

Parashat Shemot שמות

Torah: Exodus 1:1– 6:1

Haftarah: Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22–23

God's Apparent Silence

General Overview

This week's Torah portion begins to tell one of the most famous stories of all human history — the story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. God Himself offers an outline to help explain this portion. The outline is found in Exodus 2:23–25:

During those many days it happened that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to God. God *heard* their groaning, and God *remembered* His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God *saw* the children of Israel; and God *knew* (Italics and translation author's).

Exposition

The verbs of this verse will determine our outline for us in our exposition of Parashat Shemot:

- I. God Heard Their Moaning
- II. God Remembered His Covenant
- III. God Saw the Children of Israel
- IV. God Knew

In this excerpt from Parashat Shemot, we will focus on section I, God Heard Their Moaning.

I. God Heard Their Moaning

A. *God's Apparent Silence*

When is enough, enough? The answer, if you are God, is when your will has duly been carried out. Through two whole chapters, the cries, the moans, and the groans of the people of Israel because of the harsh Egyptian servitude have been screaming from the pages. What was the point of all this suffering among the children of Israel? Throughout the first two chapters, God's name is not even mentioned. It is as if He had forsaken His chosen people!

The fact is, however, God meant exactly what He had told Jacob when he first came down to Egypt. God said, "I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again..." (Genesis 46:4). Even amidst the misery of their back-breaking labour, God was there. Even though we do not read of God speaking in the first two chapters, He was, nevertheless, listening. Indeed, He was silent, but in His silence He was accomplishing several important things.

B. Chastening

First, God was in the process of chastening His children. When Jacob first went down to Egypt, he went with the intention of merely sojourning there. It was supposed to be a temporary stay, but, as was observed in previous parashiyot, the temporary stay turned into a permanent dwelling. Israel began to be allured by whatever attractions Egypt had to offer. In short, they began to assimilate and lose their family distinctiveness. The *Shemot Rabbah* comments on this idea, although with a slight exaggeration, when it says,

when Joseph died, they abrogated the rite of circumcision. They said, "Let us be like the Egyptians. Because they did do that, the Holy One Blessed be He turned the love which the Egyptians bore them into hatred."¹

Thus, instead of settling down and buying houses, the children of Israel should have been making plans to leave Egypt as soon as possible. In all fairness, they were living in some of the most fertile land in all of Egypt, just on the eastern edge of the Nile River delta. In a time of famine, at least there was water and grazing land for their flocks. Nevertheless, Canaan was the Promised Land. The children of Israel should have left the land of temptation and come up to their Promised Land when the famine subsided. Instead, by remaining in Egypt, the people made themselves completely vulnerable to all of Egyptian culture, in which, they may have begun to participate. Because of this, God was in the painful process of disciplining His children. "Accordingly, Israel's sin lay in imitating the ways of the surrounding people and attempting to lose their identity."²

Throughout their history, every time Israel fell into the sin of assimilation, it always ended up in slavery, as it did in Egypt. The Jews of 19th and 20th century Germany were, perhaps, one of the most assimilated of all Jewish generations. All of us know the horrible outcome resulting in slavery in the death camps. Assimilation, therefore, invariably leads to moaning and groaning.

C. Spiritual Growth

A second reason for God's apparent silence is that He was causing some deep spiritual growth in the people of Israel, as a people. This Torah portion is the first time since the story of Adam that a single individual is not at the center of the story. That changes later in chapter two where Moshe comes to the forefront. At the beginning of Exodus it is not an individual, but a *people* who are in the limelight — the children of Israel. Exodus tells how God prepared them for both redemption and for nationhood.

This process of preparation is described by Scripture as refining. It pictures the children of Israel as a piece of precious metal such as gold, and the harsh servitude as the refiner where impurities are burnt away and the pure precious metal is left. Other Scriptures also refer to the slavery story by these terms. For example, Deuteronomy 4:20 says, "The Lord took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are." Isaiah also expresses it in a similar manner by saying, "See, I have refined you, not as silver, I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10).

Hence, there *had* to be moans and groans for Israel. It was God's way of preparing them to be a nation. It was, as many would say today, "no pain, no gain!" A modern Jewish thinker, Nehama Leibowitz, put it in a more refined and powerful way:

Exile is an experience that stands on an equal footing with the revelation at Sinai and settlement in the promised land...but for it, Israel would have been reduced to the dead level of all the nations, like other people that have nothing else but a country and a government, wrapped up in their four cubits of mundane time-killing existence and lowest common culture. What they need is exile, not revolutions, internationals or league of nations but exile plain and simple, that will refine, purify and teach them to understand the meaning of the universe, of men, of fellowship, compassion, truth, and justice.³

Yet, another descendant of Jacob stated it like this:

Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4,NASB).

Thus, in their terrible slavery, God was using the refining process. He was perfecting a people in holiness and in the process, preparing a nation.

D. To Learn

There is, yet, a third reason for the slavery. This one is more positive. It was, as Nechama Leibowitz calls it, "an educational purpose."⁴ Through their slavery in Egypt, God was teaching Israel many "object lessons" which could be used to teach profound spiritual truth.

There are many such lessons throughout the Torah. One such object lesson is found in the concept of being a "stranger." For example, the Lord tells His people, "Do not ill-treat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt." (Exodus 22:21). How was Israel to know how to treat a stranger? It was by remembering what it was like when *they* were strangers in Egypt.

E. A Redemption Picture

Finally, a fourth reason for the slavery was that God was preparing the children of Israel for redemption. They would never know the depth of God's mercy if they did not experience the hopeless bondage of slavery. They would not fully understand the freedom of redemption if they never experienced the shackles of servitude.

In this servitude and the preparations for redemption, God was beginning to paint a carefully crafted portrait of the person and work of Yeshua, our Deliverer and Redeemer, who set us free from the slavery of personal sin. In the Egyptian slavery, God was busy painting a picture of the hopelessness, the horrors, the bondage, and the futility of slavery to self and sin. This is needed to help convince sinners of their need for personal redemption found in the One who is greater than Moshe — Yeshua.

Thus, there was a lot of Israelite mourning in the first few chapters of Exodus. This suffering was further exacerbated by God's apparent silence, but even though it seemed like God was staying aloof during the Israelite servitude in

Egypt, He was not inactive. He told us that He, indeed, heard the moaning of their suffering in slavery. Consequently, He was accomplishing significant, redemptive things that most would not have noticed.

¹ Shemot Rabbah 1.8

² Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot*, 3.

³ Ibid, 9–10.

⁴ Ibid, 3.