



Light of Torah

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Exodus: a life and death struggle

Exodus: that foundational story of God's liberation of the Israelites from slavery and their formation as a nation. Exodus opens with the descendents of Jacob groaning under the yolk of oppression. Their long period of slavery in Egypt is never clearly explained in the Torah and we may well ponder the 'why?' of this prolonged suffering. Did no divine/prophetic voice urge them to leave Egypt before it was too late? The Torah's silence on this is indeed perplexing...

But let's begin our exploration of Exodus with Chapter 1, digging into the biblical text in search of gems of ancient wisdom. Read Chapter 1 of Exodus slowly, carefully. Pay particular attention to details such as

- i) recurring themes,
- ii) connections with stories we have read previously in Genesis,
- iii) the use of names (and the absence of names),
- iv) surprising elements in the text.

Beneath the surface of the narrative, what is God's Word 'saying' to you? How do these ancient, sacred writings speak to your life, to your faith?

No doubt you noticed that this chapter is permeated by a theme of fertility, birth, abundant life, unstoppable growth. The chapter opens by listing Jacob's progeny. It goes on to describe their descendents, the children of Israel, using language found also in the creation account in Genesis 1: 'fruitful,' 'teemed,' 'multiplied,' 'the land was filled with them.' Note, too, the explicit references to the scene of birth in vv. 16, 19. And how surprising it is that the centre-stage figure in this chapter is not the most powerful man in Egypt (for 'Pharaoh' remains unnamed) but two heroic 'Hebrew midwives' (who are named in v.15). Their role in facilitating Israelite births successfully dismantles Pharaoh's murderous plans, and they are twice praised as being 'God-fearing' (vv. 17, 21). What else caught your attention in this chapter?

Recall God's command—'be fruitful and multiply'—to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28) and to Noah (Gen. 9:7). Recall, too, God's promise to the patriarchs that their descendents would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:5) and as the dust of the earth (13:16). The Exodus story tells the story not only of a growing race of people, but of the unfolding of a covenantal relationship. God blesses his people and holds out a future of great promise.

Indeed, they live, grow and thrive in great numbers! And not only do they thrive, they do so amidst oppressive conditions and despite the systematic attempts of Pharaoh to destroy their male young. What can we conclude? Right from the start, the book of Exodus presents a dramatic confrontation between the powers of life and death, between the living God of the Israelites and the deathly paranoia of an earthly king. This is the backdrop against which Moses, as a defenseless baby, enters the picture (Ex.2), survives against all odds, and is destined to become a savior, a liberator to his people.

Continue to ponder this Torah portion, sharing your insights and questions.

Reflect upon a painful period of your life in which, despite hardships, you were able to recognize God's enduring, lifegiving presence. How were you shaped by this experience?

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 2001). Scripture: Friedman's translation.