomes a reference to the list of Yaakov's children, a list whose seeming redundancy needs to be justified by our commentaries.

Rav Mordechai Druk, who for decades darshaned in five Yerushalmi shuls every Shabbos, intimates that Rashi is not only justifying the repetition of the names of Yaakov's family when he explains that this communicates Hashem's affection for us. Rather, Rashi also wants us to be continuously cognizant of that affection throughout our study of the trials and triumphs of exile and redemption. Hence, the name "Shemos" comes as a reminder or a guide to the study of volume two.

I believe that we can gain insight through another comment of the Netziv. With his typical sensitivity to the text, the Netziv points out that the list of names is not referring to Yaakov's sons, but rather to the tribes of which they are also symbols. More precisely, each name refers to an aspect of the Jewish people, each of which Yaakov had begun to describe in Parshas Vayechi, that the members of each shevet would inject into our people repeatedly. The pasuk reads, "These are the names of Bnei Yisroel that came to Egypt with Yaakov..." The Netziv reasons that were this a list of Yaakov's children, the Torah would call them the children of Yaakov and simply refer to him in the balance of the pasuk. By explicitly mentioning Yaakov in the end of the pasuk, the "Bnei Yisrael" in the opening phrase must refer to us as a people.

It follows that we have come to refer to this sefer as, "names of [our 12 distinct parts]". It therefore, seems to me that the name of the sefer, "Shemos", is one of the mandates of the galus therein described. Perhaps we are being instructed to be ever mindful throughout our diaspora wanderings that we are sorely missing so much of the vibrant colors of our people and the tapestry that can only come through the togetherness of all twelve stripes. That dangling unfinished title, "names of", refers to our avoda of galus, of maintaining the breadth of opportunities to do Hashem's will even as the strategies of survival will wisely focus us on one path at a time. Perhaps this title of the galus and redemption experience also refers to the avoda of doing our utmost to hold our brethren close to the missions and mesora of our roots, of keeping the family intact to the best of our efforts.

Finally, the opening **ספר שמות נדר** indicates its inseparability from the forgoing narrative, and starts the galus journey at the bedside of Yaakov where each son learns of his strengths and that of his brothers. Each son understands the contribution that they are being asked to make and how incomplete it will be if it is not supported by the blessings of all those in attendance. That journey finally came full circle when each shevet took up its position around the mishkan. It will circle around again when we each return to our tribal section of the Land of Israel, in which we will all find a well-suited home.

שבת שלום לכולם

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