

Parashat Shemot: Expansion and Oppression

The Ramban defines Sefer Shemot as the book of Galut and Geula. The process begins with the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt, the commencement of a life in exile. In our shiur this week, we shall start at the very beginning, focussing our attention upon the machinations of Exile. How was it that an entire nation was lured into slavery? We will also discuss the unusual explosion in population size. How did this small family expand quickly enough to form a fully-fledged nation of millions?

Let's learn!

Chavruta Study

1. Study the description of the enslavement and oppression of Am Yisrael. It would be best to read through the entire first chapter.

There were several steps in the process of enslavement and oppression.

1. Split up the story (1:8-22) into its component stages. Outline the string of measures taken by Pharaoh. What is new about each successive stage?

2. See the commentary of the SEPHORNO to v.11,13,14 (and note his quote from Ezekiel 20:8).

How does he understand the reason for the gradual intensification of the slavery of B'nei Yisrael?

2. Does this explanation fit with the pesukim?

3. Compare this explanation with the comments of the RAMBAN to v.11. According to the RAMBAN, what was the cause of the incremental levels of slavery?

4. An interesting contrast is the way in which they read the phrase "Ve'ala min Ha'aretz". Contrast the Sephorno and Rashi in both parshanut and the contextual flow of the perek.

3. THE FEASIBILITY OF THE POPULATION EXPLOSION.

See Rashi on passuk 7.

* What is the basis for his explanation?

* Why would we want to say that the women gave birth in this way? See the number of people when Am Yisrael entered Egypt - 1:5 - and then read 1:9. How much time has elapsed? Is this not a little puzzling?

1. See Shemot 12:37. How large was Am Yisrael when they left?

2. How long were they in Egypt? See 12:40-41 and RASHI there. Why does he insist that they must have been in Egypt for a shorter time than mentioned by the pesukim?

Further Study

For a wonderful "must-read" shiur on this chapter, see the shiur by Rav Elchanan Samet on the VBM website: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/13shemot.htm>

The Shiur:

Sefer Shemot does not dwell upon the details of the slavery in Egypt, the harsh conditions and the precise workload of B'nei Yisrael. The Torah compacts the account of the Egyptian persecution devoting just a single chapter to this cause. However, this chapter has much to say about the way in which we were enslaved, the attitudes of our oppressors and the ability to act morally even in the thick of an evil regime.

STRUCTURE

Before we even begin, it would be worthwhile to note the structure contained in Chapter 1. It is divisible into three distinct sections.

I v. 1-7 : The rapid expansion of B'nei Yisrael; 12 sons to a family of 70 until "the entire land was filled with them" (1:7)

II 8-14 : The slavery, forced labour. Two stages of oppression through work.

III 15-22 : The two stages in the plan to kill the male children; The midwives and the river.

Each section has a theme. The theme is apparent through the story itself, but it is stressed and given emphasis through the intentional use of carefully chosen words, repeated for effect. Let me explain what I mean.

If you look at the first section, you will notice that it ends with seven words or expressions indicating the growth of Am Yisrael. In section 2 there are seven expressions of hard labour, using the words "avoda" or "parech". In the third section, the word "meyaldot" - midwife - is used seven times. This literary method stresses the three stages of the story: the phenomenal proliferation of the Jewish nation, the harsh slavery, and the failure of the attempts to kill them.

EARLY CAUSES.

It would appear that the central factor in the arousal of Egyptian attention, suspicion, and animosity is the remarkable rate of increase in the size of the nation. The king of Egypt says,

“Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and mighty than ourselves. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so they may not increase...” (1:8-9)

Could it be true? Is it possible that the Israelites actually outnumbered the Egyptians? Or possibly, this is simply the reflection of Egyptian fear. They see an immigrant population, an ethnic sub-group - B'nei Yisrael – expanding and infiltrating their society. Instead of restricting themselves to Goshen (Bereshit 47:27), they now “fill the entire land.” (1:7) The Egyptians imagine that they are being overrun, invaded, so to speak. Sometimes the psychological reality is more important than the statistical facts!

