

# ***DEREKH HOKHMA***

## **TWO ASPECTS OF THE EXODUS NARRATIVE: PART I**

**YAMIN LEVY**

There is within the Torah's narrative of the Exodus a number of thematic patterns that unify the story as a whole and suggest that the purpose of the Exodus was not only to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and fulfill the covenant with the Patriarchs, but also to provide a series of lessons designed to transform the theological outlook of both nations.

In examining the protracted negotiations and the various beliefs, fears and interests that underlay Moses' confrontation with the Egyptian empire the biblical narrative of the Exodus reads as a carefully-woven literary unit.

### ***DEREKH HOKHMA: A STRATEGY DEvised TO ENABLE THE EXODUS***

Moses, while tending the flock of Jethro, happens upon the mountain of God. There, a strange apparition, a bush that burns without being consumed, arrests his attention. While approaching it, he hears the urgent call of his name, which is indicated by the repetition *Moshe Moshe*,<sup>1</sup> stopping him before he profanes the sacred ground with his shoes. Moses at this point does not yet realize the full import of the theophany, for only after God's self-introduction (Ex. 3:6) does Moses cover his face and his eyes. While this encounter has many of the features of a numinous<sup>2</sup> experience, it is the dialogue between God and Moses that will occupy our attention.

At this point, God informs Moses of His decision to rescue the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land, and that Moses would be His agent: '*And now go, I will dispatch you to Pharaoh, and you shall take My people, the children of Israel out of Egypt.*'

Moses reacts to God's proposal by protesting that he is inadequate for the task: '*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the children of Israel out of Egypt?*'

The following verses, which make up the main thrust of God's response, seem to go beyond Moses' expression of inadequacy. God introduces a sign,<sup>3</sup> possibly for reassurance, and makes reference to the children of Israel's future

worship at the mountain: *And He said, 'For I shall be with you – and this is your sign that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain'* (3:12).

From a simple reading of the text, one might argue that God is sending Moses on one mission; namely, to take the Israelite people out of Egypt. Moses' initial response to God's charge on one level seems evident: *'Who am I that I can go to Pharaoh [mi anokhi ki elekh el Paraoh]? However, Moses adds: 'How can I [possibly] take the children of Israel out of Egypt [vekhi otzi<sup>4</sup> et bene Yisrael mimitzraim]?' (3:11). While the exact translation of the words "vekhi otzi" remain problematic,<sup>5</sup> Moses is clearly asking God about the feasibility of successfully accomplishing such a mission.*

Moses can actually make a reasonable argument. He has been a fugitive from Egypt for many years. *Vekhi otzi* might mean: How will he possibly get an audience with Pharaoh? Why would the Israelite people accept Moses as their leader and messenger from God? How will he successfully lead a nation of close to two million<sup>6</sup> people in the desert, survive and then conquer the land of Canaan?

The argument he chooses at this stage remains somewhat unclear.<sup>7</sup> From the simple reading of the text, God's answer to Moses does not seem to address the relevant issues stated above. God responds with two pieces of important information. (1) I will be with you and if you do not believe it, here is a sign.<sup>8</sup> (2) After the Israelite people are taken out of Egypt they will worship God on this mountain. *And He said: 'For I will be with you, and this is the sign that I have sent you: When you take the nation out of Egypt, you shall worship Elohim on this mountain'* (3:12).

Rashbam's careful reading of Exodus 3:11 introduces into the initial dialogue between God and Moses a number of elements that afford the student important keys to unfolding the larger narrative of the Exodus. He stresses the inadequacy of the way those who preceded him interpreted these verses. Rashbam introduces his comment on Exodus 3:11 by stating confidently: "Anyone who would like to understand the primary *p'shat* of these verses should study my interpretation of this verse, for those who explained it before me did not understand it at all." Rashbam concludes: "Anyone who explains these verses in any other manner is totally mistaken."<sup>9</sup>

Rashbam suggests that God is assigning Moses two distinct tasks: (1) Confront Pharaoh. (2) Take the children of Israel out of Egypt. Moses questions both parts of God's instructions. God, in turn, answers each of the two questions respectively. By dividing each verse into two parts, Rashbam outlines the dialogue as follows:

First Clause In Dialogue:

God commands Moses: '*Go, I have sent you to Pharaoh*' (v. 10).

