



Some Words of Appreciation

WHILE THE IDEAS IN these pages are my own, I have benefited from the partnership of many in creating this volume. Their care, attention, generosity, and wisdom helped transform mere ruminations into the volume you hold in your hands.

Chief among those partners are Ronny and Toby Hersh, the patrons of this five-volume series of books. Ronny and Toby have dedicated the series to the memory of their parents, Abraham and Esther Hersh, *z"l* and Moshe and Rivka Zytelny, *z"l*, whose own personal stories were great journeys in their own right. The first volume of the series contains an appreciation of their lives; I am honored that this series of volumes bears their name.

This particular volume of the series (essays on Shemot) has been generously sponsored by Dan and Jamie Schwartz, in honor of their children and grandchildren. I originally got to know Dan and Jamie over a Pesach we spent together a few years back. One of the first things that impressed me about them was how eager they were not just to learn Torah themselves, but to share the depth of that learning widely. Ultimately, their vision was to open up the treasures of the Torah's wisdom even to those who never benefited from a traditional yeshiva background. Early on, Dan and Jamie found a trusted partner in these endeavors: They befriended Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz, and helped him spearhead a groundbreaking series of books that made basic parsha study (and ultimately, basic Gemara learning, as well) accessible to novices of all ages. In sponsoring this volume of the *Parsha Companion*, they are taking this vision another step forward, and I am grateful to partner with them in these efforts.

I would also like to acknowledge Legacy Heritage Fund for its generous support to help make this series of books possible. The foundation focuses much of its effort on supporting Jewish education in innovative and trendsetting ways. I am honored that Legacy Heritage Fund has chosen to include this series of books among the many worthy projects they've chosen to support.

Many have helped take mere words and craft out of those words the book that you hold in your hands. I am greatly indebted to these good folks, so let me introduce you to them:

First, Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, and the rest of the team at Koren/Maggid have been spectacular to work with. They are proudly bringing a new generation of original Jewish thought to the public, one beautiful book at a time, and we are all enriched by their efforts.

Shoshana Brody (from Aleph Beta) capably and carefully managed the production of this volume, and helped edit and sharpen just about each and every essay. Immanuel Shalev and Beth Lesch (from Aleph Beta), as well as Debbie Ismailoff and Ita Olesker (from Koren), lent their editing talents to this work as well. Rabbis Eli Raful and Elinatan Kupferberg contributed valuable research. The beautiful cover design was created by Cory Rockliff, who also designed the series' overall aesthetic, while the pages of this volume were crafted by Estie Dishon.

Many of the ideas in this book on Shemot had their *own* genesis, as it were, in parsha videos I created with the help and support of the amazing team at Aleph Beta (you can find those videos at www.alephbeta.org). I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge, with gratitude, those behind the scenes who have, over the years, helped to transform Aleph Beta from mere idea, to fledgling startup, to a viable, going concern: its founders, board of directors, and officers. They are Etta Brandman, Alan Broder, David Hamburger, Jeff Haskell, Josh Malin, David Pollack, Donny Rosenberg, Robbie Rothenberg, Dan Schwartz (who, with his wife, is also the sponsor for this volume), Kutya Shalev, Steve Wagner, and Moishe Wolfson. I want to thank, as well, the manifold subscribers of Aleph Beta, who each support our work in ways great and small, and provide us with meaningful feedback, appreciation, as well as a dose of constructive criticism. It is a privilege to take this journey through Torah along with you; having you by our side gives us the drive and motivation to continue.