It is certainly true that a focus upon the wild, uncontrolled proliferation of B'nei Yisrael is a theme that runs through our entire chapter. Pharaoh engages in any number of strategies in order to control the Israelite expansion. At first, he attempts to enslave the Jewish nation hoping that it will stunt their growth rate. When he realises that cannot attack the Jewish population through forced labour, he takes matters into his own hands and tries in a more direct way to kill them off. Clearly, all these attempts are to no avail. The Jewish people continue to spread and expand despite the slavery:

“But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.” (1:12)

And after the midwife episode, we are told again:

“and the people multiplied and increased greatly.” (v.20)

THE ABNORMAL REALITY OF EXILE

The unusually rapid growth rate of this alien nation is the source of the problem. And this entire notion should strike the reader with a deep sense of irony. That the expansion of a Am Yisrael be perceived as a negative phenomenon is a direct symptom of exile. Population growth is usually seen as a blessing. The Torah always mentions it amongst the very highest of rewards that the nation can receive (see Shemot 23:24, Vayikra 26:9, Devarim 28:4, 11; 30:9). However, in exile things are different. The very existence of Am Yisrael as a minority sub-group in a foreign society transforms a blessing into a worry and a menace. In Egypt it is to become the very cause of our downfall. The “Da’at Mikra” commentary has an enlightening observation on this point:

“ Precisely the two blessings with which Israel were blessed in Egypt; the unusual growth rate, and their distinctiveness; were the very cause of the enslavement. ... Herein is a message for all time. This very proliferation and distinctiveness which are such wonderful blessings for a people in their own land, can turn into a source of trouble and tragedy when we live ‘in a strange

land’. Am Yisrael, who become formed as a nation in a foreign land arouse hatred by their very existence.” (Da’at Mikra p.16)

However, we have to examine why Pharaoh imagined that the policy of slavery would help stunt the growth rate of the Jews. What was his aim in the slavery policy? And how exactly did he manage to lure Am Yisrael into this enslavement?

SLOW ROAD TO EXTERMINATION - A FOUR-STAGE PLAN

The persecution of the Israelites does not happen in a single move. It begins (v.9-10) with Pharaoh’s suspicions. He views the Israelites as an outside force lacking loyalty to the country. He is frightened by their size and strength. He decides to paint the Israelites as a fifth column; traitors to the state.

He wants to put an end to the “threat” of the Israelites. They are dangerous; the enemy within. They need to be controlled and contained. Only that he needs to build a strategy to achieve this goal. The plan is executed in four stages. The plan is executed in four stages.

1. v.11-12 - A work tax
2. v.13-14 - Slavery of all the Israelites, working hard labour.
3. v.15-21 - The murder of baby boys by the Midwives
4. v.22 - The murder of baby boys by the entire nation.

It begins with suspicion (v.9-10) and a “tax” over them. The RAMBAN explains that this was a very simple device whereby Egypt asked for a people tax. A quota of labourers was requisitioned to work on the national projects (much like King Shlomo did when he built the Beit Hamikdash – Melachim I 5:27). The people worked for a month and then were allowed home.

But slowly, gradually, the quotas were increased. Then the entire people were enslaved and their status was officially, legally changed to that of “slaves” The people got sucked in because it was a gradual process. Much like the Nazi methods in our own century, Pharaoh knew how to tighten the knot just the right amount, whereby he could increase the slavery without causing alarm amongst the Jewish people. Undoubtedly they always consoled each other telling one another how things will “get better”, but Pharaoh’s aim was to dispose of this “numerous” people. He was not going to stop until he achieved a “final solution.”

The third and fourth stages are a deliberate plan of murder whereby the babies are systematically annihilated.

THE FINAL SOLUTION.

We might ask ourselves, did Pharaoh plan the entire process from the start? Was he planning from the very beginning to engage in genocide?

