Dedicated in loving memory of our parents

Ephraim and Harriet Grumet

אפרים בן יעקב דוד הכהן ז״ל
הענטשא בת שמחה ז״ל

Who raised us with a love of עם ישראל,
תורת ישראל *and* ארץ ישראל

Shelly and Barry Dorf
Lynn and Joel Mael

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Introduction

In the Torah scroll, five blank lines separate between one book and the next. On the one hand, each book stands alone, with its own style and tone, with its unique focus. On the other hand, all five books are joined in a single scroll – the sanctity of the Torah scroll depends on all five books appearing side by side in the proper sequence. The core ideas and themes which receive unique presentations in each of the five books are inseparably linked. To properly understand Exodus, we must place it in the context, first and foremost, of Genesis.

The bulk of Genesis describes its key heroes – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph – and, more importantly, their paths, which mark them as archetypal figures.[1] In the Bible, great characters are not born great; they achieve their status through a growth process in which they overcome challenges and obstacles.[2] Abraham must negotiate between the competing loyalties to family and God. Isaac struggles to carve his own path even as he lives in Abraham's shadow. Jacob learns to protect his dignity, to stop running from his problems, and to conduct himself

1. Technically, only the first three are identified as patriarchs. God speaks with them and formally includes them in the covenant.
2. See my work *Moses and the Path to Leadership* (Urim, 2014), 16–17.

with integrity. Joseph needs to learn humility, understand God's role in his life, and embrace the covenantal destiny of his people in their promised land.

As much as the lives of the individuals and their families are compelling on a human level, their stories are but part of a grand divine design. God created a world so that He could have meaningful interactions with humans, created in His image. That seemingly simple aspiration is repeatedly frustrated by human missteps resulting from the very fact that they are human.[3] Cain is banished from God's presence[4] and nine generations later God decides to start all over with one righteous man and his family, this time introducing some basic guidelines[5] for humanity in the hope that they will help people achieve their potential. That attempt, however, failed in a different direction. Instead of people abusing their ability to choose freely, as they did before the Great Confusion (commonly called the Flood), the crushing of human freedom in Babel required yet another divine intervention. With humanity divided by geography and language, God recognizes that His plan needs to be adjusted to accommodate the human side of humanity. Thus, Abraham is instructed to uproot himself and move to Canaan, where he will teach God's message of *tzedek* (righteousness) and *mishpat* (justice) to his family and the people he encounters, introducing humanity to Godliness.[6]

But a single individual is inadequate to become God's standard-bearer. What is required is a family, a clan, a nation which will hold fast together to bring God's message forward. Jacob, with the help of Joseph and Judah, builds a family which eventually bonds and stays together. That family will form the nucleus of the nation that will become God's partner,[7] and it – like Abraham – will need to be centered at the

3. See Gen. 6:3.
4. Gen. 4:14.
5. Gen. 9:1–7.
6. See Gen. 18:17–19. Genesis Rabba 54:6 describes Abraham's tent as the place where he welcomes guests, feeds them, and teaches them to bless God (rather than himself) for their food.
7. For a somewhat different articulation of this idea see *Haamek Davar*, introduction to Exodus.

crossroads of the world where it will be able to interact with and impact upon all three branches of Noah's descendants.

One of the fascinating features of Genesis is that God's presence dominates the opening of Genesis but slowly fades into the background as we progress through the book. The Creation, the Great Confusion, and the Dispersion from Babel all feature God as the prime mover. After He identifies Abram-Abraham as His partner, God shares the stage with that new partner. And while God is involved, speaking to Abraham, commanding him, entering into a covenant with him, there is a shift to focusing on human behavior rather than divine action. That shift continues into Isaac's life, where God speaks to him only twice and is involved behind the scenes in making Isaac successful, and it likewise persists through Jacob's tumultuous journeys. By the time we get to Joseph, He is completely silent – we, the readers, are aware of His presence only because the text tells us, but Joseph seems oblivious until he discovers God's workings behind the scenes.[8]

This brings us back to the five blank lines separating Exodus from Genesis. That space represents a fast-forward of an extended period of time – perhaps one or two or three hundred years – about which we know very little. Was Jacob's family still isolated in Goshen or did they spread out? Did they maintain a distinct identity as shepherds, or did they assimilate into Egyptian culture and society?[9] How long were they

8. This pattern will repeat itself in the latter books of the Bible. The initial battle in the conquest of the Promised Land has God miraculously bringing down the walls of Jericho, but from then on God recedes further and further into the background. The books of Samuel and Kings have intermittent overt interventions by God, evidenced especially by the lack of success of the prophets in bringing any awareness of God's involvement into the public and royal consciousness.

9. Varying sources take different positions regarding this. On the one hand we have Moses's family apparently living near enough to the royal palace that they can secrete him in a basket in the reeds. We also find a description of Israelite women asking for silver, gold, and clothing from their Egyptian neighbors and housemates (3:22). Later, the Israelites are instructed to eat the *pesaḥ* in their homes and mark the door frames with the blood of the sheep (12:7), again indicating that they had their own homes. Exodus Rabba 14:3 and 16:3 also describe the Israelites living among the Egyptians. A conflicting position is evidenced in 8:18, describing Israel as living in Goshen and hence being spared the wild beasts. When it comes to their spiritual

in Egypt before the slavery began? And together with the unknowns about the people, there is God's absence. Has God abandoned Jacob's family? Has God abandoned His covenant with the patriarchs with its focus on the special land? Has God given up on the people founded by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being His ambassadors to humanity?

These are the questions which drive the opening of Exodus. In fact, they drive all of Exodus. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant looms large, but there is another layer lurking just beneath the surface of – and sometimes peeking through – the entire saga of the liberation from Egyptian slavery. That hidden agenda, in which God seeks His national covenantal partners, slowly emerges and finally bursts forth as the central thrust of the story when Israel arrives at Mount Sinai and enters into a new covenant with God. Nurturing and negotiating that covenantal relationship closes the book with the construction of the Tabernacle along with the incident of the Golden Calf and its aftershocks.

Lest we think that it is just the modern reader imposing questions about the link between Genesis and Exodus, the opening chapters just about make those connections explicit. The opening five verses of Exodus are an abridged version of – including some of the same language as – the passage in Genesis 46:8–27. They both open with *Ve'eileh shemot benei Yisrael haba'im Mitzraima*, continue with a listing of those who descended to Egypt with Jacob (minus Joseph, who was already there), and close with the total count of seventy family members who ended up in Egypt. Following that (v. 7), the text describes the dramatic growth of the family as *paru vayishretzu vayirbu vayaatzmu bimeod meod, vatimalei haaretz otam*, language which echoes God's blessing to humanity in Creation (Gen. 1:28) and His subsequent blessings to Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1 and 9:7). The parallels continue into chapter 2 of Exodus (2:2), where Moses is described as *ki tov*, a phrase which reminds the reader of that same phrase which dominates the first chapter of Genesis.[10]

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stature, the Torah does not reveal much, but rabbinic literature does refer to this. On the one hand, the Zohar (*Yitro*) describes Israel as being on the forty-ninth level of impurity in Egypt (had they reached the fiftieth level, they would have been unredeemable), yet Exodus Rabba (1:28) praises Israel for not taking on Egyptian names, language, or dress, maintaining a distinct cultural identity.

10. Similarly, the first key turning point in Genesis is the Great Confusion, after which

There are many more such references, especially in the beginning of Exodus.[11] These parallels lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. One possibility is that Exodus is the genesis of Israel,[12] the story of how a family became a clan, the clan a nation, and the nation a holy people in covenant with God. A variation on that shifts the focus from the people to God – Exodus is where God's plan for creation and the desire to have a relationship with humanity is finally getting close to fulfillment. The difference between these two formulations is subtle, but significant. Is it the story of the formation of the Israelite nation or does it represent a path toward the ultimate completion of creation?[13] The first is particularistic, the second universal, and that is one of the tensions framing Exodus.

After all, if God really does care about all people, not just about His chosen ones, how are we to understand the seeming capriciousness of the plagues brought upon the Egyptians even after they urge Pharaoh to release Israel? The detail of those afflictions occupies more than a tenth of Exodus, including a description of God's actions in Egypt as

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God introduces the seven Noahide laws which are to guide humanity in its relationship with God. The centerpiece of Exodus is the Revelation at Sinai, where God introduces an updated version of those laws – the Ten Commandments – which serve as the foundation of Israel's relationship with God.

11. There are also instances of contrasts. For example, the ten generations following Noah saw the rapid expansion of humanity and the emergence of a populated world which seems to be the product of men begetting men – not a single woman is mentioned until Abram and his brother are described as marrying. That is contrasted with the opening chapter of Exodus, which describes the rapid expansion of the descendants of Israel and the land of Egypt being populated by the descendants of Israel as a result of the courageous midwives and the "vigorous" Hebrew women who manage to bear their children even before the midwives arrive. Similarly, the bulk of Genesis focuses on the three patriarchal figures, while the opening of Exodus emphasizes the mothering qualities of the midwives and of Moses's nurturing mother, sister, and adoptive mother.
12. See the introduction to Exodus by Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann.
13. Or perhaps it is both. God's plan for humanity cannot come to fruition without the Israelite nation as His partner, and the emergence of the Israelite nation is important inasmuch as they will be God's partner. This is much like the *Aleinu* prayer, in which the first paragraph celebrates the uniqueness of Israel while the second affirms that Israel's uniqueness is not an end unto itself but a means to God's ultimate hope for humanity.

making the Egyptians a "laughingstock" (10:2). Does that reflect a universalist-oriented God? That question is not a modern one; it is inherent in a careful reading of the text, and we find echoes of discomfort with the suffering of the Egyptians in a midrash which cites God rebuking the angels for wanting to join in Israel's song at the Reed Sea.[14]

Exodus introduces us to the birth of the nation of Israel, their slavery and liberation, their struggle to adapt to the dramatic transformation from a disorganized, oppressed people to an independent nation. It highlights their and God's struggle to establish, build, and maintain a meaningful relationship, one which will hopefully eventually bring them into sanctified partnership with God but seems hopelessly mired in the petty details and travails of daily life.

