

Torah Weekly

12-18 January, 2020
15-21 Tevet, 5780
Torah: Shemot:
Exodus 1:1 - 6:1
Haftorah: Isaiah 27:6 - 28:13;
Isaiah 29:22-23
PARSHAT SHEMOT

Calendars
We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs
Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah
We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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ALEPH INSTITUTE
No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

Who Am I? Moses' second question to G-d at the burning bush was, Who are you? "So I will go to the Israelites and say, 'Your fathers' G-d sent me to you.' They will immediately ask me what His name is. What shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:13) G-d's reply, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, wrongly translated in almost every Christian Bible as something like "I am that I am," deserves an essay in its own right (I deal with it in my books *Future Tense* and *The Great Partnership*). His first question, though, was, *Mi anochi* (Exodus 3:11), "Who am I?" "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" said Moses to G-d. "And how can I possibly get the Israelites out of Egypt?" On the surface the meaning is clear. Moses is asking two things. The first: who I am to be worthy of so great a mission? The second: how can I possibly succeed? G-d answers the second. "Because I will be with you." You will succeed because I am not asking you to do it alone. I am not really asking you to do it at all. I will be doing it for you. I want you to be My representative, My mouthpiece, My emissary and My voice. G-d never answered the first question. Perhaps in a strange way Moses answered himself. In Tanakh as a whole, the people who turn out to be the most worthy are the ones who deny they are worthy at all. The prophet Isaiah, when charged with his mission, said, 'I am a man of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5)'. Jeremiah said, 'I cannot speak, for I am a child.' (Jeremiah 1:6) David, Israel's greatest king, echoed Moses' words, 'Who am I? (Samuel 11, 7:18)'. Jonah, sent on a mission by G-d, tried to run away. According to Rashbam, Jacob was about to run away when he found his way blocked by the man/angel with whom he wrestled at night. (Rashbam to Genesis 32:23) The

heroes of the Bible are not figures from Greek or any other kind of mythology. They are not people possessed of a sense of destiny, determined from an early age to achieve fame. They do not have what the Greeks called *megalopsychia*, a proper sense of their own worth, a gracious and lightly worn superiority. They did not go to Eton or Oxford. They were not born to rule. They were people who doubted their own abilities. There were times when they felt like giving up. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah reached points of such despair that they prayed to die. They became heroes of the moral life against their will. There was work to be done – G-d told them so – and they did it. It is almost as if a sense of smallness is a sign of greatness. So G-d never answered Moses' question, "Why me?" But there is another question *within* the question. "Who am I?" can be not just a question about worthiness. It can also be a question about identity. Moses, alone on Mount Horeb/Sinai, summoned by G-d to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, is not just speaking to G-d when he says those words. He is also speaking to himself. "Who am I?" There are two possible answers. The first: Moses is a prince of Egypt. He had been adopted as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter. He had grown up in the royal palace. He dressed like an Egyptian, looked and spoke like an Egyptian. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from some rough shepherds, they go back and tell their father, "An Egyptian saved us." (Exodus 2:19) His very name, Moses, was given to him by Pharaoh's daughter. (Exodus 2:10) It was, presumably, an Egyptian name (in fact, *Moses*, as in Ramses, is the ancient Egyptian word for "child". The etymology given in the Torah, that Moses means "I drew him from the water," tells us what the word suggested to Hebrew speakers). So the first

answer is that Moses was an Egyptian prince. The second was that he was a Midianite. For, although he was Egyptian by upbringing, he had been forced to leave. He had made his home in Midian, married a Midianite woman Zipporah, daughter of a Midianite priest and was "content to live" there, quietly as a shepherd. We tend to forget that he spent many years there. He left Egypt as a young man and was already eighty years old at the start of his mission when he first stood before Pharaoh. (Exodus 7:7) He must have spent the overwhelming majority of his adult life in Midian, far away from the Israelites on the one hand and the Egyptians on the other. Moses was a Midianite. So when Moses asks, "Who am I?" it is not just that he feels himself unworthy. He feels himself uninvolved. He may have been Jewish by birth, but he had not suffered the fate of his people. He had not grown up as a Jew. He had not lived among Jews. He had good reason to doubt that the Israelites would even recognize him as one of them. How, then, could he become their leader? More penetratingly, why should he even think of becoming their leader? Their fate was not his. He was not part of it. He was not responsible for it. He did not suffer from it. He was not implicated in it. What is more, the one time he had actually tried to intervene in their affairs – he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who had killed an Israelite slave, and the next day tried to stop two Israelites from fighting one another – his intervention was not welcomed. "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" they said to him. These are the first recorded words of an Israelite to Moses. He had not yet dreamed of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged. Consider, now, the choices Moses faced in his life. On the one hand he could have lived as a prince of Egypt, in luxury and at ease. That might have been his

January 13, 2020 --- 16 Tevet, 5780

Salvation of Baghdad Jewry (1638)

On this date, Murad IV, sultan of the Ottoman Empire, recaptured Baghdad from the Persian Shah after a forty-day siege. The Jews of Baghdad, who had suffered under the Shah's tenure, celebrated this day each year to praise G-d for rescuing them from Persian rule. According to legend, the Jews assisted in the capture by secretly conveying a message to the Sultan about a breach in the wall through which his forces could enter the city.

January 14, 2020 --- 17 Tevet, 5780

1st NY Synagogue (1728)

In 1684, a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who fled the Inquisition held a Rosh Hashanah service in New Amsterdam, thereby founding congregation Shearith Israel ("Remnant of Israel"). On this 17th of Tevet in 1728, the congregation purchased a lot in Lower Manhattan to erect the first synagogue in New York.

