

# 1.

## Shemot

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### Me or We?

*Is There Space for Both?*



*Dedicated to Michael and Fiona Scharf, in recognition of  
their support and partnership with JLI in bringing Torah  
study to small communities across the globe.*

## PARSHAH OVERVIEW

### *Shemot*

The Children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Pu'ah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile.

A child is born to Jochebed, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram. This baby is placed in a basket on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his people. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and kills the Egyptian. The next day, he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of

the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There, he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Zipporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Moses's brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe them, but Pharaoh refuses to let them go and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest, "Why have You done evil to this people?" G-d promises that their redemption is close at hand.

## I. CHOOSE YOUR LANE

*Back to Work*

### TEXT 1

EXODUS 5:4

לָמָּה מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן תַּפְרִיעוּ אֶת הָעָם מִמַּעֲשֵׂיו, לָכֵן לִסְבֹּלְתֵיכֶם:

Why, Moses and Aaron, do you disturb the people? Return to your labors.

*The Levitical Exception*

### TEXT 2A

RABBI CHEZKIAH BEN MANOACH, *CHIZKUNI*, AD LOC.

כששעבדו מצרים בישראל, מתחילה היה פרעה משעבד עצמו עמהם כדי שיתאמצו במלאכה . . . באותה שעה נזכר שבטו של לוי מה שצוה יעקב בשעת פטירתו - שלא ישאהו לוי לפי שהיה עתיד לשאת את ארון הקודש, ולא רצה לשעבד את עצמו ולא הכריחם פרעה. מיום ההוא והלאה הוקבע להיות משועבד כל מי ששעבד עצמו.

When the Egyptians first compelled the Jews to work for them, Pharaoh worked alongside them so they would be motivated to work hard. . . . The tribe of Levi recalled that Jacob had forbidden his son Levi to carry his casket at his funeral because Levi's sons would one day carry the holy ark. The Levites, therefore, refused to submit to Egypt, and Pharaoh did not compel them. [It turned out that] only those who chose to be subjugated that first day remained in bondage.

**Rabbi Chezariah ben Mano'ach**  
(*Chizkuni*)

c. 1250–1310

French rabbi and exegete. His commentary on the Torah, *Chizkuni*, is based principally on the work of Rashi and, according to the author's testimony, also draws upon nearly 20 earlier sources that he collected during his travels. He focuses on elucidating the straightforward meaning of the text of the Torah.

## TEXT 2B

NACHMANIDES, AD LOC.

ומנהג בכל עם להיות להם חכמים מורי תורתם, ולכן הניח להם פרעה  
שבט לוי שהיו חכמיהם וזקניהם.  
והכל סיבה מאת ה'.

It is the custom of every nation to have wise people who pre-serve and pass on the [nation's] heritage. Pharaoh released the tribe of Levi from bondage so they could serve as the wise men and elders of the people.

And this was all orchestrated by G-d in Heaven.

### *Two Forms of Labor*

## TEXT 3

RASHI, EXODUS 5:4

לכו למלאכתכם שיש לכם לעשות בבתיכם, אבל מלאכת שעבוד  
מצרים לא היתה על שבטו של לוי.  
ותדע לך שהרי משה ואהרן יוצאים ובאים שלא ברשות.

Go to your labors that await you in your homes. But the tribe of Levi was exempt from bondage.

The proof is that Moses and Aaron came in and out of the palace at will.

**Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman  
(Nachmanides, Ramban)  
1194–1270**

Scholar, philosopher, author, and physician. Nachmanides was born in Spain and served as leader of Iberian Jewry. In 1263, he was summoned by King James of Aragon to a public disputation with Pablo Cristiani, a Jewish apostate. Though Nachmanides was the clear victor of the debate, he had to flee Spain because of the resulting persecution. He moved to Israel and helped reestablish communal life in Jerusalem. He authored a classic commentary on the Pentateuch and a commentary on the Talmud.

**Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki  
(Rashi)  
1040–1105**

Most noted biblical and Talmudic commentator. Born in Troyes, France, Rashi studied in the famed *yeshivot* of Mainz and Worms. His commentaries on the Pentateuch and the Talmud, which focus on the straightforward meaning of the text, appear in virtually every edition of the Talmud and Bible.

## TEXT 4

RABBI BACHYA BEN ASHER IBN HALAWA, AD LOC.

ובמדרש: "אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: שבטו של לוי פנוי היה מעבודת פרך."  
אמר להם פרעה: "בשביל שאתם פנוים אתם אומרים נלכה נזבחה  
לאלוקינו. לכו לסבלותיכם לישראל."

In the Midrash: Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said, "The tribe of Levi was exempt from backbreaking labor."

Pharaoh said to Moses and Aaron, "You propose to leave Egypt and go worship your G-d because you have too much time on your hands. [Therefore,] go join the rest of the Jews in slave labor."

**Rabbi Bachya ben  
Asher ibn Halawa  
(Rabbeinu Bechaye)  
c. 1255–1340**

Biblical commentator. Rabbeinu Bechaye lived in Spain and was a disciple of Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, known as Rashba. He is best known for his multifaceted commentary on the Torah, which interprets the text on literal, Midrashic, philosophical, and kabbalistic levels. Rabbeinu Bechaye also wrote *Kad Hakemach*, a work on philosophy and ethics.

## II. A MAN OF TWO LANES

### *Two Worlds*

## TEXT 5

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 16, P. 29

פרעה איז אליין געווען א חכם גדול. די טענה פון פרעה איז געווען א טענה וואס האט אן ארט אין שכל העולם.

על פי טבע האבן אידן זיך ניט געקענט באפרייען פון גלות מצרים, כמאמר רבותינו ז"ל, אז "לא היה עבד יכול לברוח ממצרים" (מכילתא, שמות יח, יא). נאכמע, דאס איז געווען מתאים מיט דעם סדר ההנהגה מלמעלה, ווייל דעם אויבערשטענ'ס גזירה פון גלות מצרים איז געווען אויף "ארבע מאות שנה".

און דאס האט פרעה גע'טענה'ט: וואס גייט איר משנה זיין טבע און דעם אויבערשט'ס דרכים? "לכו לסבלותיכם" (שמות ה, ד) - גייט לערנען . . . תורה, און לאזט אידן פירן זיך ווי עס פאדערט זיך מצד דעם סדר הנהגת העולם.

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson**  
1902–1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as "the Lubavitcher Rebbe," or simply as "the Rebbe." Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe's scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.

Pharaoh was a very wise man, and he had a strong logical argument.

By every natural consideration, the Jews had no hope of being liberated from Egypt. As our sages stated, "No slave could escape from Egypt" (*Mechilta*, Exodus 18:11). Moreover, this state of bondage was also consistent with G-d's Heavenly decree. For G-d had decreed that the Jews would remain in Egypt for 400 years [and only 210 years had elapsed].

This was Pharaoh's argument. "Why do you set out to change both nature and G-d's wishes? Go to your labor: go study Torah and let the question of Jewish bondage be resolved by the world's natural pattern."

From Youth

## TEXT 6A

ZOHAR, VOL. 2, P. 11B

”וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן, וַתֵּרָא אוֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא.”  
 מַאי כִּי טוֹב הוּא?  
 אָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּיא: דְּאֵתִילִיד מֵהוּל . . .  
 רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אָמַר: נִהִירוּ דְשִׁכְיָנְתָּא דְנִהִיר בֵּיה חֲמָאָת, דְּבִשְׁעָתָא דְּאֵתִילִיד  
 אֶתְמַלִּיא כָּל בֵּיתָא נְהוֹרָא.

“And the woman conceived and gave birth to a son. And she saw that he was good” (Exodus 2:2).

What was good about him?

Rabbi Chiya said, “He was born circumcised. . . .”

Rabbi Yosei said, “She saw the light of G-d in him. The moment he was born, the entire house filled with light.”

### Zohar

The seminal work of kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. The *Zohar* is a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in Aramaic and Hebrew. According to the Arizal, the *Zohar* contains the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yocha'i, who lived in the Land of Israel during the 2nd century. The *Zohar* has become one of the indispensable texts of traditional Judaism, alongside and nearly equal in stature to the Mishnah and Talmud.

## TEXT 6B

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 16, PP. 26-27

בנוגע די מעלות ומדריגות פון משה געפינט מען צוויי ענינים: (א) זיין מעלה ושלמות בנוגע לעצמו, ער איז געווען דער "נבחר מכל מין האדם", העכער אינגאנצן פאר וועלט, און כל כולו דבוק ומיוחד מיט אלוקות. (ב) זיין שלמות אלס "רועה", וואס ער האט ממשיך און משפיע געווען אלע ענינים גשמיים ורוחניים צו אידן, און דורך זיי לכל העולם כולו. [וואס דאס איז פארבונדן, בכלל, מיט א תנועה פון ירידה פון זיין מעמד ומצב נעלה וואס איז העכער פון וועלט].

און די ביידע סוגי מעלות זיינען ביי אים געווען תיכף משנולד ...

נולד מהול ווייזט אויף זיין אייגענער מעלה ושלמות, ובאופן פון העכער פון וועלט, וואס דאס איז דער ענין פון נולד מהול (ניט כסדר טבע העולם), אז ביי אים לייכט בגלוי דער נפש האלוקית ווי ער איז אן דער ערלה און דעם העלם פון יצר הרע.

און דאס וואס "נהירו דשכינתא דנהיר ביה כו' אתמליא כל ביתא", איז די מעלה ושלמות פון זיין השפעה והארה צו אידן (און וועלט).

We find that Moses excelled in two areas: (A) He was superior and perfect. The fact that G-d chose him from all of humanity indicates that he was spiritually exalted—he was above worldliness and completely attached to G-d. (B) He had achieved perfection as a shepherd. He provided for every material and spiritual need of the Jewish people, and through them, to the world at large. [The first highlights his transcendence, while] the latter indicates his willingness to descend from his transcendent state.

Both of these traits were in him immediately upon birth:

Being born circumcised speaks to his personal perfection and transcendence. Such births are not natural. [It tells us that] he was completely irradiated by his G-dly soul without the hindrance of a foreskin or evil inclination.



The fact that G-d's light filled the house upon his birth indicated that he would share his rare light and teachings with the Jews in particular and with the world at large.

### *In the Real World*

## TEXT 7

RASHI, EXODUS 2:11

"ויגדל משה". והלא כבר כתיב "ויגדל הילד"?  
אמר רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי: הראשון לקומה והשני לגדולה, שמינהו  
פרעה על ביתו.

"And Moses grew up." Does it not already state that the child grew up?

Rabbi Yehudah the son of Ila'i said, "The first is for growth in height; the second is for growth in stature, for Pharaoh appointed him lord over the royal palace."

## TEXT 8

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 16, PP. 27–28

דערהערט זיך די מעלה אין ביידע ענינים . . .  
 סיי די שלימות עצמו, דער יחוד ודביקות מיט אלוקות, העכער פון  
 האבן צו טאן מיט'ן זולת, "הראשון לקומה".  
 און אויך די שלימות אין השפעה והתנשאות אויף א זולת, "השני  
 לגדולה שמינהו פרעה על ביתו".

[Moses encompassed both traits.]

(A) His personal perfection, his attachment and oneness with G-d—this was the transcendental mode. [In Rashi's words,]  
 "The first is for growth in height."

(B) His perfect ability to share with others [in the lower world—  
 in Rashi's words,] "the second is for growth in stature, for  
 Pharaoh appointed him lord over the royal palace."

### III. G-D, YOU, AND ME

#### *The Same G-d*

## TEXT 9

MIDRASH, *ELIYAHU RABAH* 11

שכל ישראל ערבים זה לזה.  
ולמה הן דומים? לספינה שנקרע בה בית אחד. אין אומרים נקרע בה  
בית אחד, אלא כל הספינה נקרעה כולה.  
כך הם ישראל.

All Jews are responsible for each other.

This may be compared to a ship that was pierced in a single cabin. We do not say only one cabin is vulnerable. Rather we say the entire ship has been made vulnerable.

The Jewish people are the same.

#### ***Tana Devei Eliyahu***

A Midrashic work, sometimes referred to as *Seder Eliyahu*. Midrash is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. This work deals with the Divine precepts, their rationales, and the importance of knowledge of Torah, prayer, and repentance. The work is divided into 2 sections (*sedarim*): *Eliyahu Rabah* and *Eliyahu Zuta*.

## *There Is Always Enough*

# TEXT 10

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON,  
IGROT KODESH 18, PP. 383–384

במענה למכתבו . . . בו כותב על דבר מנהגו הטוב זה משך ל"ז [!37]  
שנה להפריש מעשר לצדקה, ואשר כיון שבעתיד תתצמצם ההכנסה  
[הכספית] שלו, ואי אפשר יהיה לו להפריש המעשר לצדקה, שואל  
עצה איך להתנהג ובאם צריך התרה או לא וכו'.

ולפלא גדול למה לו להכנס בכל הפלפולא, בה בשעה שהמוצא הכי טוב  
והעצה היעוצה [היא] להמשיך במנהגו הטוב, ולתבוע מבורא עולם  
ומנהיגו שיתן לו היכולת לעשות האמור מתוך הרחבת הדעת בבריאות  
הנכונה ובשמחה ובטוב לבב . . .

בברכה לבשורות טובות בכל האמור.

In response to your letter . . . about your wonderful thirty-seven-year-custom to tithe from your earnings to charity: You [write that you] expect a deduction in your future earnings, in which case you will be unable to tithe. You ask how to proceed, whether you must seek an annulment [from your presumed commitment to continue to tithe].

This is most surprising. Why would you ask this question when the best possible outcome and the wisest course of action is to continue your wonderful custom and demand that G-d, the Creator of the world and the Orchestrator of its affairs, enable you to do so with peace of mind, good health, joy, and gladness of heart . . . ?

[I conclude with] a blessing for good tidings about all of the above.

## Spiritual Assistance

### TEXT 11

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON,  
SEFER HAMAAMARIM MELUKAT 1, P. 9

וזה תובעים מכל אחד מאתנו . . . ודוגמת הנהגת אברהם אבינו שהוא - געקומען אין אזעלכע ערטער וואס מ'האט דארטן ניט געוואוסט פון ג-טליכקייט, ניט געוואוסט פון אידישקייט און ניט געוואוסט אפילו פון אלף בית. און זייענדיק דארטן האט מען זיך אפגילייגט אן א זייט, און אל תקרא ויקרא אלא ויקריא . . .

צריך לידע אז אויב ער וויל אים זאל איינגיין דער ויקרא, מוז זיין דער ויקריא. דארפסטו זעהן אז יענער זאל ניט נאר וויסן נאר אויך אויסרופען. הגם אז ביז איצט האט יענער ניט געוואוסט פון גארניט, אבער איצט דארפסטו זעהן אז ער זאל שרייען א-ל-עולם.

The conduct of Abraham our Patriarch is demanded of each of us . . . ; he came to places where G-d, Judaism, and even Hebrew proficiency were unknown. He set aside his personal preferences and, rather than calling out to G-d, he taught others to call. . . .

We must know that if we want to succeed in our relationship with G-d, we must assist others in their relationship with G-d as well. We must see to it that others not only know G-d but also call out to G-d. Although they knew nothing heretofore, we must help them declare that there is a “G-d in the world” (Genesis 21:33).

# TEXT 12

HAYOM YOM, 8 AV

וואס איז די פעולה פון חסידות און יראת שמים, אז עס פעלט דער  
עיקר - אהבת ישראל?  
און נאך גורם זיין חס-ושלום צער אל הזולת.

What good is *Chasidut* and piety if the main quality—love of another—is lacking?

How much more so if we, G-d forbid, become the cause of another's anguish.

## Hayom Yom

In 1942, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the 6th rebbe of Chabad, gave his son-in-law, the future Rebbe, the task of compiling an anthology of Chasidic aphorisms and customs arranged according to the days of the year. In describing the completed product, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak wrote that it is “a book that is small in format but bursting with pearls and diamonds of the choicest quality.”

# TEXT 13

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 16, P. 30

כשם ווי בעת אז מען זעט אז עס ברענט א פייער, רחמנא ליצלן, אין א אידישער הויז, וועט דאך קיינער ניט אוועקזעצן זיך מיישב זיין, צי ער זאל עפעס טאן אויף צו ראטעווען דעם צווייטן פון פייער; אדער מאכן א חשבון: ווי קען איך און וואס דארף איך זיך מישן אין דעם צווייטנס ענינים? ...

ס'איז פשוט, אז יעדער איינער וואס זעט אזא פאסירונג וועט זיך ניט אריינלאזן אין א שקלא וטריא, צי דאס איז אויסגעהאלטן לויט דער שיטה, אדער א צווייטער שיטה, נאר ער וועט באלד לויפן ראטעווען דעם צווייטן.

אויב דאס איז אזוי בעת עס האנדלט זיך נאר וועגן חיי עולם הזה, איז כל שכן וקל וחומר ווען עס רעדט זיך וועגן חיי עולם הבא און חיי עולם הזה צוזאמען, אז עס האט קיין ארט ניט צו מאכן חשבונות - נאר טאן אלץ וואס מ'קען צו ראטעווען יענעם מבאר שחת.

When we see a fire burning in a Jewish home, we never sit down to consider whether to save our fellow from the flames. We would never ask, "May I, or should I, intrude into my fellow's affairs?" ...

No one would ever ask such questions when seeing another on fire. We would never ask whether our actions are correct according to this or that school of thought. We would rush to help.

If this is true when someone's physical life [and livelihood] are at stake, it is much truer when someone's spiritual ... life is at stake.

There is no justification for such questions. Rather, we must do all that we can to save another from the pit of destruction.

## KEY POINTS

- » Pharaoh told Moses to worry about himself rather than be concerned about the Jewish slaves. Pharaoh also told Moses that Moses's lofty ideas were not relevant in the real world.
- » Moses rejected both arguments. Moses's entire life was devoted to the idea that there aren't two worlds, a spiritual world of G-dly ideas and a world of pragmatic reality. Rather, the G-d of the higher world controls the lower world. He has the final say in both worlds.
- » Similarly, the same G-d who wants me to provide for myself and my family wants me to provide for others, and their families. Neglecting either is inconsistent with G-d.
- » When we appear to have enough resources to provide for only one, we must continue to look after others and G-d, who sustains the entire world, will grant us the resources to do both.
- » This truth applies whether the assistance that others require is material or spiritual.