THE *MISHKAN*

Nearly a third of Exodus is dedicated to the design and construction of the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary Israel carried with them through their travels and which served them for nearly half a millennium, well into their entry into their promised land. Despite its significance as the *ohel moed*, literally, the tent in which God meets His terrestrial partners, the lengthy technical details of the plan are mind-numbing to most readers when they are first presented in chapters 25–31 and frustrating when they are repeated in chapters 35–40, as the Torah describes the actual construction. A quick survey of many of the traditional commentaries reveals that there is a lengthy stretch in that repetition for which the commentaries have absolutely nothing to add.

When we understand the Tabernacle in the context of God establishing a dwelling place, in Hebrew a *Mishkan*, among His partner nation, the details of that *Mishkan* reveal a significant amount of symbolic meaning about how God envisions the relationship with Israel. Even more, when we understand the nature of that *Mishkan* and its context in Exodus, it sheds a new light on the incident of the Golden Calf and

14. Sanhedrin 39b. This is a fascinating midrash. As angels are divine messengers incapable of independent thought, the desire of the angels is an expression of God's will. God wants to rejoice in the downfall of the Egyptians but cannot, as their demise reflects a failure in God's plan for their divine image to inform and direct their actions.

its aftermath (chapters 32–34), which seems to interrupt between the plan for constructing the *Mishkan* and its implementation. In fact, the interruption is not only in the textual narrative, but also in the nascent partnership between God and Israel. The entire vision for the *Mishkan* and what it represents is threatened by Israel's sin; there is the real possibility of a rupture between God and His people.

It is in that light that the actual construction of the *Mishkan* takes on new meaning and significance. Every detail, even if described earlier, needs to be described again, and every nuanced difference between the plan and its implementation takes on profound significance. When we include the full narrative of the Golden Calf and its aftermath as an integral part of the *Mishkan*, it turns out that this occupies nearly half of the book of Exodus and deserves substantive study.

A TALE OF TWO COVENANTS

Much of the first half of Exodus is almost expected. After all, God established a covenant with Abraham, which was passed on through Isaac and Jacob. In that covenant, known as the Covenant Between the Pieces (Gen. 15:9–21), God informs Abraham that his descendants will be strangers in a foreign land where they will be subjected to oppressive slavery for an extended period of time, after which they will be freed with great wealth and returned to their ancestral land. That covenant is referenced explicitly at the end of Exodus 2 and again in God's speech to Moses at the beginning of Exodus 6. Fulfillment of that covenant would involve the liberation of Israel and their direct transit into their promised land.

That, however, is not the trajectory of Exodus. The trip from Egypt to Canaan is delayed, most significantly by a detour to Mount Sinai, where God offers Israel a new covenant. Unclear to the reader is the relationship between those two covenants. Is the latter built on the former or does it stand independent of it? What would have happened had Israel rejected that second covenant? Does their violation of that second covenant with the Golden Calf annul the patriarchal one?

An initial analysis suggests that the two covenants are dramatically different. The first is about what God will do for Israel – it is one-sided. All Abraham's descendants need to do are endure their fate and await God's deliverance. By contrast, the second covenant is two-sided.

It requires Israel's initial acceptance and demands adherence to a set of rules and code of behavior. In contrast to the Abrahamic covenant of fate, this is a covenant of chosen destiny.[15]

MOSES

No discussion of Exodus is complete without a serious exploration of its hero, Moses.[16] Moses is unquestionably the most central human figure in Exodus, and he will remain the Torah's most important character through the end of Deuteronomy. We hear about him from before his birth until his death. He is the prototype of the unwilling prophet who eventually embraces his mission with extraordinary passion. We are witness to his passionate defenses of and commitment to both God and his people. As I noted earlier, the most significant heroes in the biblical tradition are those who grow into greatness, grappling with challenges along the way and growing from both their successes and failures. Moses is no exception. Born auspiciously, saved audaciously, raised in Pharaoh's house, he shows promise as a popular savior only to disappear soon afterward into a quiet pastoral life as a Midianite shepherd (imagine – an Egyptian prince serving as a shepherd, a profession despised by the Egyptians[17]). When approached by God, he seems genuinely uninterested in getting involved, and when forced into the task only to see it fail, brazenly confronts God. Exodus portrays Moses alternating between challenging God and representing Him, between faithful oracle of God's message and creative interpreter of that message, and between frustrated leader of a difficult people and their staunchest advocate.

As much as Moses is described in Numbers (12:7) as "loyal" to God, in Deuteronomy (34:10) as prophetically unique, and in Joshua (1:1) as God's servant, there is little indication in Moses's early life of loyalty, prophecy, or servitude. Moses is independent. A careful reading of the Torah text reveals a Moses who defies God, evades God,

15. This framing was first articulated by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in an address he delivered in 1956 and was later published as an essay titled "Kol Dodi Dofek" in *BeSod HaYaḥid VeHaYaḥad*, ed. Pinhas Peli (Orot, 1976).

16. For a more extensive examination of Moses, see my work *Moses and the Path to Leadership*.

17. See Gen. 43:33 and 46:34.

challenges God, changes God's instructions, and forces God's hand. It will also reveal multiple aspects of who Moses is and, more importantly, who he becomes. Ironically, the same Moses whose antinomian streak balks against human law is the one who brings God's law to the people and rails against its violation.

Why does God choose him, and does He stick with Moses despite Moses's rebellious streak or because of it? How does a man with seemingly no connection to the Hebrews in Egypt and no apparent spirituality become the most important figure in forging a national identity for Israel and bringing them into a covenantal bond with the Divine, enabling God's hope for humanity to get that much closer to fruition?

MOSES'S INITIATIVE

One of the ideas which will emerge is that Moses is not simply a passive loudspeaker for God's message but is an active participant in delivering that message, to the extent that he repeatedly challenges God, modifies the message delivered to Israel, and takes his own initiative. While there are ample examples where that will be readily apparent, there are other places where it is open to interpretation. For example, God's version of the commandment regarding consecration of the firstborns is brief, covering but a single verse (13:2); Moses's version of that spans six verses (13:11–16) and adds many elements which are not even hinted to in God's command. Did God say all those details to Moses but the Torah chose not to record them, or did Moses add them on his own? Nahmanides addresses this question in multiple places throughout the Torah and is open to both possibilities, although many traditionalists would be wary of suggesting that anything is Moses's original idea. The approach I take is based on the way the Torah presents it. When Moses's words are different from those of God, appear to be a significant expansion of God's words, or appear to be a condensed version of God's words, my assumption is that it is probably presented that way for a reason, and is not simply for variety of expression.[18] That being said, even if we assume

18. Ibn Ezra's approach is generally the opposite, as he understands that the variations are insignificant as long as they present the same general idea. See his commentary on 20:1.

those to be Moses's additions, that does not detract from their significance, as their inclusion in the Torah implies God's approval.[19]

GOD AS LEARNER

The idea of God testing man is first introduced in Genesis, when God tests Abraham. The very notion of testing generated intense discussion among the midrashim and traditional commentaries struggling to explain why an omniscient God needs to test people.[20] That challenge is magnified in Exodus, which thrice explicitly describes God as testing Israel[21] and where many of the explanations offered in Genesis are less relevant.

I've argued elsewhere[22] that to create man, an independent being endowed with *tzelem E-lohim* – the divine quality of independence and creativity – omniscient God may have intentionally self-limited His knowledge of what people will do. In fact, it may even have been a necessary precondition for creating the type of being God sought to create, for how could humans be truly God-like, free to choose their paths, if their choices are known in advance? This self-limiting is what makes it possible for the Torah to describe God as disappointed when humanity doesn't meet His hopes and expectations (Gen. 6:2, 5–7), necessitating a restart of creation in the Great Confusion and another significant intervention as He disperses the people from Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). God had hoped that things would have turned out differently but truly did not know – because He chose not to – how people would act until after they did.[23]

19. See Abrabanel's introduction to Deuteronomy.
20. For example, Rabbi Saadia Gaon suggests that the test is to provide the righteous with an opportunity to receive extra reward, Rashi understands the test as providing an opportunity to improve the one being tested, Rashbam sees the test as a form of punishment, and Nahmanides understands the test as a means of bringing out the potential in the one being tested.
21. 15:25, 16:4, and 20:16.
22. Zvi Grumet, *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant* (Maggid Books, 2017), 17–27.
23. This presentation of an omniscient God whose knowledge of people is suspended is mirrored by a talmudic aggada (Nidda 30b) which describes unborn children as having mastered all of Torah and being made to forget it just prior to birth.

The possibility for an omniscient God to not know what people will do provides an elegant solution to the conundrum of God repeatedly testing people, as this is how He learns about people.[24]

In Genesis, God's "blind spot" regarding humanity is expressed as frustration,[25] regret,[26] or a need to intervene in the affairs of humanity.[27] In Exodus the focus shifts from humanity to Israel, and God's disappointment – which generates His learning about them – is expressed as anger or even as a rhetorical question. Thus, God is angered when Moses repeatedly looks for excuses to avoid engaging in his mission (4:14), is frustrated that Israel fails to trust Him (16:28), and threatens to destroy Israel (32:10) or remove His presence from them (33:3) in response to the Golden Calf. Later, His anger will flare at them for their unjustified discontent (Num. 11:1), their ingratitude regarding the manna (Num. 11:10), and their distrust regarding the quail (Num. 11:33). He will be frustrated by their rejection of the Promised Land (Num. 14:11–12) and their rejection of Moses and Aaron as their leaders (Num. 17:6–10). His disappointment in the ability of Moses and Aaron to meet the challenge of the new generation (Num. 20:7–13) will impel Him to bar them from continuing to lead the people.