Moses asks: '*Who am I that I can go to Pharaoh?*' (v. 11).

God Answers: '*For I will be with you and this [the burning bush] is the sign that I have sent you*' (v. 12).

Second Clause In Dialogue:

God commands Moses: '*Take the children of Israel out of Egypt*' (v. 10).

Moses asks: '*How can I take them out?*' (v. 11).

God answers: '[In order to] *take them out of Egypt* [tell Pharaoh] *this nation must worship their God on this mountain*' (v. 12).

It seems that Moses is to a certain extent concerned about getting an audience with Pharaoh, if indeed part of God's plan involves accomplishing his mission through Pharaoh. In addition, assuming Pharaoh has to be involved, Rashbam adds that Moses wonders how he will successfully persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelite people out of Egypt.

In response to Moses' concerns about his own credentials, God tells Moses not to worry: '*I will be with you.*' Regarding how he could possibly achieve God's intended goal of taking the Israelite people out of Egypt without sounding at best naïve, at worst ridiculous and suicidal, Rashbam suggests that God instructs Moses to use the following strategy: Just tell Pharaoh that the only thing the children of Israel are requesting is an opportunity to worship God in the desert. Once out of Egypt, Moses will lead the people into the Promised Land!

Rashbam calls this *Derekh Hokhmah*. Rashbam supports his *p'shat* based on the details mentioned in the same theophany where God issues more specific instruction to Moses regarding his meeting with Pharaoh. God says: '*Then you and the elders shall go to the King of Egypt and tell him: The God of the Hebrews had come and told us that we must go for a three-day journey into the desert [to Har Horev] to offer sacrifices to our Lord' (3:18). If indeed Rashbam is correct, Moses never really asks Pharaoh to free the Israelites*

from slavery; rather, he only asks for a three-day respite from work in order to worship their God in the desert.

#### RASHBAM'S THEORY AND THE NARRATIVE AS A WHOLE

As was stated above in verse 3:18, God tells Moses that all he needs to ask of Pharaoh is a three-day journey in the desert in order to worship God. There is no mention of a permanent freedom from slavery. This is precisely what Moses asks of Pharaoh at their first encounter: *Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh: 'Thus said the God of Israel, Let My people go and worship me in the desert' . . . . And they answered: 'The God of the Hebrews has called upon us to take a three-day journey into the desert in order that we may sacrifice to our God, lest He strike us with pestilence and the sword' (5:1-3).*

Moses repeats to Pharaoh almost verbatim God's words from 3:18. Thus, the impression Pharaoh is given at this early stage is that Moses' intent is only a three-day journey to worship God in the desert and then to return back to work. In verse 5:3, Moses' warning to Pharaoh '*lest He strike us with pestilence and the sword*' may explain God's intentions in 3:12: '*You shall worship God at this mountain [ta'avdun et ha'elohim al hahar hazeh]*'. The warning is clear – if Pharaoh does not let the Israelite people journey into the desert and worship the Lord, a severe Divine punishment will ensue and many people, including Egyptians, may die. It seems that Moses is suggesting that it is in Egypt's best interest to allow the Israelites this three-day journey to worship their God.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE WARNINGS AND PHARAOH'S CONCESSIONS

Rashbam is one of the first to observe the well-known patterns that form the structure of the Ten Plagues.<sup>11</sup> For example, they are arranged in three sets, with three calamities in each set, while the Tenth Plague lies outside the scope of the structure. Within each series, the first two plagues are each preceded by a warning, while the third plague strikes unheralded. The pattern indicates that the narrative of the plagues is conscientiously articulated as a tightly knit composition. Each of the warnings is identical, with the exception of the first. Each contains the words: '*Send My people that they can worship Me [shelach et ami ve'ya'avduni]*'. The first warning includes the location, in

the desert. One can argue that the first warning *'Let my people go so that they can worship Me in the desert'* is what Pharaoh understands to be the extent of Moses' goal. Never does Moses hint at the possibility of the children of Israel leaving Egypt for good.