Toldot Aaron (1754)

Rabbi Aaron Zelig ben Joel Feivush of Ostrog, Russia, author of *Toldot Aaron*, passed away on Tevet 17 of the year in 5515 from creation (1754).

Maggid of Dubne (1841)

Tevet 17 is also the yahrtzeit of Rabbi Yaakov Wolf Krantz (1740-1804), the Maggid (preacher) of Dubna, particularly known for the parables (meshalim) he employed in his sermons and writings.

January 15, 2020 --- 18 Tevet, 5780

B'nei Yissachar (1841)

The 18th of Tevet the yahrtzeit (anniversary of the passing) of Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dynov (1783?-1841), author of the Chassidic work *B'nei Yissachar*.

January 16, 2020 --- 19 Tevet, 5780

Passing of R. Aryeh Leib Heller, Author of Ketzot Hachoshen (1812)

R. Aryeh Leib Heller was the rabbi of the city of Stryi, in what is now Western Ukraine. His works—*Ketzot Hachoshen*, *Avnei Milu'im*, and *Shav Shemateta*—are known for their clear, logical analysis of Talmudic texts and ideas, and are staples that are studied in yeshivas throughout the world.

January 17, 2020 --- 20 Tevet, 5780

Passing of Maimonides (1204)

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Talmudist, Halachist, physician, philosopher and communal leader, known in the Jewish world by the acronym "Rambam" and to the world at large as "Maimonides", passed away in Egypt on the 20th of Tevet in 1204 (4965).

Printing of Talmud (1483)

The first volume of the Babylonian Talmud, the tractate *Berachot*, was printed in Soncino, Italy, on the 20th of Tevet of the year 5244 from creation (1483)

January 18, 2020 --- 21 Tevet, 5780

Shimon Born (1567 BCE)

Shimon, the second son of Jacob and Leah and the progenitor of the Israelite tribe of Shimon, was born on Tevet 21 (according to another opinion, on Tevet 28), of the year 2194 from creation (1567 BCE), nine years after Jacob's arrival in Charan.

fate had he not intervened. Even afterward, having been forced to flee, he could have lived out his days quietly as a shepherd, at peace with the Midianite family into which he had married. It is not surprising that when G-d invited him to lead the Israelites to freedom, he resisted. Why then did he accept? Why did G-d know that he was the man for the task? One hint is contained in the name he gave his first son. He called him Gershom because, he said, "I am a stranger in a foreign land." (Exodus 2:22) He did not feel at home in Midian. That was *where* he was but not *who* he was. But the real clue is contained in an earlier verse, the prelude to his first intervention. "When Moses was grown, he began to go out to his own people, and he saw their hard labor." (Exodus 2:11) These people were *his* people. He may have looked like an Egyptian but he knew that ultimately he was not. It was a transforming moment, not unlike when the Moabite Ruth said to her Israelite mother in law Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your G-d my G-d." (Ruth 1:16) Ruth was un-Jewish by birth. Moses was un-Jewish by upbringing. But both knew that they, when they saw suffering and identified with the sufferer, they could not walk away. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called this a covenant of fate, *brit goral*. It lies at the heart of Jewish identity to this day. There are Jews who believe and those who don't. There are Jews who practice and those who don't. But there are few Jews indeed who, when their people are suffering, can walk away saying, "This has nothing to do with me." Maimonides, who defines this as "separating yourself from the community," (Hilkhos Teshuva 3:11) says that it is one of the sins for which you are denied a share in the world to come. This is what the Hagaddah means when it says of the wicked son that "because he excludes himself from the collective, he denies a fundamental principle of faith." What fundamental principle of faith? Faith in the collective fate and destiny of the Jewish people. Who am I? asked Moses, but in his heart he knew the answer. I am not Moses the Egyptian or Moses the Midianite. When I see my people suffer I am, and cannot be other than, Moses the Jew. And if that imposes responsibilities on me, then I must shoulder them. For I am who I am because my people are who they are. That is Jewish identity, then and now. *By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks What Are You Needed For?* The sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Y. Schneerson, recounted the following story some 64 years ago: Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Chabad Rebbe, had a disciple who was also a great philanthropist. Two causes that were particularly dear to him were supporting the Jewish community in the Land of Israel and ransoming captives. This wealthy chassid had already married off his children and begun pledging dowries for his less-affluent relatives, when the wheel of fortune turned, and his finances suffered. He was forced to borrow money, and at the end he was left penniless. Overwhelmed and pursued by creditors, he did what any chassid would do: he traveled to his rebbe and unburdened his heavy heart. After listening intently to his complaints, Rabbi Schneur Zalman addressed him: "You speak about what you need, but say nothing of what you are needed for!" In this week's Torah portion, the first one of the book of Exodus, we read about the beginning of the harsh Egyptian exile. But with the disease comes the cure: in the same portion we read about the birth of Moses, the man who was to lead the Jewish people out of their bondage. One of the first things we hear about Moses is that how he helps another person. Emerging from a sheltered existence as a member of Pharaoh's household, he sees an Israelite slave being cruelly beaten by an Egyptian, and rescues him. There are times in our lives when it may be challenging to think about anyone other than ourselves, but the message of Rabbi Schneur Zalman to the anonymous chassid rings true: You speak about what you need, but say nothing of what you are needed for! Often, the best response to adversity is to break out of our comfort zones and extend a helping hand to another person with love and gratitude for all the good that we have.

By Rabbi Shaul Wertheimer

**Passover order forms have been sent to the Chaplains and Rabbis. Please begin speaking with your Chaplain about Passover.*