Beyond God's reaction to disappointment with His chosen partners, God learns about them and adjusts. In Genesis, God adjusts the rules for humanity following the Great Confusion (Gen. 9:1–7), forces diversity into a world lacking independent thought (Gen. 11:1–9), and ultimately changes course, electing to work with Abraham and his descendants as His ambassadors rather than continue to try to deal directly with all of humanity.[28] In Exodus, we will see that God

24. For a different angle on God adapting to human intercession, see Jonathan Sacks's work *I Believe* (Maggid Books, 2022), 117–21.
25. The word *etzev*, meaning pain or frustration, is used to describe God's reaction to the difficulty in creating humans who rise up to His expectations (Gen. 6:6). This is parallel to the frustration and pain decreed upon both men (Gen. 3:17–18) and women (Gen. 3:16) in their efforts to be productive.
26. Gen. 6:6.
27. This is particularly evident in the stories of the Great Confusion, the Dispersion from Babel, and the destruction of Sodom.
28. For a thematic exploration of the idea of God adjusting for the reality of humanity, see my article "The Ideal and the Real" (*Tradition* 34:3).

introduces Aaron as a partner to Moses in response to Moses's reticence to speak with Israel and Pharaoh, adjusts the covenant with Israel in response to their inability to quickly shift from a slave people to a covenantal one, shifts Moses's role in that covenant, and even adopts some of Moses's innovations.

Much like a parent who needs to adapt to children with different needs to ensure their growth and success, the God of the Torah is one who learns about people in general and His people in particular, and He adapts to them and their reality in His commitment to help them grow and succeed on their multilayered journeys. We should therefore not be surprised that God tests His people to learn about them, much as they repeatedly test Him.[29] As God and Israel seek to build a relationship, they each learn about the other.

This continues into Exodus as well. It is expressed repeatedly in God's dealings with Moses's[30] as well as in His interactions with Israel. Each brings its own source of frustration, like when Moses repeatedly refuses his mission and when Israel's trust in God falters again and again, and God shows signs of changing His plan to adapt to the human nature of those with whom He is dealing. As we will see, God not only adapts His expectations, but may even modify the covenant with Israel as a result.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Exodus is the second of the five books of the Torah. Although it stands on its own, and we've seen it in the context of Genesis, its predecessor, it will be valuable to briefly explore how it connects to the books which follow, especially Leviticus and Numbers. Both of those books are sequels to Exodus, each following a different core theme of the book. Leviticus

29. Exodus thrice describes God as testing Israel (15:25, 16:4, and 20:16) and twice describes Israel as testing God (17:2 and 17:7). In an extraordinary parallel, Deuteronomy – reflecting on the historical relationship between God and Israel – thrice references God testing Israel (Deut. 8:2, 16, and 13:4) and has two references to Israel testing God (both in Deut. 6:16). Strikingly, Numbers 14:22 speaks of ten tests in the wilderness, and it is not surprising that the Mishna (Avot 5:3) refers to ten times that God tested Abraham.

30. For one example of this, see Netziv's commentary on 4:14.

primarily explores the notion of Israel as a sanctified nation, following the theme first introduced in the preamble to the Revelation at Sinai (Ex. 19) and developed further in the lengthy discussion of the Tabernacle. As we will see, the aftershocks of the Golden Calf dominate not only the end of Exodus but also significant parts of Leviticus. By contrast, Numbers is focused on the development of the nation, its structure, and how it transforms over the course of forty years in the wilderness. It continues much of the thrust of the first half of Exodus, focused on the people, and highlighting their transformation from a band of liberated slaves with the psychological baggage of generations of servitude to a confident and unified nation poised to enter and fight for their ancestral lands.

Exodus thus serves not only as a sequel to Genesis, developing its core theme, but as the unifying book of the Torah, creating the bonds holding the first four books together as a unit.[31] The links between Exodus on the one hand and Leviticus and Numbers on the other will be explored in the epilogues.

THE LEGAL SECTIONS

Beginning with the instructions for preparing the *pesaḥ*,[32] Exodus introduces a new genre of literature into the Torah. Whereas up until now the Torah is essentially a narrative, that narrative will now be interwoven with legal sections. Some are brief and explicitly linked to the narrative, such as the mitzvot directly related to leaving Egypt in Exodus 12 and 13, and some are lengthier and not explicitly linked to any narrative, especially the extended list of laws in chapters 21–23. My approach to those is to understand them in the context of the narrative, so that they enrich the story and add new perspectives. Thus, aligned with the approach taken by Rashbam to 13:9, "the sign on the hand and the reminder between the eyes" are metaphors for keeping God's salvation in our hearts and minds, as if they were inscribed there. That does not mean that the

31. Deuteronomy stands out as unique. It serves as a reflection on the previous three books, with an eye toward preparing Israel for their future as a people settled into a land without the leader who forged them. See Micah Goodman, *The Last Words of Moses* (Maggid Books, 2023).

32. Exodus 12. In its initial usage, the word *pesaḥ* refers to the special meal prepared by the Israelites for the night of their redemption.

Torah does not require men to wear tefillin, but it understands that the source of that mitzva is not necessarily in the text of the Torah, but is in the Oral Tradition (or Oral Torah), which was passed from generation to generation. What the written text provides is an understanding of underlying principles and values which drive these mitzvot, but it is not intended as a source from which the legal, halakhic requirements of these mitzvot can be learned.

This is a significant departure from the approaches popularized in the nineteenth century by Malbim, Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg, and others, who sought to demonstrate the inseparability of the Written Law from the Oral Tradition. In my understanding, separating the Oral Torah from the Written Torah allows for each to shine independently as they complement one another – since the text of the Torah provides a conceptual framework for understanding the meaning of the mitzvot while the Oral Torah elucidates the technical requirements of their performance. To return to our example from Rashbam, the written text of the Torah provides the religious significance of the mitzva of tefillin which the Oral Law teaches.

ASSUMPTIONS

There is a dance between theology and textual reading. Every reader brings his or her own theological biases to the reading. Were we to leave it at that, there would be few revelations about biblical text other than the creative ways of demonstrating that the text supports our predetermined ideas. To truly uncover the theology of the text requires shedding theological preconceptions. That is both difficult, if not impossible, and rather frightening to those for whom their theological assumptions are of primary importance. And yet it is important to be able to do so, to some extent, if we are to begin to uncover the Bible's theology (as distinct from theologies developed over many subsequent centuries). As a result, some of what I write here may be jarring to some readers in its boldness, while other readers will be disappointed that I did not go far enough. I hope that my fidelity to the voice of the text is not colored by preconceptions.

It is this preparedness to explore the Torah's initial intent which impels me to try to read the text as if I am encountering it for the first

time, without preconditions. For me, this includes taking the text at face value. For example, there is no reason to assume that the Israelites were substantively different from other enslaved groups, with some kind of distinctive cultural heritage but not necessarily deeply knowledgeable about the intricacies of their ancestors' lives. In other words, while we readers have access to intimate familiarity with Genesis, they did not, so and they may have less knowledge about their past – and their God – than contemporary readers, whose knowledge of the Bible comes from childhood stories. The extension of this is that the Israelites leaving Egypt had a very steep learning curve. This is certainly true in matters of faith (having been entrenched in Egyptian culture for multiple generations), so that their newly found faith would have shaky foundations – despite God's repeated miraculous demonstrations. It is also true regarding their sense of identity and self-worth – having grown up generation after generation as second- or third-class people with slavery as their perceived past and destiny.

This approach also means taking the same position regarding Moses, whose stature in Jewish tradition is unparalleled. That stature is the product of a lifetime of work, but he was not born that way. Despite assorted midrashic comments, the text provides no reason to assume that Moses's early life is marked by any particular knowledge of God or the history of the Israelites, or even an identification with the latter, other than what he might have learned as an infant in his mother's home or from his adoptive mother. There is also no reason to assume that he had any idea of the God of Israel prior to his encounter at the burning bush. The result of this approach is that he, too, has a steep learning curve in matters of identity, history, Israelite theology – a curve perhaps significantly steeper than that of the rest of the Israelites.

All this allows for a fresh reading of many of the scenes in Exodus, scenes which otherwise generate questions from readers who may be puzzled after assuming that the ancient Israelites – and certainly Moses – knew at least as much as the contemporary educated Jew. Thus, when Israel first receives the manna, neither they nor Moses were aware of the concept of Shabbat or of restrictions associated with it.

Despite my professed desire to read the text as if it were my first time, I do have some basic assumptions which guide me in this work.

First, the biblical text is a unified work, and any attempt to disassemble it into its disparate components does violence to the text (unless accompanied by an equal attempt to reassemble it into a meaningful and coherent whole). Much of the classic academic study of the Bible is devoted to the deconstruction of the text. Typically, that process involves two phases – noticing the anomalies within the text and drawing conclusions about the multiple origins of the texts based on those observations. While the observations made in academic Bible study of the anomalies are often astute and filled with insight, I find that the solutions provided are usually unconvincing, since they, too, often reflect a predetermined bias of the scholar. Further, I find that this approach robs the text of even the possibility of meaning. As such, I assume that the Bible must be read as a single, focused work with a distinct message and focus.

My second assumption is that the meaningfulness of the Bible emerges organically from a close reading of it and should not be superimposed on it from external sources. The enterprise of Midrash (rabbinic homiletic readings) is meaningful as its own discipline but should not be confused with the meaning which is inherent within the biblical text. With regard to Midrash, it should be noted that many midrashim were born out of deep readings of the Bible for which the Rabbis used homiletic rather than exegetical language to express those ideas. As such, it should not be surprising that many of the insights coming from contemporary literary readings of the Bible can be found in midrashim. I will sometimes point those out.

Third, I assume that the reader has at least a minimum familiarity with the biblical story. The more knowledge the reader has, the better he or she will be able to appreciate the nuances which support and develop the arguments I present, and those with access to the original Hebrew text will benefit even more. That being said, I aim to have the content accessible to those who do not already possess comprehensive knowledge of the text, but they should be prepared to open the Bible and read along.

Fourth, there is often temptation to draw conclusions from a single passage without context. While that may be appropriate for homiletic purposes, I believe that it is misleading, like drawing conclusions from an individual photo when a video is available. I believe that

a broad and comprehensive reading of the text reveals patterns and themes which contain the lasting truths which make reading the Torah as compelling today as ever.

As mentioned earlier, this applies to the great biblical heroes as well. They are heroes because they became giants grappling with challenges. Those struggles sometimes reveal steps forward, but we should not be surprised to find slipping backward or mistakes. It is precisely their humanity which makes them meaningful characters from whom we can learn. The Torah never asserts that its central heroes are models of perfection,[33] and the assumption made by some that they are flawless characters forces those readers into complex apologetics as they try to rationalize ethically questionable behavior.