After the Fourth Plague, Pharaoh finally grants the children of Israel permission to go and worship their God. Initially, he concedes that they can worship, but within the land of Egypt: *'Go,' he said [you have permission to] 'sacrifice to your God [here] in the land of Egypt' (8:21).*

Moses here rejects Pharaoh's compromise on potentially dangerous grounds; namely, that if they offer up their sacrifices in Egypt the local population will stone them: *'Could we sacrifice the sacred animal of the Egyptians before their eyes and have them stone us?'* (v. 22). Moses continues with this line of thinking and argues: *'What we must do is make a three-day journey into the desert. There we will be able to sacrifice to God our Lord, just as He told us'* (v. 23). Pharaoh, assuming all Moses is requesting is a three-day interruption from work in order to exercise "freedom of religion," agrees to allow a short journey into the desert but not a three-day distance: *'I will let you leave as long as you do not go far away. You can sacrifice to God your Lord in the desert, but pray for me'* (v. 24).

Moses seems to agree to this concession, but rebukes Pharaoh by saying: *'When I leave your presence, I will pray to God. Tomorrow the swarm of flies will go away from Pharaoh,<sup>12</sup> his servants and his people. But let Pharaoh never again deceive us, refusing to allow the people to sacrifice to God'* (v. 25). The plague ends and Pharaoh's heart (see below) is hardened<sup>13</sup> and once again he reneges on his promise (v. 26).

Moses never mentions the possibility of an exodus from Egypt. In fact, it seems that Moses was willing to go ahead with Pharaoh's concession. While Pharaoh is worried about giving them permission to leave, he never accuses Moses of planning an exodus. Later in the narrative, after Moses warns Egypt of the impending plague of locust, Pharaoh's own servants demand some sort of concession: *Pharaoh's officials said to him: 'How long will this [man] continue to be a menace to us? Let them go, and let them serve God their Lord. Do not you realize that Egypt is being destroyed?'* (10:7).

In response to his advisors, Pharaoh summons Moses and enters into a new round of negotiations. This time, the issue is not where to worship God but

rather who may go and worship God. Pharaoh permits the men to go, while Moses insists that the women and children must come along (vv. 8-11). It is quite telling when one notices the reason for Moses' insistence that women and children participate. He does not suggest that they must join the men because they are planning an exodus from Egypt. Rather, Moses says: *'It is a festival to God for all of us'* (v. 9).<sup>14</sup>

There is a third round of negotiations that sheds light on the question of what Moses presented to Pharaoh. After the Ninth Plague of darkness, Pharaoh is willing to grant permission even to the women and children to leave, but not with their livestock: *Pharaoh summoned Moses. 'Go!' he said. 'Worship God! Even your children can go with you. Just leave your sheep and cattle behind'* (v. 24).

Again, Moses rejects Pharaoh's concession, based on a logistical reason: *'Our livestock must go along with us. Not a single hoof can be left behind. We must take them to serve God our Lord, since we do not know what we will need to worship God until we get there'* (v. 26).

Even after the Tenth and last plague, the children of Israel are granted permission to leave, but only to worship God in the desert. There is no suggestion of a permanent exodus from Egypt: *'Get moving!' he said. 'Get out from among my people – you and the Israelites. Go worship God just as you demanded.*<sup>15</sup> *Take your sheep and cattle, just as you said. Go [and] bless me too' (12:31-32).* One may suggest that the request *'Bless me too* [u'berachtem gam oti]' further implies that all Pharaoh was agreeing to was the Israelite people paying tribute to their God. Indeed a humbling concession, considering the fact that the Pharaoh is regarded as divine within Egypt.