I want to also take this opportunity to recognize three men, each of whom is no longer with us; all three played an outsized role in nurturing my development over the years. My father, Moshe Fohrman, *z"l*, passed away when I was quite young, but he taught me so much about life, people, and relationships in the short years we had together; his love and influence continues to pervade my work. My stepfather, Zev Wolfson, *z"l*, a man of towering accomplishments, took me under his wing, believed in me,

and helped me thrive. LeRoy Hoffberger, *z”l*, a bulwark of the Baltimore Jewish community, became a dear friend and mentor. Roy and I first met when he attended a class that I taught at the Johns Hopkins University; he took a keen interest in my work and ultimately helped give it life by creating the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies. The love of all three I shall carry with me as long as the One Above deigns that I walk the earth.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my family. My wife, Reena, and my kids—Moshe, Shalva, Avigail, Shana, Yael, Ariella, and Avichai—what can I say? They are not only wonderful in and of themselves; they have built a network of love and support for one another that makes me proud. In times of quarantine, when it is all too natural to feel jittery and on edge, their good cheer and love have been a welcome and refreshing constant in my life. Beyond that, they have helped shape this book in ways great and small, for they really are *my* “parsha companions.” Many of the ideas contained in these pages were born, shaped, or refined in animated discussions with them around the Shabbos table. I treasure those moments: Learning Torah with my family is a constant opportunity to talk about things that matter deeply with people I care about the most—and what could be better than that?

Rabbi David Fohrman

Inwood, NY
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Introduction

Exodus: A Book of Names?

SHEMOT. IN ENGLISH, NAMES. What a strange title for a book of the Torah. Why call it that?

The simple answer, of course, is that *shemot*, “names,” show up in the very beginning of the book. It begins with these words:

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם

These are the names of the Children
of Israel who came to Egypt.

Exodus 1:1

And then, in just two verses, the Torah goes ahead and recounts the names of the children of Jacob who had come down to Egypt back in the days of Joseph. But allow me to pose this question to you: Do you really think this is a good reason to name the book *Shemot*?

The English and Latin translators of the Torah evidently didn't seem to think so. They routinely speak of the book of *Shemot* as “the book of Exodus.”

Exodus. Now *that* would seem like a very good name for this book. After all, the Exodus from Egypt really is *the* great event that dominates the book. Indeed, once we are done with the first two verses of *Shemot*, the Torah seems to drop the idea of names like a hot potato and moves on to the story of the Israelites' enslavement and subsequent redemption from Egypt, a saga that dominates the next twenty or so chapters of text. So, if you're looking for a theme to name a book of the Torah after, “Exodus” seems perfect: The Exodus redemption narrative is riveting — it's got suffering, drama, miracles, redemption, you name it. So “Exodus” seems like a terrific name for this book. But in Hebrew, that's not what we call it. We call it *Shemot*, the Book of Names.

Why?

I want to suggest that an answer to this question may lie buried in the very first comment made by Rashi in this book. I want to read it together with you and see if we can make sense of what he's trying to get at.

Rashi's Starting Point

Rashi looks at the copious list of names the Torah gives in the first verses of Exodus and wonders why it was necessary. For, as it happens, the Torah has already listed the names of those who came down to Egypt, all the way back in the book of Genesis. Yes, that's correct; back in Genesis, right at the moment when Joseph's family comes down to Egypt, we have this verse:

Genesis 46:8

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרַיִם יַעֲקֹב וּבָנָיו
בְּכֹר יַעֲקֹב רְאוּבֵן:

These are the names of the Children of Israel who came to Egypt: Jacob and his descendants; Jacob's firstborn, Reuven.

From there, the text in Genesis goes on to list not only the names of the twelve children of Jacob who came down to Egypt, but the names of *their* children, too. Moreover, take a glance at the syntax of that verse back in Genesis, and you'll notice that it is identical to the opening verse in Exodus. Both begin with the exact same words:

Genesis 46:8

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרַיִם יַעֲקֹב
וּבָנָיו בְּכֹר יַעֲקֹב רְאוּבֵן:

These are the names of the Children of Israel who came to Egypt: Jacob and his descendants; Jacob's firstborn, Reuven.

Exodus 1:1

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרַיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב
אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:

These are the names of the Children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household.

So Rashi's question, to open *Sefer Shemot*, is: *We've heard all this already.* We don't need another recitation of the names of those who came down to Egypt. Not only is such a recitation tangential to the theme of the book, it is also just repetitious, plain and simple.