Fifth, despite the notion popularized by Rashi[34] that the Torah is not written chronologically, this book assumes (like Nahmanides[35]) that – unless there is a compelling reason to suggest otherwise – the Torah is very much chronological and sequential. This takes on particular significance in Exodus when discussing the sequence of events in the second half of the book, about which the classic medieval exegetes Rashi and Nahmanides take dramatically different positions.

Finally, I believe that the Bible is written with exquisite care so that close attention must be paid to its nuances. These include choice of words and wordplays, theme words, pacing, patterns, developing themes, and literary structures embedded within the text – even nuances in spelling can sometimes reveal significant insights. It is only through an exploration of those that deep meaning emerges from reading the text.

TERMINOLOGY AND CONVENTIONS

The Hebrew term "Torah" literally means teaching, or a guiding manual. In its most narrow sense it refers only to the Five Books, or the Pentateuch, and in its broadest sense encompasses all of Jewish teaching from the Revelation at Sinai to the latest commentaries, law codes, and religious instruction. In this volume I use "Torah" to refer specifically to

33. This approach is adopted by Rashbam, Nahmanides, Radak, and many others.
34. See Rashi's comments on Gen. 35:29; Ex. 18:9, 19:11, 21:1, 21:12, 31:18; and Lev. 8:2.
35. See Nahmanides's comments on Gen. 11:32, 35:28; Ex. 24:1; Lev. 16:1; and Num. 16:1.

the Five Books, and the term "Bible" to refer to the rest of the Hebrew biblical canon (what Christians would call the Old Testament). Biblical references to Exodus are identified by chapter and verse, often without mentioning Exodus. References to other books in the Bible are identified by book as well.

The terms "Jew" and "Jewish," used colloquially today to refer to the entirety of the people, originated as a reference to those who were associated with the biblical Judean monarchy of First Temple times, as opposed to those identified with the monarchy of Israel. To use those terms in the context of the Exodus is anachronistic, as the Judean monarchy was first established hundreds of years later. The Torah refers to the people God liberated from Egypt as "Hebrews" (*Ivrim*) or "Israelites" (Benei Yisrael, literally, "the children of Israel"). I try to be careful to use the nomenclature employed by the Torah.

Exodus is filled with multiple names for God, some of which are specifically highlighted in its early chapters. Academic and mystical writing insists on distinguishing between them, and indeed most translations make those distinctions. Unless there is particular significance to the name, I do not make those distinctions, as they are mostly unimportant to what I am exploring. When the Torah emphasizes God's four-letter name, I use A-donai. While God is neither masculine nor feminine, convention refers to God using masculine terminology (with the exception of the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, which is distinctly feminine). This book will stick with that convention, including using masculine pronouns to refer to God.

When referring to humankind, I try to remain gender neutral, using terms such as humanity, and when I use the terms man or mankind it refers equally to both genders.

The main characters in Exodus are well known in the English-speaking world, as are the conventional renditions of those names. Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Pharaoh are ubiquitous in the English language and Western culture. For purposes of convention, I use those names which are familiar to the native English speaker, even though to the student of the Bible in its original they sound awkward. Other biblical names which are less prominent I will present in transliteration of their Hebrew pronunciation.

Rendering the biblical text in translation is difficult and robs it of the power of nuance and wordplay embedded in the Hebrew text. Translations in this book are my own and are adapted to demonstrate some of the power in the original Hebrew, although I regularly consulted Robert Alter's sensitive translation in his *The Five Books of Moses: Translation and Commentary* (Norton, 2004) and Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (Schocken, 1995).

TORAH AS INSTRUCTION

Ever since the Torah was written it has been studied as a source of guidance. With the Enlightenment, in many circles the study shifted from seeking moral or religious direction to academic study. That academic examination challenged some of the most fundamental assumptions and sensitivities of the religiously oriented, and for much of the past two hundred years there has been an antagonistic relationship between those who study the Bible from an academic perspective and those who see it as a sanctified, core religious document. In recent decades, however, a new approach has begun to emerge – one which is aware of and enlightened by the contributions of two centuries of academic literature while remaining committed to preserving the Torah as its Hebrew name means, a book of instruction.

In these pages I attempt to participate in this emerging trend. I have been fortunate to be exposed to an extraordinary and growing body of literature written by people with deep reverence for the text and astonishing insights, including those derived from history, philosophy, philology, archaeology, and most importantly, an exquisitely refined literary sensitivity. The marriage of traditional reverence for the text with an array of new tools for exploring it has the potential to reveal extraordinary insights into the text coupled with deep religious inspiration which otherwise would have remained hidden. I write these pages in an attempt to share with others my own religious experience emanating from this multilayered exploration of the Torah.

Exodus 1:1–22

Genesis Revisited

While Genesis opens with the breathtaking Creation, Exodus falls rather flat by contrast – a list of names, Israel's children who descended to Egypt, information abbreviated from Genesis 46. There is nothing new in the beginning of the second book.[1]

Then again, perhaps we should not be so surprised. After all, Genesis is comprised of an introduction followed by eleven chronicles of *toledot*, almost every one of which begins with a review of some key piece of information told earlier.[2] If Exodus is the natural continuation of Genesis, then perhaps the repetition is to be expected. But Exodus is a different book, with a different focus, and absent the *toledot* structure so prominent in Genesis, which begs us to rethink the opening.

One of the characteristics of this passage is its brevity, the effect of which is twofold. First, it highlights the explosive expansion of this family – from twelve to seventy to an uncountable multitude, all in the

1. This question was addressed by many of the traditional commentaries. See Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides for a variety of approaches.
2. For more on this, see Grumet, *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant*, xvii–xviii. A similar approach here is taken by Bekhor Shor.

is used to describe God's blessing to Abraham – Abraham will be a great and *atzum* nation. As for the double adjective, it is also first used to describe Abraham's fruitfulness (Gen. 17:2, 7, and 20)[6] and is used nowhere else in the Torah.[7]

One way to summarize this opening passage is that God's blessing to and hope for humanity – including from the first people through Noah and finally Abraham – which were not fulfilled in Genesis, are finally being realized in the opening of Exodus with the descendants of Israel.

This takes on additional depth when we consider the closing phrase of this opening passage, *vatimalei haaretz otam* – the land was filled with them. This phrase echoes the opening of the story of Noah, in which God felt compelled to undo His creation, which is introduced by the phrase *vatimalei haaretz ḥamas* – the land was filled with injustice (Gen. 6:11).[8] As opposed to Genesis, where God's designs went awry in every generation, in Exodus they are finally being actualized. The growth of Israel's descendants is the fulfillment of God's blessing to all of humanity, to Noah, and to Abraham – the three major pivot points in Genesis.

The filling of the land brings to light another interesting parallel with Genesis, as well as an important contrast. The story of populating the earth is recounted in Genesis through a series of genealogical tables, most prominently in chapters 5 and 10. There is something curious about those tables, as they list twenty generations of men begetting men. There is a not a single woman identified by name; the closest we get to hearing about a woman is that the named men sired both sons and daughters. By contrast, the opening of Exodus – which also tells a story of population growth – highlights the role of women. Two women, in particular, are featured in the first chapter of Exodus – the midwives[9] who are integral to the survival of the Israelite nation – and they are

6. This third reference is actually to Ishmael, whom God blesses to become a very large nation, as he is Abraham's son.
7. It does appear twice in Ezekiel 9:9 and 16:13.
8. Most translations render *ḥamas* as violence. Its usage in Genesis 16:5 convinces me that it means injustice.
9. The Hebrew term used in the Torah is ambiguous, either meaning the midwives who themselves were Hebrews (Rashi, Rashbam) or the midwives to the Hebrews (Bekhor Shor, Abrabanel, Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto).

identified by name. That highlighting continues in the second chapter, in which three anonymous women are featured as conspiring to secretly save a single Israelite boy.

Finally, when we consider the number seventy, which is highlighted by the brevity of the opening passage, we are reminded of the seventy nations descended from Noah.[10] Those seventy nations represent all of humanity, that same humanity which disappoints God a few generations later, eventually necessitating that God shift plans. The children of Israel, presented in Exodus as God's new focus, represent God's new hope for all of humanity; their success in fulfilling the promise of Genesis holds the key to the fulfillment of God's initial plan for all of creation. As God says to Abram, "Through you will come blessing to all the families on the earth" (Gen. 12:3).[11]

FROM CHILDREN OF ISRAEL TO THE ISRAELITE NATION

It is difficult to know precisely what kind of identity Israel's descendants maintained in Egypt. Joseph set them up to live separately in Goshen yet made sure that they all had Egyptian clothes so that they could blend in.[12] We later find Egyptians and Israelites living side by side, even integrated into the same homes.[13] And while Joseph insisted that his bones be reinterred in Canaan, there is no record in the Torah of any of his brothers making a similar request.

Regardless of whatever integration there may have been, there were likely barriers as well. Egypt was a conservative and traditional culture. Kings came from long-lasting dynasties protecting ancient traditions and ways and were accorded a level of divinity which was passed from father to son. Moreover, Egyptians were Hamites, while the Israelites were Semites, which would have automatically set them apart as

10. Gen. 10:1–32. The idea of there being seventy nations in the world is reflected in multiple talmudic and midrashic comments.
11. This idea is repeated in Gen. 18:18 when God shares His thinking in choosing Abraham.
12. Gen. 45:22. While he set them up to live in Goshen, he gave them permanent land holdings in the land of Rameses (Gen. 47:11). This appears to be different from the Raamses the Israelites built in Ex. 1:11.
13. See 3:22.

being different. We will later learn that it is likely that they had an oral tradition of a divine promise that they would be taken from Egypt[14] and that Moses assumed that there was a code involving a name of God that they associated with that tradition.[15] Further, the beginning of Exodus 2 and the brief genealogical table in 6:14–25 suggest that there were tribal identities,[16] and we later hear that there was some kind of native leadership in the form of the elders.[17]

Whether they identified as Semites, as members of related clans, or as members of a family with a common ancestor, there is no sense that they identify as a nation. In the latter part of Genesis, Jacob's progeny is called either *benei Yaakov* (the children of Jacob)[18] or benei Yisrael (the children of Israel),[19] with Jacob and Israel being interchangeable. They are a family. Indeed, the opening verse of Exodus – echoing Genesis 46:5 – also speaks of benei Yisrael, the children of the man named Israel, and that same term is used again in 1:7 as the Torah describes the spectacular proliferation of the family.

