

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHEMOT

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

The List of Those Descending to Egypt as an Introduction to Sefer Shemot

This Shabbat marks the beginning of the reading of the Book of Shemot. The Netziv, in the introduction to his commentary to this sefer ("Ha'amek Davar"), cites the various names with which the "Ba'al Halakhot Gedolot" entitled the five books of the Pentateuch: Bereishit is referred to as "Sefer Ha-yashar" ("Book of the Upright"); Vayikra is named "Sefer Kohanim" ("Book of the Priests"); Bemidbar is called "Chumash Ha-pekudim" ("The Book of Counting"); and Devarim is given the title "Mishneh Torah" ("The Review of the Torah"). Our sefer, the Book of Shemot, receives no special title. Rather, the "Behag" refers to it simply as "Sefer Ha-sheni" ("The Second Book"), a title relating to its place among the other books but not at all to its content or character.

The Netziv asks the obvious question: why did the Behag differentiate between Shemot and the other four books? Either all five sefarim should be entitled based on their location in the sequence of Chumash, or the Book of Shemot should follow the pattern of the other books by having a unique title, relevant to its theme and overall content. The Netziv's answer is most intriguing:

This comes to teach us that this book is, first and foremost, second to the book involving the beginning of creation, as it constitutes the second half of this book.

Thus, according to the Netziv, the Book of Shemot must be viewed as a direct continuation of Sefer Bereishit, as it introduces neither a new time period nor a new theme. Rather, it merely continues the evolving story of Yaakov's family in Egypt through their Exodus and departure into the wilderness. Is there anything, then, that distinguishes it from Sefer Bereishit?

Sefer Shemot opens with the list of Yaakov's children who descend with their father to Egypt. It seems to me that in this brief listing lies a subtle yet profound allusion to the unique character of this sefer as a continuation of the lengthy saga already introduced in Bereishit, only from a totally different perspective.

When we read the opening verses of the Book of Shemot - the listing of Yaakov's children who descend with him to Egypt - a parallel set of verses immediately comes to mind: the list of the members of Yaakov's family who accompany him to Egypt, which appears in parashat Vayigash. A careful comparison between these two listings reveals a rare similarity between them, which more than suggests that these two lists are to be viewed as essentially one census, presented twice in the Chumash. The listing in the beginning of Sefer Shemot does not present new information, but merely recounts that which had already been told earlier. Both sections open with a similar introduction:

"These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Yaakov, each coming with his household" (Shemot 1:1);

"These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt" (Bereishit 46:8).

Just as the two introductions correspond, so do the sum totals presented towards the end of each list:

"The total number of persons that were of Yaakov's issue came to seventy" (Shemot 1:5);

"Thus the total number of Yaakov's household who came to Egypt was seventy persons" (Bereishit 46:27).

It would seem, then, that these two listings are, in fact, one and the same. It appears first upon the family's actual migration to Egypt and is repeated in the beginning of our parasha.

In truth, the list in Bereishit presents a detailed counting of all those who descended to Egypt, arranged according to Yaakov's various wives, whereas our parasha lists only Yaakov's sons themselves. One may thus argue that the two lists are not to be equated. However, the rest of the immigrants are accounted for in Shemot with the phrase, "each coming with his household." In other words, each of Yaakov's sons arrives in Egypt together with his family. Since this expression includes all Yaakov's grandchildren and great-grandchildren, we should not expect the Torah to list them all individually as it had done in Vayigash. To the contrary, the shorthand employed in this list can be more clearly understood in light of the fact that this section serves merely to repeat the list in Sefer Bereishit. Specifically for this reason, the Torah sees no reason to repeat the lengthy detail outlined earlier, sufficing merely to remind the reader of that which he had already encountered in parashat Vayigash.

Why does the Torah suddenly recall this listing as it introduces Sefer Shemot? We have already learned of the experiences of Yaakov's family in Egypt ("Thus Yisrael settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly" - Bereishit 47:27), we have read of Yaakov's death, his children's journey to his burial in Canaan and their subsequent return to Egypt, and we have even come across Yosef's passing ("Yosef died at the age of one hundred and ten years" - the final pasuk in the Book of Bereishit). Why does the

Torah see fit to present a chronological about-face and once again inform us of the names of Yakaov's sons who migrated with him to Egypt?

Rashi cites the comments of Midrash Tanchuma to deal with this problematic repetition:

"Although it counted them by name during their lifetime [in parashat Vayigash], it counts them again upon their passing, to inform us of their love [before the Almighty]."

Rashi, the grand educator (and not necessarily an exegete in this context), stresses the element of God's intense love for His people as the basis for the redundancy. Rashi here follows his general pattern at the beginning of each sefer of citing midrashim relating to God's love for Benei Yisrael. However, on the level of "peshat" - the straightforward understanding of the text - the problem remains unresolved.

It would seem that the simplest answer lies in the comments of the Ramban to the opening verse of the sefer:

The reason for [the repetition of] "These are the names" is that the Scripture wishes to trace the subject of the exile from the time of the descent of [Yaakov and his sons] to Egypt... Therefore, the Scripture returns to the beginning of this subject, from the verse, "...and all his children he [Yaakov] brought with him to Egypt" (Bereishit 46:7). This verse is followed by the verse, "These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt," the same verse with which our sefer opens. Although these are two books, the story is combined by things which follow each other.