Rashi's Answer

To resolve his question, Rashi cites a midrash. Let's read his language together and try to understand clearly what he is telling us:

אֵע"פּ שֶׁמִּנְאָן
בְּחַיֵּיהֶם בְּשִׁמוֹתָם,
חָזַר וּמְנָאֵם בְּמִיתָתָם,
לְהוֹדִיעַ חֲבָתָם,
שֶׁנִּמְשְׁלוּ לְכוֹכְבִּים,
שֶׁמוֹצִיאֵם וּמְכַנִּיסֵם
בְּמִסְפָּר וּבְשִׁמוֹתָם שֶׁנִּי
"הַמוֹצִיא בְּמִסְפָּר
צָבָאֵם לְכֹלָם בְּשֵׁם
יִקְרָא."

Although the Torah counted the Children of Israel in their lifetimes [back in the book of Genesis], still [the Torah] went back and counted them [at the beginning of Exodus] when they died, to let you know how dear they were [to the Almighty], inasmuch as they were compared to the stars. [For when it comes to the stars, we know that] God brings them out and returns them by number and by name, as it says [in Isaiah 40:26]: "He takes out the stars according to their number, and all of them He calls by name."

Rashi, from
Exodus Rabbah
1:3; Tanchuma
Yashan 1:1:2

Now, at face value, what Rashi tells us here is puzzling, for it is not immediately clear exactly how he has answered his question. Rashi seems to think that his question disappears, as it were, once we realize that the people of Israel are compared by the Almighty to stars. Stars get named, so we get named. Stars apparently get named twice: once at night, when God "takes them out," so to speak, and once in the morning, when He snuggles them back in their resting places, so that they can come back out again the next night. So... just like the stars, it seems to follow that we, too, should get named twice: once when the Children of Israel are alive, when they first come down to Egypt, and once when they are dying out, at the beginning of Exodus.

The comparison of Israel to stars, though, sounds fanciful, even whimsical. What, if anything, is the midrash that Rashi cites really trying to get at here? I think the midrash is alluding to something very deep. Here's how we might puzzle out its meaning.

Like the Stars

The midrash says that the key to understanding the naming of Israel in the beginning of Exodus is to remember that Israel is compared to stars. To begin to understand the significance of this, we need to ask: Exactly *when* did it happen that Israel was compared to stars? The midrash just states that it happened, putting it out there as a blind fact, assuming the reader immediately understands what event in the Torah it is referencing. But *when*, as a matter of fact, was that comparison to stars actually made?

The answer, of course, is that it happened in the times of Abraham.

Back in Genesis, chapter 15, Abraham had worried that he was an old man but he did not yet have an heir. Who would carry on his legacy? And in response to his fear, God had told him to go outside:

Genesis 15:5

<p>הַבֶּט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה וְרַעֲךָ:</p>	<p>“Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And [God] said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”</p>
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In telling Abraham that his children would be like the stars, God was issuing an almost playful challenge: *Can you count the stars? Just try counting them.* The implication, of course, is: *Abraham, you can't count them. They're not countable. They are innumerable! And that's how your children will be, too.*

So isn't that interesting: The moment the Almighty first associated the Children of Israel with stars was the moment God also brought up the idea of counting them. And *that* brings us face-to-face with a fascinating paradox. For when, in Genesis, God told Abraham that the nation of Israel will be like the stars, God's real point to him was that his descendants would be ... *impossible* to count. They would be innumerable. But now, here comes this midrash, and it references this very moment in Genesis, this promise that God made to Abraham that his descendants will be like

the stars — and what does the midrash make of that? That God, as a token of love, treats us just like the stars and *counts* each one of us. So the midrash seems to be directly at odds with the plain sense of the text! Are we countable, like the midrash suggests, or uncountable, like God once told Abraham?

Countable or Uncountable? It Depends

The answer, I would suggest, is: It depends on when.