In the transition from the review of Genesis to the story of Exodus that same term is used, but it takes on an entirely different connotation. Just two verses after it was used to describe a growing family Pharaoh describes Benei Yisrael (which I now capitalize as a proper name) as the Israelite nation. "Behold, the nation, Benei Yisrael, is more prolific[20] and mightier than us" (1:9). Pharaoh is the first to identify them as a separate national entity.

Ironically, it may have been his pronouncement which helped the descendants of Israel forge the beginning of a national identity, as

14. This is why they believed Moses when he first approached them in 4:31. Note that when Moses and God speak in chapter 3, Moses is not concerned that they will not believe in redemption, but rather that they will be skeptical of him being the redeemer.
15. 3:13.
16. *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 42 expresses this idea midrashically, suggesting that the sea split into twelve distinct paths, one for each tribe.
17. 3:16–18.
18. Gen. 35:33, 49:1.
19. Gen. 46:5, 8.
20. This translation is based on the comments of Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides, and Ralbag.

they are marked by the Egyptians as non-Egyptian, and as a subjugated minority they found new ways to bolster themselves. "The more they [the Egyptians] oppressed him [Israel], the more he [Israel] multiplied and spread" (1:12). This switch is portrayed subtly yet powerfully in the opening narrative of the enslavement and oppression in which every reference to the Egyptians in verses 9–12 consistently describes the Egyptians using plural pronouns and verbs while every reference to Israel describes it in the singular.[21] Notice the highlighted words in this passage:

> Behold, the *nation*, Benei Yisrael, *is* more prolific and mightier than *us*. Come now, let *us* outsmart *it*, lest *it* become even more numerous and then, if there should be a war, *it* will be added to *our* enemies and *it* will go up and away from the land. So, *they* set upon *it* officers of the labor tax to afflict *it* with *their* burdens, and *it* built storage cities for Pharaoh, Pitom and Raamses. But as *they* oppressed *it*, *it* continued to increase and *it* spread out, and *they* loathed *Israel*. (Ex. 1:9–12)

In fact, two words stand out as they contrast the children of Israel with the Israelite nation. Describing the phenomenal growth of the people (1:7), the Torah uses five verbs in succession, including *vayirbu* (they became numerous) and *vayaatzmu* (they grew mighty). These two verbs, along with the others in the succession, are in the plural. They – the many individuals who reproduced greatly and mightily – are transformed. Pharaoh uses those same verbs to describe the Israelite nation, but this time they are in the singular. The nation is *rav* and *atzum*. It is a large and mighty nation.

This switch begins one of the most important projects in the history of Israel – building a national identity. The endeavor begins in the very first chapter of Exodus and continues throughout the book. In fact, forging that national identity emerges as one of the most significant effects of the forty years in the wilderness and is one of Moses's great

21. This is overlooked in most translations of the Torah. Notable exceptions are Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses* (Schocken, 1983) and *The Steinsaltz Humash* (Koren Publishers, 2018).

achievements – even managing to prevent the secession of two of the tribes just months before the entry into the land.[22]

The riddle of the opening verses highlights the transformation of the people. Indeed, the opening sounds like Genesis 46, which speaks of Jacob's family. But as we race through the generations in less than ten verses, we understand that the opening is designed to serve as a contrast to what they were when they descended and what they became, in no small part due to Pharaoh's efforts. In that sense, the opening verses begin to frame the story of the genesis of the nation of Israel.

PHARAOH AND BABEL

It is not just the introductory passage which links Exodus and Genesis, but the story of the enslavement of Israel echoes one of the key events of Genesis, the story of Babel.[23] Chapter 11 of Genesis depicts all of humanity living in a single place, the floodplain of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, speaking in a single voice and single language. A technological development, the ability to create bricks by firing mud, enables construction in ways previously unimaginable. That sparks a movement to build a city with a tower that will "reach the heavens" to prevent them from spreading out over the land, and the tower to maintain watch over – and control – the inhabitants. God, seeking to thwart the plan to dominate, introduces multiple languages so that the residents lose their ability to cooperate effectively. Not only is the construction plan thwarted, but the inability to communicate impels people to disperse from that centralized place.[24]

Both the thematic framing of the story and the language used are echoed in our present narrative of the subjugation of Israel. There is an attempt by the powerful to control others.[25] A major construction project

22. See Grumet, *Moses and the Path to Leadership*, 163–65. Maintaining that national identity is one of the most important challenges of the rest of the biblical narrative, eventually faltering with the splitting of the Kingdom of Israel (I Kings 12) – a rift which has never healed (Ezekiel 37 is a prophecy about a future reconciliation).
23. For a fuller explication of this parallel, see J. Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (JPS, 2009), 31–62.
24. For a fuller explication of this, see Grumet, *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant*, 101–8.
25. Genesis Rabba 23:7 identifies the leader in Babel as none other than Nimrod, the

to build a city – *ir* – is introduced with the call of *hava* – let us – which is designed to thwart – *pen* – some anticipated danger involving people leaving the land – *aretz* – and which is eventually foiled when intervention brings about precisely the very thing which was feared. Bricks – *leveinim* – and mortar – *ḥomer* – are described in both as essential elements of the design to subjugate. The initiative in Babel was designed to prevent the fulfillment of God's desire for humanity to fill the earth, which is precisely what Israel does in Egypt, and divine intervention is the only way to prevent the human plan from succeeding. Here is what the linguistic parallels look like:

Exodus 1	**Genesis 11**
hava *nitḥakma lo* (v. 10)	***hava*** *nivne lanu ir* (v. 4)
pen *yirbeh* (v. 10)	***pen*** *nafutz* (v. 4)
ve'ala min ***haaretz*** (v. 10)	*al penei kol* ***haaretz*** (v. 4)
vayiven (v. 11)	***nivne*** (v. 4)
arei *miskenot* (v. 11)	***ir*** (v. 4)
beḥomer uvileveinim (v. 14)	*vatehi lahem* ***halevena*** *le'aven vehaḥemar haya lahem* ***laḥomer*** (v. 3)
ken yirbeh (v. 11)	*vayafetz* (v. 8)

A deep reading of the Babel story reveals that the attempt to control humanity threatens to undermine God's role. After all, if the tower provides for control over those who are lower, then a tower which "reaches the heavens" is designed to control everything under those heavens, replacing God as sovereign over humanity. The mirroring of the stories suggests that Pharaoh's designs to dominate Israel are equally an attempt to subvert God's role on earth, in essence painting Pharaoh as God's rival.[26] Indeed, a passage from the Passover Haggada emphasizes this

first man to lord himself over masses of others (Gen. 10:7–10).

26. God's absence in Exodus 1, which is dominated by Pharaoh, is striking. Leon Kass, *Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus* (Yale University Press, 2021), 35, notes that

very point: "Had God not taken us out of Egypt, we and our children and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt."

This parallel provides the setting for one of the central themes of the first half of Exodus. If Pharaoh's plan is to dominate humanity, that is, to challenge God, then it is not sufficient for God to free Israel. Rather, it will become necessary for God to demonstrate to Pharaoh, and to all those who look up to him, that he is not the god, that there is a Being before whom Pharaoh will necessarily submit. This is an idea which we will see repeatedly throughout the first half of Exodus.

The passage involving the midwives is interesting (1:15–21) as, on the surface, it sems to be unnecessary. What would we be missing had the Torah omitted this entire section, going straight from the intensified slavery (1:14) to the decree to throw all male babies (presumably only the Israelite ones) into the river? This omission would not affect anything in the subsequent narrative, and their subversion does not ultimately derail Pharaoh.

The seeming superfluousness of the section challenges us to explore its significance. True, the narrative of the oppression and the parallel to Babel draw our attention to the danger of unchecked power concentrated in the hands of the few, in this case, Pharaoh. The second half of that narrative, however, the story of the midwives, ignites a new hope. True, Pharaoh seems unstoppable, except that a group of women surreptitiously subvert him. And while they are not the saviors of the people, they are the saviors of the innocent newborns, exposing Pharaoh's weakness.[27] In the face of tyranny they demonstrate a different kind of freedom – one which is not dependent on external factors but which results from their deciding to act like free people and refusing to

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the end of Genesis highlights Egypt's desire to control death, while the beginning of Exodus describes Pharaoh's effort to control birth. As the Talmud (Taanit 2a) reminds us, however, those realms are solely in God's hands.

27. In the Bible, one of the greatest disgraces to an authority, especially a man wielding power over others, is being undone by a woman. Thus, the great disgrace to the Canaanite general Sisera (Judges 4:21) is being killed by Yael using household tools, and Avimelekh is mortified by the thought that he could have been defeated by a woman using a kitchen implement (Judges 9:53–54).

have their conscience controlled. Pharaoh's might and power are challenged by the basic decency of ordinary people.[28]

It is precisely in this that the Torah defines the difference between the Babel story and the present one about Pharaoh. In Babel, God must intervene, and without that intervention the plot to derail God's hope for humanity will succeed. By contrast, in Egypt, God is surprisingly absent from the story, but that does not mean that all hope is lost. Quite the opposite. There are decent people, women committed to bringing life into the world, who will not be swayed to betray their sacred commitment.[29] In fact, they play an active role in ensuring that the babies survive. Note that both the Torah's description of their actions (the end of 1:17) and Pharaoh's challenging them (the end of 1:18) use the identical phrase, "*Vateḥayena et hayeladim*," "They gave life to the baby boys."[30] These midwives, Shifrah and Puah, follow their ethical cores and use their cunning to undermine Pharaoh's intentions. "The midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt ordered them" (1:17).[31]

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28. Natan Sharansky reported that his Soviet oppressors mocked the "housewives and students" rallying to free him, and how it was indeed those very housewives and students who defeated the might of the KGB.
29. See Kass, *Founding God's Nation*, 32. J. Klitsner notes the irony that while Pharaoh feared the male babies it was the females who undid his plan. The Torah text itself is ambiguous about the identity of these midwives. Are they the Hebrew midwives or the midwives to the Hebrews? While many of the classical commentaries debate this, it seems irrelevant to the story, which may explain why the Torah intentionally used ambiguous language. The actions of these two women serve as an indictment of the rest of the Egyptians who did not find ways to resist Pharaoh's murderous decrees, perhaps serving as the backdrop for why the plagues affected the Egyptian people and not just Pharaoh and his advisors.
30. See Ibn Ezra (1:17).
31. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann notes that the term "God-fearing" refers to living by a set of ethical values. See also Nehama Leibowitz, *Iyunim BeSefer Shemot* (WZO, 1975), 32–33, where she argues that this is only when referring to God-fearing non-Israelites. The Torah states that as a reward for their behavior God "made for them houses." The expression to "make a house" as opposed to "build a house" is rare, and means to build someone up, whether with wealth or progeny. See Ibn Ezra and Bekhor Shor on 1:21. Michael Hattin (https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-shemot/shemot-pharaoh-god-king) notes that the name Pharaoh means "Great House." In that context, this expression suggests that these brave women earned their own great houses to rival that of Pharaoh.