In summary, it seems that at every stage of the negotiations, Moses is presented with ample opportunities to inform Pharaoh that the Israelite people are planning to go on to the land of Canaan and never return to Egypt. Yet, that aspect of the mission is omitted. The biblical text affords us enough information suggesting that Pharaoh would have little reason to suspect that the children of Israel are leaving for good.

#### PHARAOH DECLARES WAR

The children of Israel leave Egypt and initially journey towards the desert: *The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred*

*thousand men on foot outside children (12:37). They journeyed from Succoth, and encamped in Etham, at the edge of the wilderness (13:20).*

Then, in the middle of the journey, God commands Moses to make an about face and return towards the land of Egypt: *And God told Moses, 'Tell the children of Israel to turn around and set up camp . . . near the Sea of Reeds [in order that] Pharaoh will say they are wandering in the land [of Egypt], for the desert has closed them in' (14:1-4).*

It becomes clear to Pharaoh at this point that he had been deceived. He had granted the children of Israel permission to worship their God in the desert and then return to Egypt under his rule. Now, he realizes they have declared some sort of political independence. After all, if they are not headed towards the desert and they are not returning back to Egypt they must be planning a coup. Verse 14:5 states: *And it was told to the King of Egypt that the people had run away . . . 'What have we done, for we have set the children of Israel free from their slave labor?'*

Pharaoh, for the sake of national security, declares war on this rebellious nation of slaves (vv. 6-10). He assumes that if he does not attack them first, they will surely attack him. This indeed was a preceding Pharaoh's fear and the reason for his conspiracy against the children of Israel early on in the narrative (1:10): that one day they would take over Egypt.

#### BORROWED GOODS

Another well-known difficult passage can be easily explained with Rashbam's reading of the Book of Exodus. The Torah states:

*The Egyptians were also urging the people to hurry and leave the land . . . . The Israelites did as Moses had said. They requested [va'yishalu] silver and gold articles and clothing from the Egyptians. God made the Egyptians respect the people and they lent [va'yashilum] [them] and they [the Israelites] despoiled Egypt (12:35-36).*

Through the ages, these verses have been the alleged basis for the supposed thievery committed by the children of Israel as they left Egypt. This had to be fraudulent, as the "borrowed" gold, and silver objects as well as the garments, which they had taken, could not possibly have been returned. Worst of all, this was done at God's behest, and as a result, this entire episode cast a ble-

mish on the Israelite people's concept of religion and morality.<sup>16</sup> Luzzato and others<sup>17</sup> argued that, indeed, as it was God's command, the people had to restrain themselves from demanding more from the Egyptians. On this single occasion, they were the tools of God's punishment of Egypt and from this they were supposed to learn not to oppress the stranger.

Rashbam's *p'shat*, in a non-apologetic fashion, affords us a solution to this exegetical and moral problem. The Egyptians, according to Rashbam, were eager to give the Israelite people their finest wares. After all, the children of Israel were only taking a short vacation. The assumption was that they would come back to Egypt after they paid tribute to their God and return the goods. Pharaoh, however, declared war on the children of Israel shortly after they took leave (see above), and once war is declared all agreements become null and void. That which was borrowed now becomes the spoils of war.

