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**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #05: Nations and Fertility:**

**Names and Namelessness**

**From a Family to a Nation**

The book of *Shemot* opens as though we are in the middle of a story: “**And these** are the names of the sons of Israel.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, this paragraph repeats *Bereishit* 46:8-27 in abridged form (in part, nearly verbatim), linking our book backward to the story of Jacob’s descent to Egypt with his family. *Bereishit* focused on the exploits of Abraham’s singular family, in recognition of its future destiny as prescribed by God. *Shemot* continues Abraham’s family story, steering it toward its next stage as the family becomes a nation.

The opening of the book of *Shemot* illustrates the family’s rapid transformation into nationhood. The phrase “*benei* *Yisrael*” (children of Israel) frames the brief introductory section of the book, drawing attention to this metamorphosis:

These are the names of **the children of Israel** who have come to Egypt: Jacob, each man and his household came. Reuben, Shimon, Levi, and Judah. Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin. Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. And all those descended from Jacob were seventy souls, and Joseph was in Egypt. And Joseph died, as well as all his brothers and all that generation. And **the children of Israel** were fruitful and swarmed and increased and became very, very mighty, and the land was filled with them (*Shemot* 1:1-7)

Initially, the book of *Shemot* uses the phrase “children of Israel” (in verse1) to refer to the individual sons of the third patriarch, Jacob, whose alternate name is Israel. Listing each of his sons by name, the text focuses on individual figures who descend to Egypt as part of a family. Following the death of the generation of the emigrants, the clan of seventy bursts into nationhood,[[2]](#footnote-2) so that six verses later, the second use of the same phrase (verse 7) references the *nation* of Israel, an appellation that will become its primary usage in the Tanakh.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the transition from family to nation, six terms are used to describe explosive population growth (*paru, va-yishretzu, va-yirbu, va-ya’atzmu*, *bi-m’od,* *meod*), spawning a *midrash* that asserts that each pregnancy contained sextuplets (and some say twelve or even sixty children at a time).[[4]](#footnote-4)

**River Societies and Fertility**

Abundant fertility is apparently easily procured in the river societies that surround Israel. Jacob previously found fertility in Charan, in the fertile region of Upper Mesopotamia, where his wives birthed twelve out of his thirteen children.[[5]](#footnote-5) Later in the narrative, Jacob’s family makes its way to the great river society of Egypt to obtain food, and fertility of land seems once again to link up with human fertility, spawning a population explosion for Jacob’s family in Egypt.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Canaan (the land promised to Israel), God gave Abraham a blessing of land and children, intertwining the two basic components of nationhood (*Bereishit* 13:14-17). Producing descendants without land results in a clan of wandering nomads, while land without children is a vacant hull. Taken together, these blessings comprise the Abrahamic blessing, a central theme in Tanakh narratives.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus far, however, both famine and infertility have dominated the *Bereishit* narratives, as the “blessed” family struggles in its quest for survival. The land of Israel, located at a distance between the two great river societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia, is a land without rivers.[[8]](#footnote-8) It does not bequeath easy fertility, whether of produce or of progeny. To receive the promised blessings, the nation that dwells in Israel will have to learn to cultivate a relationship with God, who controls both rain and human fertility.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Infertility encourages dependence upon God and also fosters appreciation for the miracle of childbirth, resulting in a society likely committed to its children. River societies, which obtain fertility effortlessly, tend to breed human arrogance, precluding a sense of one’s own existential insecurity or any need to rely upon God. Plentiful fertility can, moreover, lead to indifference to human life and concomitant moral depravity, as evidenced in Pharaoh’s decree to throw the male children into the river.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is in this sort of society that Abraham’s family transforms into a nation.

**The Blessing of Fertility**

Israel’s population explosion in Egypt seems to be a blessing, perhaps the fulfillment of God’s initial plan for the world. The language of fertility in *Shemot* 1:7 recalls God’s creation of the world, where He blesses His creatures that they shall be fruitful and multiply and fill the world (1:22, 28).[[11]](#footnote-11) God bestows a similar blessing upon Noah when he emerges from the ark to a new, recreated world following the flood (9:1).