SLOW DESCENT INTO SLAVERY

It is hard to know whether Pharaoh genuinely feared the Israelites or contrived this fear to serve his political needs and ideology. Did he really not know who Joseph was or, as some suggest, did he choose to bury Joseph's legacy because it accorded Joseph too much credit for the Egyptian success story?[32]

After all, the traditionalist Egyptian monarchy was responsible for guarding the purity of Egyptian heritage, a purity which made it unbearable for Egyptians to eat together with Semites,[33] much less have them play a significant role in Egyptian society or grow into a significant force. Hence the first step taken by Pharaoh was to identify the Hebrew nation as "other" – a foreign implant that is not native to the land. In doing so he plants the seeds of fear in his people. Not only are there foreigners in the land, but they are multiplying faster than the Egyptians and will soon present a significant threat.[34]

It is here that Pharaoh faces a problem. He does not like, and may even be genuinely fearful of, the foreigners. On the one hand, he may be tempted to expel them, as he sees – or presents – them as a potential threat. On the other hand, they are way too valuable to expel. In fact, he is afraid that they will leave the land on their own.[35]

> Behold, the nation, Benei Yisrael, is more prolific and mightier than us. Come now, let us outsmart it, lest it become even more

32. At the end of Genesis, Joseph is directly responsible for bringing his family and settling them in Egypt as well as serving as the architect of the plan to turn Egypt into a mighty empire. He is also responsible for showing favoritism to his own family while the Egyptians starved for food (Genesis 47), perhaps planting the seeds of animosity between the Egyptians and the Hebrews. Further, he created institutionalized slavery in Egypt, which laid the foundation for the eventual enslavement of Israel.
33. Gen. 43:32.
34. A similar argument can be found in Haman's presentation of the Judeans as a fifth column in the Persian Empire. See Est. 3:5.
35. Rashi (v. 10) attempts to solve this conundrum by reading "it will leave the land" as a euphemism for "we will be forced to leave the land." This, however, strays from the meaning of the text.

> numerous and then, if there should be a war, it will be added to our enemies and it will go up and away from the land. (1:10)

Having marked Israel as other and identifying his conundrum, Pharaoh comes up with a plan. They will stay, but they will be disempowered and marshaled to build the Egyptian infrastructure. The text tells us *what* he did: "So they set upon it officers of the labor tax to afflict it with their burdens, and it built storage cities for Pharaoh, Pitom and Raamses" (1:11). What the text doesn't say is *how* he did it. How did he manage to get decent Egyptians to agree to such a plan? How did he get Israel to participate so readily?

When we think about it, it is not too difficult to use our imagination to fill in those gaps. Identifying Israel as foreign invites the question of loyalty. Are they truly Egyptian, or do they have a subversive agenda? Imagine that Pharaoh announces a national plan to meet some great Egyptian need – perhaps storage cities to preserve Egypt's precious resources.[36] To prove themselves as genuine Egyptians, the Israelites offered their services, and once they did it was difficult to pull back. Were they no longer concerned with Egypt and its needs? Having been shamed into continuing to work it became enshrined in law, with officers in charge of the labor tax to ensure compliance – institutionalized, justified, and legalized servitude. This is the meaning of the Torah's expression *lemaan anoto besivlotam* – in order to intensify the servitude of Israel by making Israel carry the burdens of the Egyptians.[37] In fact, the word *anoto* comes from the Hebrew *inui*, often translated as oppression but which, at its core, means to intensify the servitude in a way which marks the worker's status as a servant.[38]

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36. Notice how this plays on the story of Joseph, who collected the grain during the years of plenty and warehoused them in cities in preparation for some future event. See Gen. 41:48.
37. Note that Israel (in the singular) is being held responsible for the burdens of the Egyptians (in the plural).
38. This is what Sarah does to Hagar (Gen. 16:6) in response to Hagar's rejection of Sarah's authority as the mistress of the house. She establishes her own authority over Hagar, which Hagar, having tasted the hope of freedom, cannot bear. See also Code of Hammurabi, no. 146.

Pharaoh may have successfully established control over Israel, but Israel's fecundity despite the servitude impels him to take the next step, intensifying the burden so that it would literally crush them. That is the word which concludes both 1:13 and its expansion, 1:14. In fact, the root E-V-D, meaning slave or labor, appears four times in in a single verse – *Vayemareru et ḥayeihem ba**avoda** kasha beḥomer uvilveinim uvev khol **avoda** basadeh, et kol **avodatam** asher **avedu** bahem befarekh* (1:14).

Within just eight verses, the slippery slope designed by Pharaoh took Israel from being "them" (as opposed to "us") to volunteerism, forced labor, servitude, crushing slavery, and ultimately infanticide. Facing a problem that instead of going away just keeps growing, Pharaoh first instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill the male babies secretly, as if they had died in childbirth, and when that does not succeed, ultimately charges all Egyptians to participate in drowning the male Hebrew children.[39]

Ironically, it is Pharaoh's desire to control Israel that leads to its emerging national identity and uncontrolled growth. It is his decree against the babies which brings the redeemer of Israel to be raised in Pharaoh's own home.[40]

There is a universal message here as well. What Pharaoh does not understand, the readers see clearly. If the only way to rule people is through control and power, then you don't really have control and power. He successfully makes the lives of the Israelites miserable, but he cannot control the divine spirit – the *tzelem E-lohim* – which is an integral part of who people are as God created them. Pharaoh may be powerful and wily, even able to outsmart his adversaries, but God has already planted the seeds of humanity in people, and it is within those people – as we will see in the next chapter – that the seeds of rebellion will take root and begin to unravel his plans.

FINDING THE SAVIOR

Where does this leave us? Israel is transformed from a family into a nation as it provides the spark of hope for the fulfillment of God's Genesis hopes.

39. The foundations for this reading can be found in the comment of Nahmanides on 1:10.

40. Kass, *Founding God's Nation*, 34.

God prepares to reenter history after an extended absence, but faces the challenge of Pharaoh, who assumes God's role and, if not stopped, will prevent God's plan from coming to fruition. If God is going to be reintroduced to humanity, that must involve not only the liberation of His people and the fulfillment of His promise, but the humbling of Pharaoh and Egypt so that they – and the rest of the world – acknowledge God.

That humbling, however, has a twist. In the first chapter of Exodus, God does not intervene directly to prevent the reversal of Israel's growth; it was the midwives, His human agents, who did that. In that sense they act in Abrahamic fashion, as God's involvement with the world is going to necessarily entail human agency. Similarly, as much as God will be involved in humbling Pharaoh and liberating Israel, He will insist on using people to accomplish that.

The catch is that people are human. They have their own wills and desires and opinions. The midwives inspire hope, but they are not the answer. Recruiting and grooming the right messenger will prove to be a more significant challenge than anyone realizes.

Exodus 2:1–22

The Missing Hero

From where do heroes come? Are they born into greatness, or do they need to develop that unique character which sets them apart from others?

The grand sweep of the introductory chapter focusing on the emergence of the nation despite – or perhaps as a result of – Pharaoh's decree, and the unsuccessful attempt of two courageous women to subvert the evil decree, fades into the background. The noise of Pharaoh's furious efforts, the growth of the people, and the clatter of construction disappear as the Torah shifts our focus to one anonymous couple, their unnamed child, a sister-in-waiting, and an anonymous but gutsy princess. The story is quiet; we hear silence and subdued conversation with the rustle of the reeds in the background.

The dramatic change in setting gives the feeling of watching a movie filmed in shades of gray with only a single scene, or perhaps even a single character, shown in full color; we don't know if this was the only story of its kind or if there were thousands of other brave and desperate attempts by Hebrew mothers to save their sons, perhaps with very different endings.

An initial reading reveals a beautiful chiastic structure:[1]

(A) The boy is in his mother's home, but is hidden
  (B) The mother places the child in the water as the sister watches
    (C) Pharaoh's daughter finds the child
    (C') Pharaoh's daughter is filled with compassion for the child
  (B') The sister schemes to return the child to its mother
(A') The boy is returned to his mother's home

This is an elegant scene. The child who was cared for clandestinely can now be nurtured openly; the mother who thought she had lost her son has him miraculously returned. The progression takes us from the loving mother to the caring sister and ultimately to the dangerous stranger. After all, she was the daughter of the Pharaoh, the one responsible for the decree. We move from the one we imagine would be most caring to the one we anticipate would be the least.

The progression is accentuated even more by the timing of the scene. The introduction of the story takes months, maybe a year, followed by a slowing – a three-month period of hiding the infant at home. Preparing the basket[2] slows the pace of the storytelling, which slows even more as the Torah describes the meticulous placing of the basket into the water as the sister anxiously watches from a safe distance. The pace slows even more as the tension rises when Pharaoh's daughter discovers the basket:

> She opened it and she saw him. The child. (v. 6)

This moment freezes the scene completely. It is only in the second half that the tension is relieved as the reader is pleasantly shocked to discover

1. See Elhanan Samet, *Iyunim BeFarashat HaShavua,* Series 2, Volume 1 (Maaliyot, 2004), 230–46. See also David Ti, "Moshe – HaYeled VeHaIsh," *Megadim* 22 (1994): 30–42.
2. Various midrashim note the parallels between this scene and the story of Noah. Both involve a *teiva* (ark or basket) coated with tar for waterproofing and whose inhabitant who is saved from the water ends up saving an entire world, or at least the world which God is trying to save.

that Pharaoh's daughter's first reaction is compassion toward the crying Israelite child. At that point the pace picks up with the intervention of the sister and the return of the child to its mother to be nursed for a few years.

