

עץ חיים

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ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY  
THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM



*Produced by* THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary  
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*The Rabbinical Assembly*

*3080 Broadway*

*New York, NY 10027*

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*Illustrations of the tabernacle and its furnishings by Joe Sikora.*

*Composition by VARDA Graphics, Skokie, Illinois*

*Design by Adrienne Onderdonk Dudden*

*Manufactured in the United States of America*

09 10 10 9 8

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

*Bible. O.T. Pentateuch. Hebrew. 2001.*

*Etz Hayim: Torah and commentary / senior editor, David L. Lieber; literary editor, Jules Harlow; sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.*

*p. cm.*

*Text of the Pentateuch in Hebrew and English; commentary in English.*

*Includes the haftarat and commentary on them, p'shat and d'rash commentaries, comments on Conservative halakhic practice, topical essays, and other material.*

*Includes bibliographical references and index.*

*ISBN-10: 0-8276-0712-1 ISBN-13: 978-0-8276-0712-5*

*1. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch—Commentaries. 2. Haftarat—Commentaries. 3. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch—Theology. 4. Conservative Judaism—Customs and practices. I. Lieber, David L. II. Harlow, Jules. III. United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. IV. Rabbinical Assembly. V. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch. English. Jewish Publication Society, 2001. VI. Title.*

*BS1222 .L54 2001*

*222'.1077—dc21*

2001029757

**Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary**  
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1 These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: <sup>2</sup>Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; <sup>3</sup>Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; <sup>4</sup>Dan and

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים  
מִצְרַיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:  
<sup>2</sup>רְאוּבֵן שְׁמֵעוֹן לֵוִי וְיְהוּדָה: <sup>3</sup>יִשָּׁשָׁר

### REVERSAL OF FORTUNE (1:1–22)

Joseph dies, with his generation; the Israelites multiply in Egypt; and a new pharaoh suddenly enslaves them. The barest of details concerning slavery and suffering are offered. The narrative becomes expansive only when it begins to describe the liberation.

#### AN INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY (vv. 1–7)

The sons of Jacob—the tribes of Israel—are listed in an order based on Gen. 35:23–26. That chapter includes the divine blessing to Jacob: “Be fer-

tile and increase; / A nation, yea an assembly of nations, / Shall descend from you” (35:11). This promise of increase has been fulfilled, as we read in 1:7.

**1. These are** The initial Hebrew letter of the verse that begins Exodus (*vav*, usually translated “and”) is a link to Genesis, because the letter suggests continuity with what precedes it.

**Israel** The name here refers to the patriarch Jacob. The name is used to refer to the nation for the first time in verse 9.

We read in the Book of Genesis the story of a family living out its relationship to God in the midst of sibling jealousies and marital strife. Exodus is the story of a people encountering God in the course of their journey from slavery to freedom.

#### CHAPTER 1

“The historian asks, What political, economic or religious factors inclined Pharaoh to enslave the Israelites? The Midrash asks, Why is Israel persecuted and enslaved more than any other nation of the world?” (N. Leibowitz).

The Sages of the Midrash, writing more than a thousand years after the events and living under the harsh rule of the Romans, tried to interpret the experience of slavery in Egypt as a way of understanding their own experience. Some said that slavery was a punishment for assimilating into the Egyptian way of life and wanting to be like the Egyptians. They interpreted the words “the land was filled with them” (1:7) to mean “the theaters and circuses were filled with them.” The Israelites adopted the Egyptian way of life in all of its crudeness and superficiality. Thus psychological enslavement, the notion that being an Egyptian was better than being an Israelite, preceded physical enslavement, even as psychological liberation will later precede physical liberation. These commentators describe the Israelites as devoid of redeeming qualities, and see the Exodus as resulting from God’s unearned grace

and God’s promise to the patriarchs (Tanh. B. Sh’mot 6).

Others saw enslavement in Egypt as part of God’s long-range plan, foreshadowed in Gen. 15:13, to take the descendants of Abraham and teach them, through the experience of being enslaved and redeemed, to be sensitive to the oppressed in every age (Exod. 22:20: “You shall not wrong a stranger . . . for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”) and to be grateful to God for intervening to free them. On the opening words of the book, “These are the names,” the Sages commented (again with later generations in mind) that “the Israelites were worthy of being redeemed precisely because they did not assimilate. Through all the years of slavery, they did not change their names, their language, or their mode of dress” (Mekh. Bo 5).

Striving not only to understand the Torah but to understand the phenomenon of gentile hatred of the Jewish people, the commentators carefully studied Pharaoh’s words in verses 9 and 10. They note that he objects not so much to the behavior of the Israelites as to their very existence. Like many enemies of the Jewish people, he exaggerates their numbers and power (they could not have been more than a small fraction of the Egyptian population). He uses the same words (“they are much too numerous for us”) that the king of the Philistines used for Isaac’s lone family in Gen. 26:16.

**1. the sons of Israel** When they were growing up, they were the sons of Jacob, not Israel.

Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. <sup>6</sup>Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. <sup>7</sup>But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

<sup>8</sup>A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup>Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they

זְבוּלוֹן וּבְנֵימִן: <sup>4</sup> דָּן וְנַפְתָּלִי גָד וְאַשֶׁר:  
<sup>5</sup> וַיְהִי כֹל-נַפְשׁ יִצְחָק יִרְדְּ-יַעֲקֹב שִׁבְעִים  
 נַפְשׁ וַיּוֹסֶף הָיָה בְּמִצְרַיִם: <sup>6</sup> וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף  
 וְכָל-אָחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: <sup>7</sup> וּבְנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאֵד  
 מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם: <sup>8</sup>  
<sup>8</sup> וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-  
 יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף: <sup>9</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עַם  
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: <sup>10</sup> הֲבֵיאָה

**5. Jacob's issue** Literally, "that came out of Jacob's loin." In the Bible, the Hebrew for "thigh, loin," (*yerekbh*) is a euphemism for the male organ of procreation.