Our story also opens with a new creation of sorts, anticipating the destruction of a world with Egypt at its helm.[[12]](#footnote-12) Egypt’s leadership has led the world away from its objectives, entangling the Near East in a morass of social depravity and religious polytheism. God will appoint the nation of Israel to steer the world back to a proper course; in the process, He will “uncreate” Egypt and create a new order, with the rapidly proliferating nation of Israel at its helm, leading the world to its spiritual purpose.

Israel’s fertility, especially the words “and became very, very (*meod* *meod*) mighty,” also recalls God’s blessing to Abraham. God uses the phrase “*meod* *meod*” twice when He promises to increase Abraham’s descendants (*Bereishit* 17:2, 6).[[13]](#footnote-13) The realization of the blessing of children at the beginning of the book of *Shemot* sets the stage for the fulfillment of the second part of God’s promise, when Abraham’s descendants will take possession of the land of Israel.[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet, it seems unlikely that Israel would willingly depart on its own from the bountiful land of Egypt with its abundant riches. Israel’s rapid growth may play a role in moving the narrative toward fulfillment of divine promise; the fledgling nation’s fecundity threatens Pharaoh’s rule, spawning the likelihood that he will expel Israel from Egypt and thus coercing the nation into realizing God’s promise to Abraham.

Even if the story will end with Israel’s movement toward Canaan, events do not move seamlessly toward a felicitous conclusion. Instead of simply ridding his country of the threat of the Hebrews, Pharaoh doubles down, enslaving and actively persecuting the hapless children of Israel. God does not allow the burgeoning nation to leave Egypt just yet. What is the meaning behind this delayed fulfillment of the second stage of God’s promise, where Israel returns to its homeland? It appears that fertility is not sufficient for them to begin their movement to their land; first, they must acquire identity.

**Rapid Growth and Namelessness**

Fertility is not only a blessing; it also constitutes a challenge. As a family of individuals develops into a population whose size is sufficient for nationhood, the people retreat into anonymity. A book that began by listing names now renders all people anonymous. Exponential growth threatens to turn an identifiable group of individuals into a mass of nameless, faceless humans, who are existentially unequipped for nationhood.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Rapid growth challenges Israel to find its collective identity and purpose. At this point, Israel’s existence seems to be devoted exclusively to procreation; the biological multiplication of humans evokes animal fertility, a point made by using the word *va-yishretzu* (and they swarmed) to describe Israel’s fecundity.[[16]](#footnote-16) The nominal use of the word (*sheratzim*) refers to small aquatic (*Bereishit* 1:20) and land creatures (such as insects), known for their rapid movements and copious reproduction. Seforno uses this word as evidence that the proliferating Israelites lived lives without purpose or meaningful existence:

It means to say that they multiplied like insects, without culture, and they behaved like insects… and all of this is negative. (Seforno, *Shemot* 1:6)

Seforno also proposes an engaging wordplay between the word *sheratzim* (insects) and the word *she-ratzim* (who run), where the grammatical prefix (*she*) is attached to the word *ratz* (run):

And after all of the seventy individuals died, they turned to the ways of insects (*sheratzim*), who run (*she-ratzim*) towards oblivion. (Seforno, *Shemot* 1:7)

Like insects, Israel dashes rapidly to and fro, in a frenzy of activity but lacking goals or destiny.

The nameless proliferation also indicates that Israel has relinquished its individuality, willfully integrating into Egyptian culture. Many *midrashim* describe Israel’s attempt to blend in;[[17]](#footnote-17) they no longer circumcise their children,[[18]](#footnote-18) they fill the theaters and circuses of Egypt,[[19]](#footnote-19) and they style their hair and dress like their fellow Egyptians.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Lacking identity of its own, the children of Israel rightly lose their names. And if Israel has become a nation whose purpose is solely procreative, then they are justly likened to animals. Even before Pharaoh begins his persecution of Israel, Israel’s loss of direction threatens to upend the goals and destiny of Abraham’s family, who swiftly abandons its values as its numbers increase.