To explain, what God was really telling Abraham back in Genesis was that, *at a certain point in time*, your children are going to become virtually innumerable. I think we can agree that, in its plain meaning, that is really the point of the verse. So let me ask you: *When*, historically, did that actually happen? When did God’s promise actually come true?

The answer, interestingly enough, would have to be: *Right at the beginning of the book of Exodus.*

Yes, right there at the beginning of Exodus. Look at what happens right after the Torah goes and counts the people by name:

וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחָיו וְכָל
הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ
וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֵד
מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם:

Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. And the Israelites were fertile and they swarmed; they multiplied, and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

Exodus 1:6–7

An incredible population explosion takes place, and it happens, according to the text, right after the death of Joseph and his brothers. It was *then*, with the advent of that population explosion, that the Children of Israel started to become “innumerable.” It was then that they began to make the transition from family to nation, from a small family clan whose cousins you more or less knew by name, to a nation whose population seemed virtually innumerable, to a people so big that nobody really knows everybody anymore.

It turns out, then, that what God told Abraham was, on the one hand, a great blessing. But the blessing also had a potential downside to it as well. It contained, inherently, a bit of a darker side...

The Dark Side of “Uncountable”

“Your progeny will go from being a mere family to a teeming nation.” “They’ll be like the stars.” “You’ll be unable to count them.” When you put it like that, it all seems wonderful; to father a whole nation is an amazing blessing. But on the other hand, what happens when a group makes the transition from family to nation? Knowing the numbers starts to become hard. Knowing the *names* becomes hard.

Names and numbers. You’re a kid in middle school. What does it say to you when, in your rather large class, the teacher doesn’t even know how many of you there are in the room? Or when the teacher loses track of your names and mixes up Deloris and Doris? What does it say when you have seventy-eight grandchildren — *or was it seventy-nine?* — and you mix up Shloime with Shimmy, and the prospect of attending yet another bar mitzvah party two and a half hours down the New Jersey Turnpike starts to seem less and less appealing? There’s a kind of intimacy that can get lost as a family goes from a family to a clan, from a clan to a nation. What can get lost is the sense that each and every individual ... really matters.

It is this issue, I would argue, that the midrash intends to address. Yes, God had told Abraham that his children will eventually be like the stars. *Can he count the stars? Can anyone?* It might seem like a loss of intimacy, a loss of individual purpose, is inevitable when this blessing comes to fruition. But that is where the midrash comes in ...

The Stars: Man’s Perspective and God’s Perspective

The midrash notes that just at the point in history when Israel made the transition from an easily countable family group to a virtually innumerable mass of people that would form a nation, the Torah insisted on something. It insisted upon naming the people and counting them. And it does so twice:

Exodus 1:1

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם

These are the names of the Children of
Israel who came to Egypt.

Why? The midrash suggests that, at this juncture in history, it is as if God is completing the promise He once made to Abraham. It is as if God is

saying to Abraham: You, an ordinary human being, may be unable to count your progeny, once they become like the stars. But that's you. *Not Me*. For precisely at the moment the people of Israel are poised to become innumerable, it is then that God stops to tell us, and all future generations, their names; and it is then that He stops to tell us how many there were. Why? *Because God treats them just like the stars*.

A human being looks at the stars and, face it, they all look the same. The innumerable points of light are impressive, but they seem virtually interchangeable. *Who even knows how many of them there are up there?* But that is a human being's way of looking at the stars; it is not *God's* way of looking at the stars. That's the point of the verse the midrash quotes in Isaiah: "God counts the stars, and deals with each one by name." The Almighty does so, the midrash suggests, every night when the stars first come out, and then one more time, in the morning, when the stars seem to melt away and die in the growing, brightening dawn.

Even as we become innumerable, God can and does count us — because in His eyes, each of us counts. Even as we become innumerable, God knows our names — because in His eyes, each of us matters. Only a human gets dizzy staring at the multitudes that comprise a nation. Not God. In our Maker's eyes, we are all stars.