**seventy** The number 70 in the Bible usually is not meant to be taken literally. It evokes the idea of totality, of being all-inclusive, on a large scale. Here, it is a round number.

**6.** The entire immigrant generation had died out by the time the oppression began.

**7.** This description of the Israelites' extraordinary fertility (in language that is also used in the Creation narrative of Gen. 1:20,28) suggests the concept of the community of Israel in Egypt as a miniature universe, self-contained and apart from the larger Egyptian society. It is the nucleus of a new humanity, spiritually speaking.

**the land** Not the whole of Egypt, but the area of Israelite settlement known as Goshen.

THE OPPRESSION (vv. 8–14)

The Israelites experience sudden cataclysmic change. The most reasonable explanation for the Israelites' change in fortune lies in the policies adopted by pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1304–1200 B.C.E.), especially by Ramses II (1290–1224 B.C.E.), who shifted Egypt's administrative and strategic center to the eastern delta of the Nile, where he undertook building projects that required a huge local labor force. "A new king" may also refer to a new dynasty.

**8. who did not know Joseph** He was ignorant of or indifferent to the extraordinary service that Joseph had rendered to Egypt and the crown.

**know** This is the first appearance in Exodus of the verb יָדַע, a key term in the Exodus narratives, occurring more than 20 times in the first 14 chapters. The usual rendering, "to know," hardly does justice to the richness of its meanings, which include emotions and relatedness as well as the intellect. The use of the word here to describe Pharaoh may anticipate "that you [Pharaoh] may know" in 9:29.

**9–10.** The historical situation that prompted his fears may plausibly be reconstructed if it is assumed that the text refers to Ramses II. The eastern delta of the Nile was vulnerable to penetration from Asia. In the middle of the 18th century B.C.E., it had been infiltrated by the Hyksos, an Egyptian term meaning "rulers of foreign lands." The Hyksos were a conglomeration of ethnic groups among whom Semites predominated. They gradually took over Lower Egypt and ruled it until their expulsion in the second half of the 16th century B.C.E. After that, the delta was neglected by the central government, although many Semites remained in the region. A revival of interest in that part of Egypt began with the reign of Haremheb (ca. 1330–1306 B.C.E.) and accelerated under his successors. It probably heightened sensitivity to the presence of a large body of foreigners in that strategic area.

**Israelite people** The unique Hebrew phrase *am b'nei yisra-el* (the nation of the descendants of Israel) is found only here. It tells us that the family of the patriarch Israel (Jacob) has become the people Israel and hence are a threat to the Egyptians.

**deal shrewdly** Literally, "wisely." To control

Jacob had to wrestle and change to become Israel, and his children, the children of Jacob, also had to struggle to outgrow their less admirable traits to become the children of Israel.

**8. who did not know Joseph** Pharaoh knew that Joseph had saved Egypt, but did not care.

He did not let the information change his outlook (MRE 7:137). Through much of Jewish history, the people's well-being depended on the goodwill of a ruler. When the leadership changed, the fortunes of the Jewish community often changed as well. Pharaoh begins by

may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”<sup>11</sup> So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Rameses.<sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

<sup>13</sup>The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites <sup>14</sup>the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

the growth of the Israelite population. Pharaoh unwittingly challenges the will of God, for the divine promise to Abraham (Gen. 22:17 and elsewhere) had pledged that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands of the seashore.

**and rise from the ground** The literal meaning of the Hebrew (*v'alah min ha-aretz*) may come from a forgotten idiom that means “to rise from a lowly state,” or “to gain ascendancy over” (see Hos. 2:2). Or it may simply mean “leave the land.”

**11.** The Israelites are conscripted for compulsory unpaid labor on public works projects for indefinite periods.

**they built** The Hebrew may refer to founding new cities as well as to rebuilding those that existed.

**Pharaoh** The title combines two Egyptian words, *per-’o* (literally, “the great house”). They originally applied to the royal palace and court; later, during the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1304–

נְתַחֲפְמָה לּוֹ פֶן-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה בֵּי-תִקְרָאנָה  
מְלַחְמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ  
וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: <sup>11</sup> וַיִּשְׂמוּ  
עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מַסִּים לְמַעַן עַנְתּוֹ בְּסַבְּלָתָם  
וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה אֶת-פִּתּוֹם  
וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס: <sup>12</sup> וְכִאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנּוּ אֹתוֹ כֵּן  
יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

<sup>13</sup> וַיַּעֲבְדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ:  
<sup>14</sup> וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה  
בְּחֶמֶר וּבַלְבָּנִים וּבְכָל-עֲבֹדָה בַשָּׂדֶה אֵת  
כָּל-עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר-עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶךְ:

1200 B.C.E.), it was an honorific title for the reigning monarch. It is analogous to present-day use of “the Palace” or “the White House.”

**Pithom and Rameses** Both names are well known in Egyptian sources, but their precise location has not been fixed. Pithom is never again mentioned in the Bible. It was identified with a location in the eastern Nile delta (Tell er-Ratabah, in the east of Wadi Tumilat). The name derives from the Egyptian *per-atum*, which means “the House of (the sun god) Atum,” indicating the presence of a major temple dedicated to the primeval creator god of that name. Raamses can be none other than the famous delta residence built by and named after Pharaoh Ramses II; its beauty and glory are extolled in poems still extant. The city was situated in “the region of Goshen,” a phrase that is synonymous with “the region of Rameses,” where the Israelites lived.