The RAMBAN perceives Pharaoh to be a sworn enemy of the Israelite nation from the very beginning. Indeed, his plan is to eradicate the Israelites in a grand, national project of genocide. However, claims the Ramban, he would not have been able to withstand the weight of public criticism from the civilian Egyptian population were he to suggest the grand-scale murder of the Israelite population. Instead he develops a plan that will work in gradual steps so as to avoid a panic.

So, stage by stage, the Egyptian population begin to view the Israelites differently. First they are a threat. Then they are slaves. Then they work in "hard labour", overworked, doing all manner of labour. And after a process of national victimisation, the nation are ready to engage in a national project of genocide (v.22).

EGYPT IS HOME. NOT WANTING TO LEAVE.

The SEPHORNO explains the incremental process of enslavement in a radically different way. He suggests that the last thing on Pharaoh's mind was violence or force. True, he viewed the Israelites as a threat. However, his only desire was to induce the Israelites to leave the country entirely. The Sephorno reads v.10 as "Maybe in a war they will join our enemies and fight against us. Let them go up from the land." Sephorno comments:

"They will leave the land independently, without us exerting any element of force."

The Sephorno suggests that the initial labour tax was a ploy to make life uncomfortable for B'nei Yisrael so that they would emigrate from the country. But there was one flaw in Pharaoh's plan. He did not anticipate the degree to which the Israelites were attached to Egypt. They simply didn't get the hint. They didn't leave. In fact the Sephorno explains that the increased slavery was a further inducement to achieve this purpose, only that Am Yisrael preferred slavery in Egypt to leaving the country entirely. The entire Egyptian nation felt it within their rights to enslave them (v.13):

"When they saw the Israelites denigrating themselves in manual labour, the country declared them as slaves."

So the slavery was not part of Pharaoh's master-plan. Pharaoh might have preferred to deal with the "problem" in a more peaceful manner, however the Jews just didn't understand! The Sephorno attributes the blindness of the people at this time to their sins and their entrenchment in the Egyptian way of life (as mentioned in Ezekiel 20) . Apparently, they were too attached to Egypt and this, despite the fact that they were unwelcome guests. They never "got the hint" from Pharaoh that they were in fact, undesirables.

SUMMARY

So the Ramban sees Am Yisrael as being lead into a trap, unawares. Pharaoh executed a well-orchestrated subtle plan to enslave and persecute the fledgling Jewish nation. The Sephorno judges Pharaoh (at this stage) more fairly. Pharaoh would have been happy if the Jews would have left. He enslaved them to induce them to leave.

Who is correct? The Sephorno certainly seems to have a serious flaw. Later in the story, Pharaoh does NOT want the Jews to leave. Maybe we might say that by the time that they had fallen into serious slavery, Pharaoh's persecution of the Jews, this hatred had taken on a life of its own and Pharaoh's bad side prevails. Whichever way, we cannot claim that someone who kills babies on the birth stool is not interested in "exerting any element of force."

CONTEMPORARY ECHOES

In our more recent history, we have the painful irony of both explanations. Hitler was an expert in slowly tightening his deathly grip on the Jews: from propaganda to Nuremberg Laws, to ghettos, to Death Camps. And on the other hand, Jews have always experienced the comforts of their host countries as so welcoming, so comfortable, so much "home," that the Jews simply never desire to leave, even when the going gets tough.

Part II The Feasibility of the Rapid Population Increase

SIX IN ONE!

But, let us return to the issue of the unusual population growth of Am Yisrael. Rashi brings to our attention, a famous Midrash:

"They swarmed: This indicates that they gave birth to six children at a time." (Rashi on 1:7)

The idea clearly has certain roots in the pesukim themselves. First, there is the multiple usages of phrases indicating population growth.