This, then, is the challenge Israel faces at the outset, one that will have to be resolved before Israel can set itself up as a nation in its homeland. Can a rapidly growing mass of people find shape and purpose, and find its way back to its homeland? How will the burgeoning nation succeed in forming its identity as it sinks more deeply into the morass of Egypt?

**The Namelessness of Slavery and Despotism**

The situation will get worse before it gets better. Enslavement further depletes the nation of their purpose, their dignity, their agency, and their names. It is no surprise that names summarily disappear from the narrative; under a regime of slavery, the Hebrews are mere cogs in the mechanism of Egyptian society. Subjects become objects, losing their right to dignity and autonomy. As Martin Buber observes, Egypt constructs a society whose “perfectly organized duty of collective work” ascribes “no greater value to the foot of the living human being than to the water-wheel which that foot turned.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Egyptian society seems to erase all people’s names, not only its oppressed slaves. Taskmasters, the general populace, and even the daughter of Pharaoh[[22]](#footnote-22) surrender their names in a society that erases people’s innate humanity.[[23]](#footnote-23) In this tyrannical society, only the person at the top has agency; all others are subordinate to his dominant will.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Reacquiring Names**

The story shifts slightly with the birth of Moses, who will lead the nation to freedom. After nine verses of being referred to as “the infant,” within a story of anonymous figures, Moses finally receives a name (in 2:10). This seemingly unremarkable moment hints to upcoming liberation. Moses’ first task will be to obtain freedom for the Hebrew slaves. But his ultimate task will be to steer Israel back to a relationship with God, purposefully moving Israel toward the fulfillment of its destiny so that it can properly shape a unique identity and acquire names.

Stirrings of liberation produce hope, which begins to produce revived identity. Just before God launches the plague narrative, the names of the “children of Israel,” mentioned in the opening of the book of Shemot, surface for the first time since their descent to Egypt. Reuven, Shimon, and Levi are named, along with their children and grandchildren (6:14-19). In this context, the anonymous mother of Moshe (from chapter 2) also receives a name: Yocheved (6:20).[[25]](#footnote-25) A nation begins to emerge from the shadows of anonymity. The list of names, however, ends abruptly, without completion. We hear nothing of Jacob’s remaining nine sons.[[26]](#footnote-26) National identity remains elusive; it briefly surfaces, but then vanishes.

To fully acquire its national identity, the nascent nation must find its religious path and overall purpose; this, in turn, requires that Israel reclaim its connection to God. Yet, God is not mentioned in the first chapter until verse 17, and then only from the point of view of the narrator, who portrays the midwives as God-fearing, a description that seems to imply that they have a strong moral compass. No character actually mentions God during the first two chapters of the book. Submerged in the reliable abundance of the Nile civilization and obscured by explosive population growth, the nation of Israel has lost its connection to God. They do not turn to God even during the harsh period of persecution and enslavement; their anguished cries will be heard by God (2:23), but that hardly constitutes prayer. More to the point, even after Moshe reports on his encounter with God at the burning bush, Israel remains skeptical of God’s promises (see, e.g., 6:9) and alienated from Him. Israeldoes not turn directly to God in prayer until 14:10, an omission redolent of their alienation from God, and duly noted by Rabbinic commentaries.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The names of the children of Israel will be restored only once Israel has established a nation that holds onto a keen awareness of the centrality of its relationship with God.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Significantly, the phrase “And these are the names of the children of Israel (*ve-eileh shemot benei Yisrael*),” which opens the book but then disappears immediately, will reappear six times toward the end of the book.[[29]](#footnote-29) Unsurprisingly, it emerges in the context of worship in the *Mishkan*, which provides Israel with religious purpose that fosters a strong sense of identity. *Sefer Shemot* moves from Egypt to Sinai to the construction of the *Mishkan*, from mindless service of a human king to meaningful service of an eternal God, from purposelessness to fulfillment of national destiny, from anonymity to the reacquiring of names.