**13–14.** The Israelites now are subjected to forced labor in construction and agriculture, as opposed to the labor exacted from them earlier

refusing to acknowledge Joseph, and later refusing to acknowledge God, saying, “Who is the LORD that I should heed Him?” (Exod. 5:2).

**14. harsh labor** One of the Sages reads “harsh labor” (*b’farekh*) as “with soft words” (*b’feh rakh*). Instead of confronting the Israelites with threats and demands, the Egyptians hid their evil intent behind soft, innocuous words, assuring the Israelites that this was for

their own good. The word “*b’farekh*” occurs one other time in the Torah. In Lev. 25:46, the Israelites are told never to treat their own slaves *b’farekh*. Some oppressed people, given the opportunity, would be eager to reverse the roles and oppress others. We are taught that, because we know how it feels, we should never oppress others. Abraham Lincoln reflected the teaching of the Torah in his statement: “As I

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**1:14. they made life bitter for them** The Haggadah of Pesah connects to this verse the practice of eating bitter herbs at the *Seider*.

<sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” <sup>17</sup>The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” <sup>19</sup>The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמְיֻלְדֹת הָעִבְרִיִּית 15  
 אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית  
 פּוּעָה: 16 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיֻלְדֹכֶן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיֹּת  
 וְרֵאִיתֶן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אִם־בֵּן הוּא וְהַמִּתֶּן  
 אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בַּת הִיא וְחָיָה: 17 וַתִּירְאֶן  
 הַמְיֻלְדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר  
 דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיֶינָן אֶת־  
 הַיְלָדִים: 18 וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לַמְיֻלְדֹת  
 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מַדּוּעַ עֲשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר  
 הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיֶינָן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: 19 וַתֹּאמְרֶן

together with the other inhabitants of Egypt. In the consciousness of Israel, this experience indelibly stamped Egypt as the “house of bondage.” The word translated as “forced labor” also connotes ruthless behavior on the part of those in charge.

THE MIDWIVES (vv. 15–22)

In response to the failure of his scheme, Pharaoh issues a barbarous decree to reduce the Israelite population.

**15. Hebrew** The Hebrew word *ivri* first appears in Gen. 14:13, as a descriptive term for Abram. It is used in the Bible when non-Israelites refer to Israelites or when the latter identify themselves to others. (A class of wandering people known as *apiru* is found in a variety of Near Eastern texts.) The origin of the term is a puzzle.

**midwives** It is possible that the two names given here are not of individuals but guilds of midwives.

**Shiphrah** The name appears in a list of slaves attached to an Egyptian estate and is indicated as Asiatic. It comes from a Semitic root meaning “beauty.”

**Puah** This name, apparently meaning “young girl,” is attested on documents at Ugarit (an ancient Canaanite city whose buried library was discovered in 1929). Midrashic tradition has identified the two women with Jochebed and Miriam.

**16. birthstool** Literally, “two stones,” most likely the two bricks on which women in labor squatted opposite the midwife during childbirth.

**19.** The midwives respond evasively out of a sense of self-preservation and their desire to continue to save lives.

would not be a slave, so would I not be a master.” An ancient rabbi taught: What made the work so unbearable? Not only that it was hard but that it seemed pointless. People are capable of working hard, but they burn out from a sense of futility, a sense that nothing will come of what they are doing.

**16. if it is a boy** Pharaoh assumed that the only threat to his power would be physical resistance by Israelite males. He could not conceive of the power of spiritual resistance, exemplified by the role women play in the Exodus narrative.

**17. The midwives, fearing God** The phrase translated as “the fear of God” (*yir-at Elohim*) is the closest the Torah comes to having a word for religion. The case of the midwives suggests that the essence of religion is not belief in the existence of God or any other theological precept, but belief that certain things are wrong because God has built stan-

dards of moral behavior into the universe. (In Gen. 20:11, Abraham is afraid that the Philistines will murder him and abduct his wife because “there is no fear of God in this place.”) The midwives not only believed in God but also understood that God demands a high level of moral behavior. They were willing to risk punishment at the hands of Pharaoh rather than betray their allegiance to God. This is the first recorded case of civil disobedience, challenging government in the name of a higher authority. It would find an echo in the thousands of righteous gentiles who risked their own lives to protect Jews from the Nazis. The midwives begin a pattern that is continued in the story of Moses, whose life is repeatedly threatened by men and saved by women (his mother; Pharaoh’s daughter; his sister, Miriam; his wife, Zipporah). “It was through righteous women that Israel was redeemed” (Exod. R. 1:12).

**19. the Hebrew women are not like the**

are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”<sup>20</sup> And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.<sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.<sup>22</sup> Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

הַמִּילֹדֹת אֶל־פְּרֻעָה כִּי לֹא כַנְשִׁים  
 הַמִּצְרִית הָעֵבְרִית כִּי־חַיּוֹת הָיָה בְטָרֶם  
 תָּבוֹא אֱלֹהֵן הַמִּילֹדֹת וַיִּלְדּוּ: <sup>20</sup> וַיֵּיטֵב  
 אֱלֹהִים לַמִּילֹדֹת וַיִּרְבּ הָעָם וַיֵּעָצְמוּ  
 מְאֹד: <sup>21</sup> וַיִּהְי כִּי־יִרְאוּ הַמִּילֹדֹת אֶת־  
 הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בְּתִים: <sup>22</sup> וַיִּצַו פְּרֻעָה  
 לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיְלֹד הַיְאֹרֶה  
 תִּשְׁלִיכוּהוּ וְכָל־הַבַּת תַּחֲיוּן: ח

**2** A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.<sup>2</sup> The woman con-

**ב** וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־  
 לֵוִי: <sup>2</sup> וַתְּהֵרָה הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּרְא אֹתוֹ

**20. multiplied and increased** The narrative closes as it began (1:7), suggesting divine providence. Pharaoh’s diabolical measures have not changed the situation.