"The children of Israel were fruitful, they swarmed, they multiplied, and grew strong, exceedingly, indeed; and the land was filled with them." (1:7)

Clearly, there are six phrases denoting fertility and expansion in this verse. This focuses attention upon the number six. The concept of these multiple births, however has its source in one specific word; Vayishretzu - and they swarmed. This word is somewhat related to the word "sheretz" - an insect. The midrash (Shemot Rabba 1:8) states:

"Each women gave birth to six, as it states; 'The children of Israel were fruitful, they swarmed, they multiplied, and grew strong, etc. ... Others say that they gave birth to twelve babies! ... Do not be surprised (at this unusual phenomenon, seemingly defying the laws of nature) for the scorpion - one of the "sheratzim" - has seventy offspring at one time."

So B'nei Yisrael have sheretz-like properties. They swarm and expand at an alarming rate.

How are we to relate to this Midrash? Should we accept it according to its literal understanding? After all, we DO have to explain, somehow, the way in which a family of seventy became a nation of six hundred thousand males (of fighting age! see 12:37. If these are only the men between 20 and 60, then Am Yisrael should number approx. 3 million by the Exodus.). Maybe this miracle was God's way of making this family become a nation. But, on the other hand, it does seem a little unrealistic (but, then again, so do the plagues!). How do 70 people become 600,000 in a short period of time?

The problem is further accentuated when we realise that if we take Shevet Levi as an example, we have only THREE generations to deal with! - Levi-Kehat-Amram-Moshe. How, in three generations, do 70 persons become 600,000?

Some of commentaries with a more scientific, rational inclination, attempted to minimise the mind boggling, supernatural nature of this sixfold birth phenomenon. The Ibn Ezra:

"Maybe 'vayishretzu' refers to the regular birth of twins and other multiple births. I saw four children that a woman had given birth to in a single delivery. The doctors say that even seven foetuses can fit into a single womb!"

A 14th Century commentator - The "Megale Amukot" - writes of a testimony of a doctor who claims to have met a woman who had twenty children in four births; giving birth to quintets each time! These commentators are trying to lessen the abnormal, unbelievable approach of the Midrash, presenting it as a realistic biological possibility. The Megale Amukot does add, "But the amazing thing is that this phenomena happened to them all!" Realistic, if improbable!

A different rationale for this rapid expansion is offered by the Shadal. He takes the passuk (12:40) literally, explaining that B'nei Yisrael were in Egypt for a full 430 years. In this time he explains, the Israelites had extraordinary success as regards fertility, infant mortality and the strength of their children.

"The early writers explain that the Nile increases fertility and that Egyptian women give birth to twins as a rule....but all this can still not explain the phenomenal expansion. So we must say that God's providence guided Israel, keeping them healthy and strong."

He still insists that to become a people with 600,000 men, ie. 3 million people, they must have had 430 years.

9 GENERATIONS

Rav Medan of Yeshivat Har Etzion (in the Yeshiva's Daf Keshet No.267 Tevet 5751) offers his own theory. He wishes to retain ChaZaL's view of a 210 year enslavement. He suggests that we have nine generations at our disposal. How so? In Divrei Hayamim, we are given 9 generations between Ephrayim and Yehoshua (See DH"Y I 7:22-27). Ephrayim is the generation of the descent to Egypt. Yehoshua is the generation of the Exodus. Additionally, he notes that of the generation of the 70 names who entered Egypt (Bereshit Ch.47), only 2 are women. Maybe the entire family is described selectively and there were many more members. We can certainly assume that there were

another 70 women!

Now, let us imagine not sextuplets, but the successful birth of six children per family; certainly, more normal, but nonetheless, exceptional for ancient (and modern!) times.

We then begin with 60 men of childbearing age, and we have nine generations. We shall multiply by 3, not six, due to the reasonable assumption of an equal split between birth of boys and girls amongst the Jewish population. We begin with 60 men; 2nd generation is 180 (men); 3rd-540, 4th - 1620; 5th - 4860; 6th - 14580; 7th-43760; 8th-131,280, 9th -400,000! If there were more people, then we are certainly close. Six children per family, even if non-simultaneous, would certainly be a miracle for a malnourished, overworked, persecuted and enslaved nation. We now have an explanation that explains the unusual expansion AND retains a certain rational believability!

Shabbat Shalom.

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