Slavery and Stars

Let's return to our question about the name of this book. It is the Book of Names, not the book of Exodus. Why? Or, to put that question more sharply, the dominant theme in this book is clearly slavery and our miraculous deliverance from it. Does the designation of this book as *Shemot*, *Names*, completely deviate from that theme... or does it somehow relate to it?

I think that perhaps the latter is the case. I want to suggest that the name of the book indeed relates to the themes of slavery, oppression, and deliverance that make up the book's central theme. Given what we've seen above, the word "names" may actually have something powerful to say about that.

Go back for a moment to the title of the first book of the Torah, Genesis. Why name it that? The most obvious answer is that the book begins with the story of creation, and hence, the name *Bereishit*, or Genesis, which means "the beginning." But creation is only the first story in the book.

Why name the *whole* book after that? Is it just a matter of convenience and happenstance — the word *bereishit* appears in the first verse of the book — or might the name also somehow relate to the themes of the book as a whole?

The answer may well be that the first book of the Torah deals with more than one kind of creation. It is not just a universe that first comes into being in that book, but a people: The genesis of the people of Israel takes place in the first book of the Torah. Indeed, when does Genesis come to an end? It ends, fittingly enough, at the last moment of this “beginning.” The people, still one large, extended family, have made their way down to Egypt. Their future has been secured with the lifesaving grain Joseph provides to his brothers and their families. And yet, slavery looms on the horizon...

That is where Genesis ends. And the very first event in the Torah’s next book, the book of *Shemot*, marks a new stage in the life of the people. Just after giving us the names of those who came down to Egypt, *Shemot* tells of a population explosion that occurred in Egypt. With that sudden ballooning of numbers, the people are becoming not just a family, but an incipient nation. And so... the book is called “Names.” Why? Not only because in the very first verses, the people get named. That’s only half the story. Just as there was more than one reason to call Genesis “Genesis,” there is also more than one reason to call *Shemot*... *Names*. Which is to say: Just as in Genesis, there was an overt moment of creation at the beginning of the book, but a larger, more subtle process of creation would unfold that would span the whole book (the creation of the family of Israel), more deeply justifying the name “Genesis”... so it is with the Book of Names, too. The people are overtly named by God, in just a verse or two, at the beginning of the book, but the book is called *Names* for a reason that pervades the book as a whole. It is as if the name of the book were saying: *God continues to know our names, to keep track of each and every one, throughout all the events that happen in the book.*

For, after all, what *does* happen in the book?

In this book, not only do we attain the numbers to become a nation. That’s the nice part of the book. The not-so-nice part is what happens to us, just as we reach this stage of maturation: We are brutally enslaved. Our babies are thrown into the Nile. We become victims of brutality, of history’s first quasi-genocidal act of anti-Semitism.

It is a dark moment in history, a moment when God seems to hide His face. And yet... it is *still* the Book of Names. It is as if the title of the book itself suggests that even in our moments of greatest suffering, God knows our names. God attends to each and every one of us, individually. For consider this: When, after all, was it that God told Abraham that his children would be like the stars? It was immediately before He told him something else:

<p>יָדַעַ תִּדַעַ כִּי גַר יְהִיִה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעַבְדוּם וְעִנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה:</p>	<p>You shall know, yes know, that your progeny will be strangers in a land not their own. And [the inhabitants of that land] will enslave them, and oppress them, for four hundred years.</p>
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Genesis 15:13

It was as if God were saying to Abraham: *Yes, there is darkness on the horizon. But know this: You will be like stars to Me. Never forget that.* To a human, individual stars may not matter. But you and I *see stars differently*. God names the stars and counts them. Even in your darkest moments, in My eyes, you still continue to shine.

In the end, perhaps when we call the book *Names* we are not attempting to evade discussion of Egyptian enslavement. On the contrary, this, itself, is a way we talk about that enslavement. Through it all, God knows our names. He cares about each and every one of us, in all of our pain, all of our anguish. For we are like stars, indeed.