Toward the end of Shemot, the “names of Israel” (*shemot* *benei* *Yisrael*) are engraved on the stones of the ephod and breastplate of the high priest.[[30]](#footnote-30) The high priest bears Israel’s names as he engages in his daily service as their representative. Even more significantly, this service bequeaths names upon a nation that had almost receded into anonymity. Daily service of God shapes Israel’s destiny and identity; it allows a nameless nation to reacquire its lost names.

1. This is not unique to *Shemot*. The books of *Vayikra* and *Bamidbar* also open with the connective “and,” linking each book into a broader corpus. The fact that Deuteronomy does not open with a word that connects it to the previous book is intriguing – an observation that should be addressed in the context of understanding the uniqueness of that book. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Two verses later, Pharaoh will refer to Israel as an *am*, a nation. This is the first time in the Bible that Israel is referred to as a nation. It is intriguing that Israel transforms into a nation under the watchful gaze of its enemies, whose hostile policies play no small role in forging their national identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While the appellation *benei* *Yisrael* appears only twice in all of *Bereishit*, it appears one hundred and twenty-five times in the book of *Shemot*, highlighting the centrality of the newly founded nation in that book. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Tanchuma* Buber *Shemot* 1:6; *Tanchuma* (Warsaw) *Shemot* 1:5; *Shemot Rabba* 1:7. B. Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 9, points out that classical authors such as Aristotle and Strabo describe the fecundity of Egyptian women, which they attribute to the waters of the Nile. These ancient authors mention septuplets. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is difficult to identify exactly where Charan lies. *Bereishit* 24:10 indicates that it is used interchangeably with the place Aram Naharayim (*naharayim* seems to be connected to the word for river (*nahar*), in plural form), which implies a city between the two great rivers (see, e.g., Rasag and Rashi, ad loc.), presumably in the northern region. Targum Onkelos (ad loc.) translates Naharayim as “on the Euphrates.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A similar verse describing Israel’s fertility in Egypt appeared in *Bereishit* 47:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is a theme that I explored in my book, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, pp. 192-193; 302, 340, 392, fn. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. While the Jordan is the most important groundwater source in Israel, the Bible never calls it a river (as it does the Nile and the Euphrates); the Jordan’s meager volume of water, as compared to the surrounding rivers, did not produce a great ancient civilization that revolved around its profitable river. That Israel does not contain an actual river as its main water source, instead relying on rain, is by design, as noted in *Devarim* 11:12 and discussed in [*shiur* #2](https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/studies-tanakh/leaving-egypt%E2%80%99s-religious-conceptions-1-source-human-success). It appears that the maximal borders of the land are those that God demarcated for Avraham (*Bereishit* 15:18): “I have given this land to your descendants **from** the river of Egypt **until** the great river, the Euphrates River.” The borders of Israel are delimited by rivers, but the promised land does not include them. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A *gemara* in *Taanit* 2a makes the point that both fertility of land and fertility of humans are under God’s exclusive domain. It describes three keys that are in the hands of God and not transmitted to humans: the key of rain, the key of childbirth, and the key of resurrection of the dead. *Chazal* say that God sometimes withholds fertility (see, e.g., *Yevamot* 64a) or rain (see, e.g., *Chullin* 60b) in order to encourage prayer and communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also *Bereishit* 6:1, which links abundant human fertility to the antediluvial immorality, [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. God blesses the fish, birds, and people with fertility in *Bereishit* 1, but the land animals receive no such blessing. Possibly, their blessing is included in God’s blessing to humans, who are created on the same day, but the wording of *Bereishit* 1:28 makes this unlikely. Radak suggests that because animals and humans vie for the same living space, one’s blessing cancels out the other. Because the chapter wishes to bless humans, it does not bless the animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The birth of Moses, whose mother sees him, “that he is good” (*Shemot* 2:2), linguistically recalls the creation of the world, where God sees His emerging creations, “that it is good” (*Bereishit* 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Note that Moses, like Noah, emerges from an ark, a person chosen to spearhead a “recreated” world. In our discussion of the ten plagues, we will note the linguistic references to the creation of the world as God unravels Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. God repeats variations of this blessing both to Isaac (*Bereishit* 26:4, 24) and to Jacob (35:11; 48:4), thereby confirming that it is part of the dynastic legacy of the family. Note that Ishmael is blessed similarly (17:20). *Shemot Rabba* 1:7 notes God’s continued active role in giving them fertility here. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See for example *Bereishit* 48:4, where population growth is linked to the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is ironic that a book colloquially known as “*Shemot*” (“names”), due to its second word, almost immediately devolves into a tale of anonymous figures. Seforno (*Shemot* 1:1) notes that Jacob’s sons are mentioned by name because of their worthiness, but that after their deaths, there were none worthy of being named. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This verb prepares the reader for Egypt’s impending loathing of Israel (*Shemot* 1:12), which seems connected to Israel’s fecundity. See *Kli Yakar* on *Shemot* 1:7. The midwives will explain to Pharaoh that the Israelite women are “like animals” (1:19), a description that may be designed to (falsely) assure Pharaoh that they too regard the Israelite women negatively. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Other Rabbinic sources (e.g. *Vayikra Rabba* 32:4; *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 4:12) portray an opposite scenario, in which Israel preserves certain distinctions from the indigenous Egyptians (such as their language, their names, and in some versions, their dress), thereby meriting redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Tanchuma* Buber *Shemot* 7; *Shemot* *Rabba* 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Tanchuma* Buber 1:6 describes the nation filling the theaters and circuses, as though they have no elevated pastimes or goals. Rabbinic commentators often associate theaters and circuses with debauchery of a sexual and violent nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See *Vayikra Rabba* 23:2. Ancient Egyptians styled their hair differently from Semitic peoples, as is evident from ancient Egyptian pictures. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. M. Buber, *Moses*(New York: Harper, 1946), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. We will examine the anonymity of Pharaoh’s daughter in a later *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The only ones who appear to retain their names in chapter 1 are the midwives, Shifra and Puah. Possibly, these women maintain their names because they maintain their integrity; they act against a powerful regime, allowing their moral compunctions to determine their actions. Nevertheless, both the daughter of Pharaoh and Moshe’s family members (his mother and sister) will act in chapter 2 in a similar manner as the midwives, yet they do not receive names. Some exegetes do not regard Shifra and Puah as proper names, explaining instead that these are the descriptions of their jobs as midwives or of the midwifery guilds. We will discuss this further in an upcoming *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Pharaoh also does not have a proper name in the story, a peculiarity that I examined in *shiur* #3. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The anonymous man from the house of Levi also receives a name in *Shemot* 6:20; Amram’s role, however, is negligible in our story, and therefore his anonymity is less striking. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. We will examine this omission more fully in a later *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Israel’s failure to pray is so striking that some *midrashim* maintain it is the sole reason that God will again harden Pharaoh’s heart *after* Israel’s exit from Egypt, causing him to chase the Israelites after their departure from Egypt. See *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 2:2. Indeed, it is this event that will cause Israel to turn directly to God in 14:10, *for the first time in the book of Shemot*! [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Devarim* 29:19 transforms this idea to fit into a punitive context, explaining that if a member or a group should sin and worship idols, “God will erase his name from under the heavens.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Altogether, the phrase *“shemot benei Yisrael*” appears seven times in the book of *Shemot*, indicating that it constitutes a key phrase of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Shemot* 28:9, 11, 21, 29; 39:6, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)