**21. established households** Or families. God

rewarded their virtue by blessing them with large families.

**22.** All else having failed, Pharaoh issues a final decree. He mobilizes “all his people,” the entire apparatus of the state, to annihilate the Israelites.

THE BIRTH AND YOUTH OF MOSES (2:1–25)

THE ABANDONMENT AND SALVATION  
 OF MOSES (vv. 1–10)

**1. man . . . woman** This refers to Amram and Jochebed. Note the lack of personal names in this part of the story, except for Moses at the end.

**married** The Hebrew root לקח (literally, “to take”), is frequently used of marriage. The narrative focuses on the role of the mother.

**2. she saw how beautiful he was** The word *tov* usually means “good.” Here it might also convey the sense of “robust, healthy.”

**Egyptian women** Why does Pharaoh choose to believe this improbable excuse? The Hebrew word here translated “vigorous” literally means “like animals.” Pharaoh is ready to believe that the Israelites are virtually a different species, less human and less deserving of life than are the Egyptians, so that he can proceed with his program of persecution and slaughter.

**22. all his people** Why did Pharaoh involve all the people rather than leave it to the authorities or the army? Persecution cannot be successful without the complicity of the community.

hero, of noble birth, is raised by peasants and ultimately returns to his lofty origins. Moses, an Israelite raised in Pharaoh’s palace, returns to his people, as if to suggest that it was nobler to be a common Israelite than an Egyptian prince.

**1. A certain man of the house of Levi** The text implied that Moses was born shortly after his parents married. But we know that they had two older children, Miriam and Aaron. The Midrash resolves the problem in this way: Moses’ parents already had two children when Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite males would be killed. His father and mother divorced, his father declaring, “What is the point of having another child only to see him killed?” But Miriam reproached her father, saying, “You are worse than Pharaoh. Pharaoh only threatens the males; you eliminate the possibility of any child. Pharaoh’s decree may not be carried out, but your decision not to have children cer-

CHAPTER 2

The story of Moses’ birth and early years contains many elements common to hero legends: The special child, endangered at birth but rescued, undergoes a period of separation and then returns as a changed person with a mission. But there is one notable difference. The typical

ceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

<sup>5</sup>The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must

כִּי־טוֹב הוּא וְתַצְפְּנָהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים: 3 וְלֹא־יִכְלָה עוֹד הַצְּפִינוֹ וְתַקַּח־לוֹ תַּבַּת גָּמָא וְתַחְמְרָהּ בַּחֹמֶר וּבַזָּפֶת וְתָשֶׂם בָּהּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְתָשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל־שֹׁפֶת הַיָּאֵר: 4 וְתִתְצַב אַחֲתוֹ מֵרְחֹק לְדַעַה מֶה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ:

5 וְתָרַד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וְנִעְרַתֶּיהָ הִלְכָת עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וְתָרָא אֶת־הַתַּבָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וְתִשְׁלַח אֶת־אִמָּתָהּ וְתַקְחָהּ: 6 וְתִפְתַּח וְתִרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנְהִינְעַר בְּכָה וְתַחְמַל עָלָיו וְתֹאמֶר מִיִּלְדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה: 7 וְתֹאמֶר

**3.** The desperate mother, because of the decree, takes every possible precaution to ensure the baby's safety.

**a wicker basket** The receptacle is called *tevah*. The word appears elsewhere in the Bible only as the ark in which Noah and his family were saved from the waters of the Flood (Gen. 6:14). The use of the word here heightens our awareness of the infant's vulnerability and of divine protection. The reminder of the Flood tells us once again that the birth of Moses signals a new era in history.

**wicker** The Hebrew word *gome* is the "papyrus plant," once abundant in the marshlands of the Nile delta. Its huge stems, often more than 10 feet high, were used by the Egyptians for a variety of purposes, especially for the construction

of light boats. Both *gome* and *tevah* are Egyptian words, giving local color to the story.

**reeds** The Hebrew word *suf*, also borrowed from Egyptian, is a "reed thicket." By placing the basket among the reeds, the mother prevented it from being carried downstream.

**4. his sister** Miriam.

**at a distance** Thus she was inconspicuous and would not arouse suspicions that the child was not really abandoned.

**5. to bathe in the Nile** An Egyptian princess would not have bathed publicly in the mighty, crocodile-infested river itself. This bathing place was no doubt one of the Nile's many rivulets, where privacy and safety could be ensured. The mother of Moses probably selected that spot after observing the princess's character and habits.

tainly will be." She persuaded her parents to reunite, and Moses was born shortly afterward. The other Israelites followed both decisions of her parents, divorcing and reuniting. Because of her action, the Sages call Miriam a redeemer of Israel every bit as much as her brothers (BT Sot. 12a).

The names of Moses' parents are not revealed to us until 6:20. Why does the Torah not mention their names at this point? To teach us that any Jewish family can give rise to a great person. In the same way, we set aside a chair for Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, whenever a Jewish baby is brought into the Covenant, as if to say: "Perhaps this will be the one to make the world into the kingdom of God."

**2.** The mother's delight at seeing her newborn child echoes God's delight at contemplat-

ing the newly created world: "Behold it was good" (B. Jacob).