#### NOTES

1. See also Genesis 22:11. All translations are the author's unless specified differently.
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923) coined the term *numinosum* (numinous) to express a special kind of experience. Otto describes the main feature of this experience as a bold awareness of one's humanity, in the face of something that can only be expressed as a *mysterium tremendum*. The experience contains the elements of awefulness, of fear, of a sense of overpoweringness, energy and/or urgency. The numinous includes the feeling that one is confronting the incomprehensible, the wholly other. The response to such an experience is both fascination and retreat.
3. See Note 8.
4. Rashi understands *vekhi otzi* to mean "Why the children of Israel," while Ramban suggests it means how will they defeat the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.
5. See Daat Mikra on the Verse
6. Six hundred thousand men over the age of 20 and an equal number of women, not including children.
7. Ibn Ezra keeps the dialogue between God and Moses simple. Moses is actually asking just one question: namely, how will he, "a shepherd" go and see a king like Pharaoh? God not only assures Moses that He will be with him, but also offers Moses a reason for the Exodus, namely that the Israelite people will gather at this mountain and enter into a Covenant with God. Rashi and Seferno re-interpret Moses' question to fit God's answer. Rashi<sup>1</sup> suggests that when Moses asks: *vekhi otzi* he is not concerned with the countless challenges he might face as the redeemer and leader of a nation of slaves and the numerous logistical and tactical hurdles involved, but rather he asks for what purpose does God wish to free the children of Israel. According to Rashi, Moses is bothered with whether or not the children of Israel are indeed worthy of being taken out of Egypt. In response to this question, God tells Moses that after they leave Egypt they will come to this mountain and receive the Torah *ta'avdun et ha'Elohim al ha'har hazeh*. Through this merit the people of Israel retroactively become worthy of redemption. Ramban does not reject Rashi's

reading outright. However, instead of putting words into Moses' mouth as does Rashi, Ramban prefers to interpret God's response in a way consistent with the kinds of issues we raised above. Ramban suggests that Moses not only questions his credentials for having an audience with Pharaoh, but how he will possibly take a nation of slaves and conquer the land of Canaan. To this, God says I will be with you and following the Exodus the people will come to this mountain, worship God, and walk in His ways. As a result, they will believe in God and in Moses and fearlessly conquer the land of Canaan. A fourth interpretation is that of Rambam. In *Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah*, he rearranges the sequence of events to fit into a philosophical concern on the part of Moses. Moses is concerned with whether or not he will successfully persuade the children of Israel to believe in him and in God. God answers Moses that the miracles He will perform are simply a means of getting the people to the mountain. Once at Mount Sinai, the people will become covenanted and believers.

8. For a careful study of the various possibilities in the usage of the "sign" in the verse see Tamar Verdiger, "Ve Zeh Lekha Ha'Ot," *Megidim* 12, 5751

9. For other such remarks on the part of Rashbam regarding his predecessor's comments see Genesis 37:2, 45:28, 49:8-9; Exodus 17:15, 33:14, 43:29.

10. This reasoning is actually consistent with ancient Near Eastern theology, in that the gods are angered when they are not served at their request.

11. Rashbam 7:26. One might argue that Rabbi Yehuda in the Hagaddah was the first to notice the patterns with his mnemonic device for the Ten Plagues. Also, see Rabbenu Bahya Ben Asher on 10:1 and Abarbanel on 7:26.

12. Since Pharaoh had shown respect to God, Moses uses the third person

13. For a discussion on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Exodus Vol. 1*; also see Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 6:3.

14. Ibn Ezra

15. [*Kedaberchem*] as you originally demanded in 5:3

16. This accusation was first made by Marcion, the second-century Christian heretic and enemy of the Old Testament. It was repeated by the Manicheans, for whom the God of the "Old Testament" was the devil. Tertullian, one of the early Church Fathers, wrote an elaborate work called *Against Marcion* (II:20) in defense of the Old Testament. Hints of these accusation may pre-date Marcion; see Book of Wisdom 10:17, also Jubilees 48:18 and Philo, *Life of Moses* I, 103. For the philosopher of the anti-Semites Eugen Dühring, these verses were decisive and an accurate description of the character of the Jewish people.

17. Shadal on 3:21; see also Ibn Ezra and Augustine.