According to the Ramban, whose approach we will adopt here, the Torah's repetition of the names of those who descended to Egypt serves to ensure the narrative's flow from the moment of the first wave of migration to Egypt through the Egyptian slavery depicted in Sefer Shemot. Repetition for this purpose is certainly not uncommon in the Chumash. (For example, see Shemot 6:10-2 and Shemot 6:29-30.) It becomes clear, then, why the Torah presents this list for a second time. The purpose of this citation relates specifically to the earlier section, in an effort to maintain the narrative's flow from this point onward. Therefore, we should not expect any discrepancy whatsoever between the two lists.

Specifically for this reason, we are doubly surprised by a glaring discrepancy between the two lists, with regard to the order of the presentation of Yaakov's sons.

The section in Parashat Vayigash lists the sons in the following manner:

Leah's sons:

1. Reuven
2. Shimon

3. Levi
4. Yehuda
5. Yissakhar
6. Zevulun

The Sons of Zilpa, Leah's Maid:

7. Gad
8. Asher

Rachel's Sons:

9. Yosef
10. Binyamin

The Sons of Bilha, Rachel's Maid:

11. Dan
12. Naftali

This list is constructed according to the central division in Yaakov's family - Leah and her maid (1-8) followed by Rachel and her maid (9-12). This list, then, expresses the basic tension within the very fabric of Yaakov's household: Leah on one side, Rachel on the other. The listing of the children thus corresponds to, and thereby reflects, this domestic struggle.

By contrast, the list opening the Book of Shemot presents a drastically different arrangement of Yaakov's children:

Leah's Sons:

1. Reuven
2. Shimon
3. Levi
4. Yehuda
5. Yisachar
6. Zevulun

Rachel's Sons:

7. Binyamin

(Yosef's name is omitted, as he was already living in Egypt.)

The Sons of Bilha, Rachel's Maid:

8. Dan

9. Naftali

The Sons of Zilpa, Leah's Maid:

10. Gad

11. Asher

Apparently, this list is built according to the genealogical stature of the various children: the sons of the wives first (1-7), followed by the children of the two handmaids (8-11). In all likelihood, Bilha's children precede those of Zilpa because Rachel's children were just mentioned, and the Torah would rather flow naturally from Rachel's sons to those of her maidservant. The list then concludes with the sons of Zilpa, the maid of Leah, whose own children were listed first. The structure of this list follows the chiasmic style, which should most likely be seen as simply a literary technique.

The critical question is, of course, why does the Torah change its method of ordering Yaakov's children from the first list to the second? The difficulty compounds in light of our previously stated assertion that this list must be seen as merely a repeat of the initial list in parashat Vayigash. Why does the Torah conspicuously allude to a parallel between these two lists, thus suggesting their identification one with the other, and then proceed to order the sons differently? Recall the Ramban's view that the entire purpose of this list is to bring the narrative back to the point of the first listing of parashat Vayigash and to continue the story from there. If so, the discrepancy is all the more baffling. If this list serves merely to remind the reader of the previous section, should the ordering not remain consistent in both accounts?

It would seem that the answer lies in the Netziv's aforementioned comments. Unquestionably, the Book of Shemot constitutes a direct continuation to Sefer Bereishit. Therefore, at the very outset of this sefer, the Torah repeats the event in Sefer Bereishit of primary significance for the purposes of this second sefer - Yaakov's sons' descent to Egypt. The Chumash then proceeds to trace the series of events from this point in history. However, concurrent with this continuation of the narrative, the Torah alludes to a fundamental change of perspective with regard to the experiences of Yaakov's children in Egypt. In effect, the difference between the order of listing in Vayigash and that in Shemot signifies the distinction between a family and an entire nation.

Sefer Bereishit depicts the descent to Egypt of a family unit. In this sense, their migration fits perfectly within the rubric and general environment of the Book of Bereishit, which is the story of the family of Avraham. Quite understandably, then,

the ordering of the sons appears on the basis of the domestic tension, which had pervaded Yaakov's home - the tension between Leah and Rachel, a conflict perpetuated by their children.

The Book of Shemot, by contrast, introduces us, for the very first time, to the "Nation of Israel" in the true sense of the term. The Egyptian monarch utters the fateful pronouncement, "Look, the NATION of Benei Yisrael are much too numerous for us" (Shemot 1:9). Suddenly, Yaakov's family has been transformed into the Nation of Israel. The twelve "individual" sons have developed into a nation on the threshold of bondage, suffering, and ultimately redemption through the direct, supernatural involvement of the Almighty and His choosing them as His special nation. The indication of this change of perspective emerges from the change in the order of Yaakov's children as presented in the beginning of Sefer Shemot. Here the Torah does not divide them according to the family strife, but rather according to the national hierarchy: first the children of Leah and Rachel, and then the children of the maidservants. Reuven and Shimon, two of Leah's sons, most likely felt a stronger personal kinship with Gad and Asher, the sons of their mother's maid (and for this reason they generally appear together throughout Sefer Bereishit). Nevertheless, from the general, national perspective, the personal tendencies and feelings of the brothers themselves are simply irrelevant. The Torah arranges their listing according to the nation's overall hierarchical social structure.

Interestingly, in other contexts as well, the order generally employed when listing Yaakov's sons in Sefer Bereishit follows the family unit, as it appears in Vayigash. (See also the order employed by Yaakov when blessing his sons in Parashat Vayechi.) From Shemot on, however, the order generally corresponds to the national structure (as is the case in the beginning of the book). The various exceptions must be treated independently, a topic beyond the purview of our discussion.

This, therefore, is how we must open Sefer Shemot. We recall and then continue to develop the event already recounted in Bereishit (the descent of Yaakov and his family to Egypt). Only now, this historical process assumes a different character. The Chumrah has shifted to a new angle - the national perspective as opposed to that of the family, which had characterized the narrative of Sefer Bereishit.

(Translated by Rav David Silverberg.)

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