**5. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile** Would not the daughter of Pharaoh have servants to bring water for her bath? Bar Yohai suggests that she (perhaps an idealistic adolescent) opposed her father's policy of murdering the Israelite children; she went to bathe in the Nile as a way of simultaneously identifying with Israel at the place of its suffering and cleansing herself of her father's defiling policies (BT Sot. 12b). Another commentator sees Pharaoh's daughter as going along with her father's policies until she saw the endangered Hebrew child. Until that moment, the Israelites had been an abstraction, and she was prepared to believe the worst about them. Once she encountered an innocent, vul-

be a Hebrew child.”<sup>7</sup> Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?”<sup>8</sup> And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.<sup>9</sup> And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.<sup>10</sup> When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

<sup>11</sup>Some time after that, when Moses had

MOSES IS RETURNED TO HIS MOTHER  
(vv. 7–10)

Ironically, the evil intentions of Pharaoh are unknowingly thwarted by his own daughter. The arrangements she makes follow a pattern found in Mesopotamian legal documents relating to the adoption of foundlings. These “wet nurse contracts” specify payment for the services of nursing and rearing the infant; they stipulate that, after weaning, the right of possession belongs to the one who paid for the child’s upbringing. That the princess can personally execute such a contract accords with the relatively high social and legal position of women in ancient Egypt. She possessed rights of inheritance and disposal of property and enjoyed a fair measure of economic independence.

**10.** The high infant mortality rate in the ancient world dictated that formal adoption and naming by the adoptive parent be postponed until after weaning, which took place at a much later age than in modern societies.

**Moses** The Hebrew *Moshe* is of Egyptian origin. Its verbal stem *ms’i* means “to be born,” and the noun *ms* means “a child, son.” It is a frequent part of ancient Egyptian personal names, usually with the addition of the name of a god, as illustrated by Ahmose, Ptahmose, Ramose, and Thotmose. Two papyri from the time of Ramses II mention officials named Mose.

אָחֹתוֹ אֶל-בֵּת-פַּרְעֹה הָאֵלֶּף וְקָרָאתִי לָךְ  
אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקָת מִן הָעֵבְרִית וְתִינֶק לָךְ  
אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד: <sup>8</sup> וְתֹאמְרֶינָה בֵּת-פַּרְעֹה לְכִי  
וְתִלְךְ הָעֵלְמָה וְתִקְרָא אֶת-אִם הַיֶּלֶד:  
<sup>9</sup> וְתֹאמְרֶינָה לָךְ בֵּת-פַּרְעֹה הִילִיכִי אֶת-  
הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינְקֵהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֶּן אֶת-  
שְׂכָרְךָ וְתִקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וְתִנְיָקֵהוּ:  
<sup>10</sup> וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וְתַבְּאֵהוּ לְבֵת-פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי-  
לָהּ לְבֵן וְתִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וְתֹאמְרֶינָה  
מִן-הַפְּתַיִם מִשִּׁיתֵּהוּ:

שלישי <sup>11</sup> וַיְהִי | בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא

**explaining** A Hebrew origin for the name is attributed to the Egyptian princess. Through wordplay, the Egyptian *Mose* is connected with Hebrew *משה*, “to draw up/out (of water).” Note the ironic wordplay. She intended it as “the one who is drawn out (of the water).” *Moshe* is active in form and means “one who draws out,” a name that fits his future situation better than his present one.

THE CHARACTER OF MOSES (vv. 11–15)

How did Moses spend his days in the royal palace, and how long did he remain there? The Bible is not interested in such details. Like other privileged boys in court and bureaucratic circles in Egypt, Moses at an early age would have begun his formal education, which lasted about 12 years. Concentrating largely on basic skills and knowledge, it would have been conducted under a regimen of strict discipline, with drill and memorization as the basic teaching techniques. The Bible is concerned with Moses’ character and commitments, which are illustrated by three incidents that display his moral passion and his inability to tolerate injustice: 2:11–12, 13, and 16–17. These qualities mark him as being worthy to lead the struggle for the liberation of the Israelites.

nerable Israelite, however, she had to recognize her common humanity with them. “Only one who can hear the cry of Moses the infant will be able to properly understand the words of Moses the lawgiver” (Isaac Luria). A rabbinic tradition has it that Pharaoh’s daughter later

joined the Israelite people at the time of the Exodus and that she stood at Sinai with them.

**11. when Moses had grown up** An ancient rabbi taught: The phrase “he grew up” occurs twice (vv. 10–11), once referring to physical maturity, the second time to a sense of re-

grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. <sup>12</sup>He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. <sup>13</sup>When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" <sup>14</sup>He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! <sup>15</sup>When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

אֶל-אָחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסַבְּלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם  
מַכֵּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאָחָיו: <sup>12</sup> וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה  
וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּךְ אֶת-הַמִּצְרַיִם  
וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל: <sup>13</sup> וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁנַי וַהֲנִה  
שְׁנַי-אֲנָשִׁים עֹבְרִים נֹצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לַרְשָׁע  
לָמָּה תִכֶּה רֵעִי: <sup>14</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שְׂמִיךְ לְאִישׁ  
שֶׁר וְשִׁפְטֵ עָלַינוּ הֲלֹהֵי אֲתָה אָמַר  
כִּאֲשֶׁר הִרְגַת אֶת-הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֵן נֹדַע הַדָּבָר: <sup>15</sup> וַיִּשְׁמַע פְּרַעֲה  
אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ אֶת-מֹשֶׁה  
וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פְרַעֲה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ-  
מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל-הַבְּאֵר:

**11. his kinsfolk** Literally, "his brethren." In the Hebrew of this verse, the word for "his brethren" (*ehav*) is repeated, perhaps to emphasize that the years Moses spent in court circles did not alienate him from his people.

**witnessed their labors** Not as a detached observer but as one who identifies wholeheartedly with their suffering.

**12.** Outraged, Moses goes to the aid of the victim. He hesitates for a moment because he is aware that, by Egyptian law, he is about to commit an act that will forever cut his ties to the aristocratic society in which he was raised. Note that he takes action before God does (see 2:25). His looking "this way and that" indicates that he is calculating the cost and proceeding with deliberation.

**he struck down** The same verb, "*makkeh*," is

used in v. 11 for the action of the Egyptian assailant. It can be a technical term for killing, as here.

**15.** Now an outcast, Moses flees for his life to the "land of Midian," where he takes refuge. (The Midianites are described as the nomadic descendants of Abraham and Keturah in Gen. 25:2). "The land of Midian" was under the control of one or more of the five seminomadic tribes that, according to biblical sources, made up the Midianite confederation. There was an early history of close and friendly relations between Israel and the Midianites. The two peoples became enemies, however, in the period that followed the conquest of Canaan (see Num. 31).

**a well** In the ancient Near East, wells were meeting places for shepherds, wayfarers, and townsfolk. It was most natural for newcomers to head for them.

sponsibility, going out to join his kinsmen and take responsibility for righting the wrongs of society. It is not uncommon for a leader of an oppressed people to come from a privileged background: One thinks of Theodore Herzl, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. Such a person may be psychologically freer to act, and will be taken more seriously both by his followers and by his opponents.

"Witnessing an injustice and degradation of another, Moses feels the blow dealt to the other as though it were directed against himself. Breaking through the selfishness of his own ego, he discovers his neighbor. It is this discovery that, in the last resort, brings about the Exodus. The estrangement between men has disap-

peared. Before, all men were strangers, bearing not even the slightest resemblance to himself. Now all men are neighbors" (André Neher).

**12. seeing no one about** Not because Moses wanted to act furtively but to indicate that because there was no one to administer justice, he had to take the law into his own hands.

**14. Moses was frightened** When Moses learned that there were bullies and talebearers among the Israelites, he was afraid that they were unworthy of being saved (Mekh.). Suffering and persecution can bring forth nobility of spirit in some victims, and meanness of spirit in others. Moses shows his maturity as a leader by devoting his efforts to helping his people even though they are less than perfect.

<sup>16</sup>Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; <sup>17</sup>but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. <sup>18</sup>When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" <sup>19</sup>They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." <sup>20</sup>He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread." <sup>21</sup>Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. <sup>22</sup>She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

16 וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֵנָה וַתִּדְלְנָה וַתְּמַלְאֵנָה אֶת־הַרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אָבִיהֶן: <sup>17</sup> וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרֹעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשֶׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־צֹאנָם: <sup>18</sup> וַתִּבְאֵנָה אֶל־רְעוּאֵל אָבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מִדּוּעַ מֵהֵרְתָּן בָּא הַיּוֹם: <sup>19</sup> וַתֹּאמְרֵן אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם הִצִּילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָרֹעִים וְגַם־דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־הַצֹּאן: <sup>20</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנֹתָיו וְאִיּוֹ לָמָּה זֶה עֹבְרָתָן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קְרָאתָן לוֹ וַיֹּאכֵל לַחֶם: <sup>21</sup> וַיֹּאֲלֵ מֹשֶׁה לְשִׁבְתָּ אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּ לְמֹשֶׁה: <sup>22</sup> וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ גֶרְשׁוֹם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נְכַרִּיָּה: פ

<sup>23</sup>A long time after that, the king of Egypt

וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ

#### MOSES IN MIDIAN (vv. 16–22)

Once again, Moses reveals his intolerance of injustice. Although himself a fugitive, and alone in a strange land, he comes to the aid of others.

**16. to draw water** A common occupation of young women in that part of the world.

**18. their father Reuel** The name may mean "friend of God." The title "priest of Midian" is attached only to Jethro (Hebrew *Yitro*) who, in other texts, is also referred to as Moses' father-in-law. This raises the possibility that *Yitro* (*yeter*) is not a proper name but an honorific meaning "His Excellency." Thus His Excellency (*yitro*) Reuel would be the father of the shepherdesses and the father-in-law of Moses. Tradition also refers to him as Hobab (Num. 10:29).

**How is it** Apparently, the girls experienced constant mistreatment at the hands of male shepherds, causing them to arrive home late regularly.

**19. an Egyptian** Identified by his garb.

**21. he gave** A father had the power to make such decisions.

**Zipporah** The name means "a bird."

**22. Gershom** The name is explained as a composite of the Hebrew words *ger sham*, "a stranger there," signifying "a stranger in a foreign land." This echoes God's covenant with Abraham: "Your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs." The "land" is Egypt, not Midian. The prediction of slavery that was made to Abraham had been fulfilled; the liberation is now at hand. The birth of the child is symbolic of the regeneration of Israel.

#### A TRANSITIONAL POSTSCRIPT (vv. 23–25)

These verses return us to the plight of the Israelites in Egypt and serve as a transition to the next development. God breaks His silence and directly

**17.** "Three times Moses intervenes on behalf of a weak person oppressed by a stronger one: first an Israelite beaten by an Egyptian, then an Israelite beaten by another Israelite, and finally the Midianite women harassed by shepherds. Had we been told only of the first clash, we might have doubted the unselfishness of his motives. Perhaps he had been motivated by the sense of solidarity with his own

people. . . . Had we been faced with the second example, we might still have had our doubts. Perhaps he was revolted by the disgrace of witnessing internal strife among his own folk. Came the third clash, where both parties were outsiders . . . his sense of justice and fair play was exclusively involved" (N. Leibowitz).

**23.** A close reading of the text would seem to indicate that the Israelites were not crying

died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. <sup>24</sup>God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. <sup>25</sup>God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

מִצְרַיִם וַיֶּאֱנָחוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הָעֲבֹדָה  
וַיִּזְעְקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים מִן-  
הָעֲבֹדָה: <sup>24</sup> וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נַאֲקָתָם  
וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת-אַבְרָהָם  
אֶת-יִצְחָק וְאֶת-יַעֲקֹב: <sup>25</sup> וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּדַּע אֱלֹהִים: ס

**3** Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove

רביעי ג ומֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת-צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתָנוֹ  
בְּהַן מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת-הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר

intervenes in Israel’s history. It was established practice in Egypt for a new king to celebrate his accession to the throne by granting amnesty to those guilty of crimes, by releasing prisoners, and by freeing slaves. The Israelites had good reason to expect that the change in regime would bring with it some easing of their condition. But this was not to be. Hence, the emphasis on the intensity of their misery. Moses, however, did benefit from the amnesty, as 4:19 confirms. Four terms give expression to Israel’s suffering: “groan-

ing,” “cried out,” “cry for help,” “moaning”; and four verbs express God’s response: “heard,” “remembered,” “looked upon,” “took notice.”  
**24. remembered** The Hebrew stem זכר connotes much more than merely the remembrance of things past. It means “to be mindful, to pay heed” and signifies a sharp focusing of attention on someone or something. It embraces concern and involvement, and always leads to action.  
**His covenant** The repeated promises to the patriarchs of nationhood and national territory.

THE COMMISSIONING OF MOSES (3:1–4:17)

The appointment of a leader to rally the demoralized people and represent them before the Egyptian authorities is the first stage in the process of liberation.

in the direction of Egypt from Midian. The term “wilderness” (*midbar*) indicates a region of uninhabited and unirrigated pastureland.

REVELATION AT THE BURNING BUSH (3:1–6)

**Horeb** Some traditions seem to identify this location with Sinai, but they may not be identical. Horeb may have been the name of a wider region in which Mount Sinai, a specific peak, was located; perhaps that peak eventually lent its name

**1. into the wilderness** He traveled westward,

out to God. They were groaning in their misery, with no certainty that anyone would hear them. (The Hebrew for “cry for help” is used in Job 24:12 in reference to the last groan of a dying person.) God responds to the Israelites, not because they besought divine help but because God sees their suffering. Heschel defined Jewish religion as “the awareness of God’s interest in Man.”

Nazi death camps tells of how some prisoners would share their meager rations of food and clothing with the sick and needy.

**25. God looked upon the Israelites** An ancient rabbi taught: What God saw was that despite their misery, the Israelites tried to help each other. For example, instead of each man looking out for himself, when one would finish making his quota of bricks, he would help out a weaker neighbor. Similar testimony from the

**and God took notice of them** Unlike Pharaoh, who “did not know [i.e., care about] Joseph,” God is not only informed about Israel’s plight but is moved to sympathy. God feels the tension between compassion for the suffering of innocent people and the commitment to a long-range plan calling for their continuing to suffer until the time of redemption arrives, until the people are psychologically ready to claim their freedom.

CHAPTER 3

**1. drove the flock into the wilderness** Why

the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.<sup>2</sup> An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.<sup>3</sup> Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?"<sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am."<sup>5</sup> And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is

וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹהֵי הָהָר הַהוּא: <sup>2</sup> וַיִּירָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלִבַת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיִּירָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינְנוֹ אֲכָל: <sup>3</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמִּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה: <sup>4</sup> וַיִּירָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לְרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִי: <sup>5</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הָלֶם שֶׁל־נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא:

to the entire area. Horeb (Hebrew *Horev*) means "desolate, dry." Its precise location is unknown.

**mountain of God** Clearly, Moses is unaware of any sanctity attached to that site.

**2. an angel of the LORD** The messenger here, like the angels in Genesis, has no independent being. It is the sudden appearance of the fire that attracts Moses before God speaks.

**in a blazing fire** Fire, being nonmaterial, formless, mysterious, and luminous, is often used to describe the external manifestation of God.

**a bush** Hebrew *s'neh* occurs only here and in Deut. 33:16, where God is named "the Presence in the Bush." *S'neh* is most likely a wordplay on "Sinai" and an intimation of the Sinaitic revelation alluded to in verse 12. The bush has been

identified as the thorny desert plant *Rubus sanctus* that grows near wadis and in moist soil.

**not consumed** The self-sustaining fire, requiring no other substance for its existence, is a clear representation of the divine Presence. To see that a bush is on fire is easy; to see that it is not consumed takes time and patience, another necessary quality of leadership that Moses displays here. The bush that remains intact in the face of flames may symbolize the people Israel surviving Egyptian oppression.

**4. Moses! Moses!** In the Bible, repetition of a name often characterizes a direct divine call.

**Here I am** Hebrew: *hinnehi*, the spontaneous, unhesitating response to a divine call (see Gen. 22:1,11; 1 Sam. 3:4).

"into the wilderness"? Rashi suggests that this was necessary to prevent the flocks from grazing on someone else's land, for that would be theft. Sforno says that it was to be free of distractions, so that Moses could meditate. The Midrash tells a story of a lamb running away and Moses chasing it into the wilderness. God, taking notice, decides that this is a man of compassion, fit to be the leader of the people. The first interpretation emphasizes Moses' commitment to justice and ethical behavior. The second sees him as a mystic, a man in search of God's presence. The third describes his compassion.

**2. An angel of the LORD appeared to him** Why did God appear to Moses in a thornbush? (a) The bush that burns but is not consumed symbolizes the Jewish people, perpetually attacked and endangered but perpetually surviving (Philo). (b) The thornbush is the humblest, least impressive of trees and plants. God, who

will take note of a tiny, oppressed people, chooses to appear in this lowly bush. "No place is devoid of God's presence, not even a thornbush" (Exod. R. 2:5). (c) For the Midrash, the thornbush symbolizes Israel's experience in Egypt (and many other situations in life). It is easier to put one's hand into a thornbush than to extricate it; so Israel's arrival in Egypt was comfortable compared to the difficulties and pain of their departure (Mekh. of bar Yoḥai). How long must one watch a burning bush before realizing that it is not being consumed by the flames? How many miracles might be happening around us but we, in our haste, never stop to notice them?

**5. Remove your sandals from your feet** Shoes not only carry the dirt and defilement of the world into the presence of God. They symbolize the effort of the well-to-do to shield themselves from the pain felt by the poor. "Remove your shoes" may be a way of saying to

holy ground. <sup>6</sup>"I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup>And the LORD continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. <sup>8</sup>I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hit-

**5. holy ground** The sanctity of space is occasioned by the appearance of God. It does not depend on the inherent nature of the place, as in the pagan world. The idea of sanctified space also appears in Jacob's experience at Bethel (Gen. 28:10ff.).

Removal of footwear in the ancient Near East was a sign of respect and humility. (The sandals mentioned here probably were made of papyrus or leather.) Priests officiated barefoot in the sanctuary, and to this day *kohanim* remove their footwear before pronouncing the priestly benediction publicly during the synagogue service.

**6. I am** This solemn, self-identifying mode of address frequently introduces royal proclamations and inscriptions in the ancient Near East. It lends special weight to the ensuing announcement, which thereby becomes authoritative and unchallengeable.

**God of your father** This phrase, frequently used in the Book of Genesis, all but vanishes during the period of the Exodus, to be replaced by "the God of your fathers," i.e., the three patriarchs. Moses is commissioned here as a divine messenger, a prophet (see, e.g., Isa. 6; Jer. 1).

**Moses hid his face** His initial encounter with

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם  
אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּסְתֵּר מִפְּנֵי  
פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מֵהַבְּיַט אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רְאֵה רָאֵה רְאֵיתִי אֶת-עַנְי עַמִּי  
אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי  
מִפְּנֵי נַגְשָׁיו כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת-מַכְאֹבָיו:

וַאֲרִיד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ  
מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶל-אָרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחְבָּה  
אֶל-אָרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל-מְקוֹם  
הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי

God is a terrifying experience, shared by others in the Bible.

#### THE DIVINE CALL (vv. 7–10)

The intimation of deliverance from bondage found in 2:24–25 becomes a clear message of hope and redemption.

**8. I have come down** A common figure of speech used to express God's descending from His heavenly abode to become involved in human affairs.

**good and spacious land** A depiction of the land of Israel, contrasting with the image of an oppressed people confined to the region of Goshen.

**flowing with milk and honey** This is a recurrent symbol of the land's fertility. Ancient Egyptian sources testify to the richness of the land. The combination of milk and honey implies that the land supports both agriculture (honey from dates) and pasturage (milk from goats). The phrase is never included in the divine promises made to the patriarchs, for whom famine was frequently a grim reality. Their faith did not need to be reinforced by stressing the attractiveness of the land. Such an enticement would carry weight for the demoralized, enslaved masses of Israelites.

Moses, "remove from yourself everything that would keep you from identifying with the suffering of your people."

**6. I am... the God of your father** According to the Midrash, when God appeared to him, Moses was but a novice in prophecy. God said, "If I reveal Myself to him in a thunderous voice, I

will terrify him. If in a whisper, he may not hear Me." What did God do? God spoke in the voice of Moses' father, whereupon Moses answered, "Here I am, Father, what do you want of me?" God said, "I am not your father. I am the God of your father. I addressed you in a familiar voice so that you would not be afraid" (Exod. R. 3:1).

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**3:6. the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob** This is the wording in the first blessing of the *Amidah*.

tites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup>Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.”

<sup>11</sup>But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?” <sup>12</sup>And He said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.”

<sup>13</sup>Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Milk in the Bible is generally from the goat, “the little man’s cow.” A plentiful supply presupposes an abundance of goats, which in turn points to ample pasturage and the prospect of plentiful meat, hide, and wool. Honey in the Bible is predominantly the thick, sweet syrup produced from dates. The combination of milk and honey provides a highly nutritious diet. Some Arab tribes are known to subsist for months at a time solely on milk products and honey.

**region of the Canaanites** There are numerous biblical lists of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. The most comprehensive is that of Gen. 15:19–21, which names 10 peoples. Other lists register 7, 6, 5, or 3 ethnic groups. The origin of these rosters is unknown, as is the reason for the variations in number, order, and content.

**10. Come** This is the pivotal moment of God’s manifestation at the bush. God chooses Moses to be the emissary of the divine will, the human instrument by which the redemption of Israel is to be carried through. The biblical institution of the messenger prophet is established here.

MOSES’ DIALOGUE WITH GOD (3:11–4:17)

**11. Who am I** His immediate reaction is a deep sense of personal unworthiness. The prophet

וְהִיבֹוֹסִי: <sup>9</sup> וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלְּחָץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: <sup>10</sup> וְעַתָּה לְכָה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם:

<sup>11</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: <sup>12</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְוַהֲלַכְךָ הָאֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאָךְ אֶת־הָעַם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה:

<sup>13</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָא אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מַה־

resisting his call is a universal theme in world prophecy (see Jer. 1:6). Moses carries it to an extreme, demonstrating his humility. This fits in with the biblical theme that God often chooses a weak vessel to exhibit His own power.

**12. I will be with you** God’s “being with” someone, an assurance of His protection, usually coincides with critical moments of human fear and indecision.

**that shall be your sign** The Hebrew for “sign” (*ot*) functions to corroborate either a promise or an appointment to office. But to what does the Hebrew for “that” (*zeh*) refer? Is it the spectacle at the bush? This would mean that the Burning Bush itself is the sign that affirms the divinely appointed nature of Moses’ mission. