

MORASHAH
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Rabbi Shlomo Siegel

Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Shemot

This Shabbat we begin *Sefer Shemot*, which literally means “the book of names.” The book begins by listing the names of Jacob's sons. *Sefer Shemot* is called the Book of Exodus in English. The Torah describes the oppression that the Israelites suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, which ultimately led to slavery, and then to the Exodus from Egypt.

Our *parashah* serves as the introduction to the life of Moses. As the story of the Exodus unfolds, we learn about the courageous leadership of Moses as he stands up to Pharaoh, demanding the release of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage. The next two Torah portions describe the ten plagues, which compelled Pharaoh to submit to God. We then learn about the splitting of the Sea of Reeds.

When one reads the first few Torah portions in the Book of Exodus, it is easy to understand why this title was selected. However, the balance of the book describes the wanderings of the Jewish people in the desert, the acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the unfortunate sin of the Golden Calf, and finally the laws governing the construction of the Tabernacle.

The question is, why do the first few portions take priority over the latter portions, which have nothing to do with the “exodus”? Why is the title “Exodus” appropriate, when the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian torture is merely the beginning of the story?

The great medieval commentator Ramban, otherwise known as Nahmanides, answers this question in the following way: Redemption is part of an overall process. Redemption did not end when the Jews crossed the Sea of Reeds. While one can easily argue that the Israelites were no longer in physical danger, they were still under the influence of the corrupt and immoral society in which they had lived for over three hundred years. The Jews may have been physically taken out of Egypt, but “Egypt had not yet been taken out of them.” Egyptian culture was so dominant that it impacted their lives in many ways.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they were in no way adequately prepared for their sacred mission. It was only when they made preparations to receive the Torah at

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Sinai that they actually began the transition from living as slaves to living meaningful lives as Jews, with a renewed sense of purpose.

When the Israelites constructed the Tabernacle, it served as a continuous symbol of Godliness in their lives. In this way the ultimate goal was reached, in that the acceptance of the Torah and the construction of the Tabernacle were the culmination of the physical and spiritual Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

Shabbat Shalom!

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