The chiastic structure and the pacing of the text draws extraordinary attention to Pharaoh's daughter as the key to the child's survival. We expect the mother to be loving, we expect the sister to be caring, but we don't expect anything positive from an Egyptian, much less the daughter of Pharaoh. In that slow-motion moment, motivated by maternal instinct and human decency, she rises as the heroine of the story.

As a beautiful sequel to the end of Exodus 1, which featured two brave midwives seeking to undermine Pharaoh's decree on a large scale, this is a story of three anonymous women conspiring to save a single child. It is a tale in which placing the baby in the very river which is supposed to drown him ends up saving his life.[3]

This reading of the story, however, leads to a false conclusion. The scene doesn't end there; the boy doesn't live happily ever after with his birth family. After he is weaned, he is returned to Pharaoh's daughter, probably before he has the chance to form any conscious memories of his family. We never know what they named him at home, what his birth name was. For the rest of his life he carries the name given by his adoptive mother. Moses, she calls him. A beautiful Egyptian name meaning "My son,"[4] with a Hebrew play on the name identifying him as the child drawn from the water, but not the name given by his birth parents.

This is a beautiful scene within a tragedy. A boy is miraculously saved, but the only way for him to be saved is for his mother to give him

3. Contrary to popular belief, placing him in the river initially is not an act of abandonment. He was not floated down the river but hidden in the reeds. The location would provide visual shelter as well as prevent him from floating downstream. His sister standing guard would look for opportunities to go to him, provide him with food and care, and return him to his hiding place. Ibn Ezra (long commentary) on 2:3 invokes the image of Hagar tossing Ishmael under the bush (Gen. 21:16), apparently to demonstrate how different this woman's action is to Hagar's.

4. See M. D. Cassuto, *Peirush al Sefer Shemot* (Magnes, 1944). The Hebrew twist on the name was perhaps an attempt by his mother to preserve a sense of identity with the Hebrews.

up. The boy has a loving and caring foster mother but is severed from his biological family.[5]

The tragedy is even bigger than we imagine. This private scene, a sequel to the previous chapter describing the intensifying hardships faced by the people, gives the reader a sense of hope. Amid the darkness there is a ray of light; the child is born. Described by his mother as *ki tov*, that he is good, a phrase echoing the perfection of the Creation in Genesis 1, surrounded by caring women, standing out as the only person in the story to be named, we anticipate that this child will bring salvation to his people. Surviving against the odds, saved miraculously from the river, even returned to his mother, we await his arrival on the scene, only to be disappointed when he leaves his mother and is raised by Pharaoh's daughter. The hero is lost.[6]

MOSES'S IDENTITY

Fast-forward. Moses is raised as an Egyptian by the daughter of the Egyptian monarch. While his birth family likely knows about him, it is unlikely that he knows who they are. After all, his sister cleverly hid her own identity and that of her mother from Pharaoh's daughter. He seems to have been sheltered in his childhood, only venturing to see conditions outside the palace when he grows up. Does he know that he is an Israelite? Did his adoptive mother, who acted rebelliously against her own father, share with him the story of how he was saved and that he was born into a Hebrew family? It certainly is possible, yet we have no way of knowing that Moses sees himself as anything but an Egyptian.

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5. The scene provides a narrative backdrop to the later command to return a lost object to its owner. The sister arranges for the "lost" child to be restored to its rightful family. The complication is that the identification of the rightful mother is unclear – is it the mother who birthed him or the one who gave him a second chance at life? For more on Pharaoh's daughter as "birthing" the child, see Samet, *Iyunim BeFarashat HaShavua*, Series 2, 230–46.
6. Both ancient and contemporary culture is filled with stories of miraculous salvation of specially endowed children. For a discussion of one parallel to this story in Ancient Near Eastern literature, see Joshua Berman's *Created Equal* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 135–66. In contemporary culture this theme has found expression in popular series such as *Star Wars*.

For the royal family he is clearly not one of them, yet he is raised among them. As a lowly Semite associated with a proud, royal Hamite family, it is unlikely that he has any sort of royal status. Otherwise, the taskmaster he eventually kills would have been obligated to heed his command rather than lose his life and Moses would not have had to hesitate – looking to see if there were any witnesses, and the quarreling Israelites would not have spoken to him with such impudence: "Who placed you over us as the man, the officer, the judge?" (2:14). Further, as a prince he would not have to fear for his life from Pharaoh. He may have been reprimanded, but probably not killed. In fact, his killing of that taskmaster may have given Pharaoh the excuse he had been long seeking to rid himself of this foreign implant in the palace. Finally, when he arrives in Midian he is identified by Yitro's daughters as an Egyptian man, not an Egyptian royal (2:19).

And yet, being raised in the palace affords him a perspective unlike other Egyptians and certainly different from the Hebrews. He has lived as a free man with protection, privilege, and dignity. He understands the inner workings of the palace and the intrigues of the royal family.[7] He is less likely to be intimidated by people with money, prestige, and power.[8]

It is this Moses who goes "out to his brethren where he sees their burdens (*sivlotam*)," and witnesses "an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man, one of his brethren," which raises a significant question: Since when does Moses identify as a Hebrew? It is easy to imagine midrashic comments seeking the backstory to explain this, and yet it is glaringly absent in the text.

Perhaps the word *sivlotam* (their burdens) holds the key. That word was first introduced in Exodus 1: "So *they* ([the Egyptians] set upon *it* [Israel] officers of the labor tax to afflict *it* [Israel] with *their*

7. Ibn Ezra (long commentary 2:3) writes: "God's thoughts are deep; who can understand His secret? Perhaps God arranged that Moses should grow up in the royal house so that his spirit would be noble and princely, not ordinary or lowly like one raised in a house of slaves."

8. Moses's position in the royal palace is portrayed suggestively by Exodus Rabba 1 as beloved by Pharaoh but despised by the royal advisors. The midrash includes a tale of Moses being unimpressed by gold and the royal wealth.

[the Egyptians'] burdens" (v. 11). Earlier we noticed that, consistently, Israel is referred to in the singular while the Egyptians are identified as many. When we reread that verse with the bracketed identifiers, what emerges is that it is not Israel who has the burden but the Egyptians. The verse describes how the Egyptians tried to make Israel bear their – the Egyptians' – burdens.

This is not a mere semantic issue but reflects the extent to which the Egyptians wanted Israel to own responsibility for Egypt's labor. Later, when Moses and Aaron first come to Pharaoh, Pharaoh dismisses them by telling them, "*Lekhu lesivloteikhem*," "Go to your burdens" (5:4). He wanted the burdens to be Israel's. God, however, sees this differently, instructing Moses to tell the Israelites that He will "take them out from under the Egyptian *sivlot*, burdens" (7:6). Despite Pharaoh's best efforts, the *sivlot* remain those of Egypt.

This observation bears great significance for understanding Moses's initial identity. He goes out to his brethren and sees their *sivlot*. Since the *sivlot* belong to the Egyptians, the brethren he goes out to see are his Egyptian brethren. It is then that he sees what he cannot accept – the Egyptians take no responsibility for their own burdens; they instead inflict them upon another people, even mercilessly beating those others in the process. It is at that moment that he identifies with the oppressed – either because of some innate quality of compassion, a deep sense of justice, or perhaps because of his own second-class status in Pharaoh's palace. The brethren that he goes out to see in the opening of the verse are Egyptian, but those with whom he identifies at the end of the verse are the Hebrews. The experience of witnessing oppression is transformative on a core level – he can no longer dream of being an Egyptian.[9]

But, as we well know, real transformation does not happen in an instant. On the second day he again goes out and sees two quarreling Hebrews (note that they are not identified as his brethren). When he intervenes to stop a beating, he is impudently rebuked by the aggressor. In their eyes Moses is neither a fellow Hebrew nor a master, but

9. As Leon Kass writes, Moses kills not only the Egyptian, but the Egyptian within himself. *Founding God's Nation*, 614n26.

an ordinary Egyptian. His identification with the oppressed, even his willingness to take action against the oppressor, did not win him an insider's status to the people who truly suffer that subjugation. Neither an Egyptian nor a Hebrew, he is a man without identity.

Belonging to no group and fearful for his life, Moses flees to Midian. He is identified there by Yitro's daughters as an Egyptian and soon afterward marries one of them and remains in Yitro's house, tending his sheep. The irony is extraordinary. The Egyptian man, raised in the house of Pharaoh, takes on an occupation that is the most anti-Egyptian imaginable. Recall that when Joseph's family descends to Egypt, he instructs his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds, guaranteeing that they remain geographically separated from the Egyptian, "for the Egyptians find all shepherds abominable" (Gen. 46:34). Becoming a shepherd completes Moses's rebellion against Egypt but also highlights his alienation. He has rejected his Egyptian identity, never fully embraced a Hebrew one,[10] and marries into a Midianite family where he will spend many decades as a nomad.

WHO WAS MOSES?

Moses's identity can perhaps be summarized as a "nowhere man sitting in his nowhere land." Just look at the explanation he provides for the name he bestows upon his son, Gershom: For I was a stranger (*ger*) in a foreign land (*sham*, meaning, "there").[11] This sense of alienation may have been what he and Yitro, the man who became his father-in-law, shared. After all, one might expect that the daughters of the priest of Midian would be accorded some privilege, that his status would provide them a measure of protection. That is not, however, the case, as they are regularly pushed aside from the watering hole by the other shepherds. Neither Yitro nor Moses truly belongs and they are thus drawn to each other.

10. It could be argued that becoming a shepherd prepares him unconsciously to identify with the Hebrews, especially their ancestors, who were all shepherds.
11. While most commentators understand that he is referring to Moses's status in Midian, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann suggests that he is referring to his being an "other" even in Egypt. The past tense used in Moses's explanation – I was a stranger – coupled with the use of the word "there" as opposed to "here," support this reading.

Lack of belonging, however, is not necessarily synonymous with a lack of character (or depth). We could indeed argue that Exodus 2 is actually devoted to laying the foundations of Moses's character and thus reveals some of what defines Moses.

At this point, we do not as yet know who his parents are; they, like everyone else he encounters in Egypt, remain anonymous. We do, however, know something about them – they are both Levites. A Levite man went and took a Levite woman (2:1). That makes Moses a pure-bred Levite, the significance of which is clear to anyone familiar with Levi in Genesis. He was a zealot who, together with his older brother Shimon, massacred the town of Shechem as punishment for the rape and kidnapping of their sister, Dinah (Gen. 34). We should not be surprised, then, that the first story we hear about Moses highlights his zealous nature as he kills the Egyptian who is beating the Hebrew man. And while it is unclear if Moses intended to kill the Egyptian or merely to strike him,[12] the rage which impelled him to intervene violently should not surprise us given his pedigree. It is that same outrage which pushes him to intervene on the following day, when he encounters the two quarreling Hebrews and later to save the daughters of the Midianite priest from the male shepherds who were bullying them.

While there is a pattern in his behavior, there appears to be a lessening of the intensity of his reaction. While he kills the Egyptian offender, he verbally rebukes the assaulting Hebrew and we do not even know how he "saves" the Midianite women. It could be argued that Moses is so shaken by the fact that he killed a man that he restrains himself, and even runs from the source of provocation so that he should not have to deal with it again. That makes Moses, with deep convictions and values, the zealot who does not want to be one.[13]

Beyond the zealotry, there seem to be two additional, intertwined elements of his character which emerge from this opening series of

12. The word used to describe Moses's act, *vayakh* (2:12), comes from the same root as the word used to describe that which the Egyptian was doing to the Hebrew in the previous verse, as well as what one Hebrew was doing to the other on the subsequent day (2:13).

13. For a more in-depth exploration of this, see Grumet, *Moses and the Path to Leadership*, 27–45. Leon Kass points out that neither killing the Egyptian nor rebuking

events: his compassion for those being abused by others who are more powerful, and his sense of justice. While it seems that his zealotry may have been part of his Levite heritage, his compassion seems to be have been nurtured by the loving women who hovered over him in his early years – the loving mother who hid him for three months and prepared to continue to do so in the Nile reeds, the caring sister who stood guard from a distance and creatively leapt into action to return him to his mother, and the compassion displayed by Pharaoh's daughter from the moment she saw him through his maturity. The fearlessness of all those women in doing the right thing, despite the risks and dangers, may have contributed to his sense of justice.

Again, with Genesis lurking in the background, these values do not stand in isolation. God and Abraham found each other because of their shared value of justice and righteousness, *tzedaka* and *mishpat* (Gen. 19:19).[14] The sense of compassion and responsibility that are evident in Abraham's relationship with Lot (especially Gen. 14), the value of hosting in his hospitality to travelers, and the qualities of kindness which Abraham's servant sought in a spouse for Isaac (Gen. 24) reflect on Abraham's values as well. Not only does Moses's commitment to justice echo Abraham, the scene at the well supersedes Abraham's hospitality and Rebecca's kindness at the well, as Moses is the uninvited guest performing the kindness for the ones who do not know yet that they will be his hosts.[15]

A zealot, filled with compassion for the weak and committed to justice, and reflecting the core values of the patriarchs. Could there be a more suitable savior for the people?

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the Hebrew actually change anything. In this sense, Moses's actions are similar to those of Shifrah and Puah – morally courageous, lifesaving on the micro-scale, but naively ineffective in the broader picture.

14. See Grumet, *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant*, 201.
15. Jacob at the well (Gen. 29:1–10) similarly inverts the scene in which his mother offers Abraham's servant water, as he is the guest offering assistance to the host. In Jacob's case, he is inspired by having arrived at his uncle's house and by the arrival of his cousin Rachel. In Moses's case, he has no prior knowledge of who these women are.

MOSES THE MAN

One of the interesting features of the description of Moses's birth and early life is the disappearing man, the *ish*. The narrative opens by telling us about a man, and we think that the story will be about him. To our surprise, the man is never to be heard from again.[16] Instead, Moses is surrounded by strong, compassionate, devoted women, who dominate the first half of the chapter.

The second half of the chapter is marked by no fewer than eight appearances of the word *ish*, referring to the Egyptian taskmaster, the Hebrew slave being beaten, the two quarreling Hebrews, Yitro, the non-existent witness to Moses's smiting the Egyptian[17] – and three times to Moses himself. Moses emerges as the *ish* where there is no other,[18] and is identified as the *ish* as he rebukes the Hebrews, saves Yitro's daughters, and is invited by Yitro to dine.

Highlighting Moses as the man in Exodus 2 builds on the patriarchal qualities he displays and strengthens our sense that God has identified the savior. Which only accentuates our disappointment to discover that he has disappeared. That same frustration experienced when the boy is returned to his mother in the false happy ending and subsequently ends up in the house of his adoptive mother is magnified even more when we meet him and learn about his character. He is bold and audacious, raised by a rebellious mother in Pharaoh's own house, compassionate and just, and a blend of the qualities we respect so much in our ancestral heroes.

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16. The type scene of the disappearing man appears a number of other times in the Bible. Manoah, Samson's father, is introduced that way but the rest of the story mocks him as irrelevant (Judges 13). Elkanah, Samuel's father, is similarly introduced, even though his wife, Hannah, will take centerstage (I Sam. 1). Elimelech, Naomi's husband, is also presented that way in the opening lines of Ruth (1:1–2); he dies in the following verse.
17. Moses's realization that there was no *ish* to witness his act was the precursor to his striking out. There were obviously Hebrews around, as revealed in the subsequent scene, but Moses was unafraid of them as witnesses, as there would be little reason for them to report one Egyptian (Moses) smiting another.
18. The juxtaposition of the lack of there being an *ish* with Moses's rising to the occasion is likely the foundation for the Mishna (Avot 2:5): Where there are no stand-up people (*anashim*), strive to be one (*ish*).

But he runs – from Pharaoh and perhaps even from his own self. Unable to bear witness to suffering and injustice, he settles into the quiet pastoral life as a Midianite shepherd.[19] He is the anti-Egyptian who keeps company with sheep – gentle creatures incapable of cruelty. He is the rock, the island, who allows no one to touch him.

But he, in turn, touches no one.

The story begins with his birth and closes with the birth of his own son, a son he names. Moses transforms his story into an ordinary life cycle – birth, marriage, and another generation. There is nothing unusual or special about him.

The hero has gone missing.

GOD'S RETURN

The disappearance of the savior frustrates not only us, the readers, but God Himself. The entire story of Moses's birth and rescue were a departure from the opening narrative describing the intensifying suffering of Israel under Pharaoh's increasingly harsh decrees, a departure which was designed to introduce hope into a bleak, seemingly hopeless situation. Perhaps the accidental concert of the mother, the sister, and the princess was not happenstance; perhaps there was a guiding hand which brought Pharaoh's daughter to exactly that place at that time to help facilitate Moses's emergence on the scene. But the great hope that God shepherded has fled the scene to live as a Midianite shepherd.

It is at that point that the narrative returns to Israel's story, not that of Moses. Pharaoh dies, but instead of bringing relief to Israel it seems like Israel's position in Egypt has been sealed, fixed, permanently institutionalized as slaves.[20] They groan from under the load.[21]

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19. There is a parallel between this story and the story of Cain. In both, the central character begins in a land of agriculture. There is a killing, perhaps unintended, followed by a flight into exile where the central character marries and has children. The story of Cain continues with a shift in Cain's way of life, with his becoming a city dweller rather than a farmer, while the story of Moses concludes with his becoming a shepherd, the quintessential Hebrew lifestyle.
20. See the comments of Bekhor Shor; Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides; and Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch on 2:22.
21. It should be noted that the text does not say that they cried out to God. Their cry

Little do they know that there was a potential savior who decided not to be involved. But God knows, and in the absence of a human actor, He decides that the time has come to act. He hears their cries, sees their pain, and remembers the covenant with their ancestors.[22] Bound by His oath to the patriarchs, God's intervention is inevitable.

Unlike His involvement in Genesis, where He single-handedly undid the Creation with the water of the Great Confusion or overturned Sodom with fire and brimstone, God is committed to freeing His people and fulfilling His covenant through partnership with a human agent. On one level, this is a continuation of the shift which began with the patriarchal covenant, in which God prefers to interact with His partners who, in turn, interact with humanity. On another level this will serve a purpose to which the Torah has only hinted until now. The people who will be freed from Egypt need to be forged into a nation – a nation which, despite its special relationship with God, will be like many others, with internal structures and institutions. That nation will need leadership, human leadership. God's partner will be that leader.

Recruiting that partner will prove more challenging than anticipated.

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was one of hopeless anguish, not a prayer or a call for assistance.

22. Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides (3:6), notes that the four verbs in the text – seeing, hearing, remembering, and knowing – are precisely those God mentions in His opening monologue to Moses in Exodus 3.

Exodus 3:1–4:16

Recruiting Moses

Moses, the Midianite shepherd, seeks nothing more than good grazing for his sheep. That's what the wilderness is for. The particular area he was in at that moment may have been drier than others,[1] but it was fine for the low bushes which grew there and on which his father-in-law's sheep could feed – and it minimized the likelihood of his running into other shepherds there.

The initial encounter between Moses and God is unlike the ones between God and the Genesis heroes – Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God approaches each of them without introduction, providing a command, a promise, or a message of comfort. They were apparently primed for those messages, as they did not flinch when God spoke with each of them. But Moses is different. He is a man who fled his past and seems content with his newfound life. God needs to draw him in, to draw his attention, to spark his curiosity. That's what the bush is for. Will Moses notice it, the way he noticed suffering in Egypt? Will he look at the bush long enough to realize the curious nature of this fire – that it burns but does not consume?

1. The name Horeb (Ḥorev) means "dry." See, for example, 14:21.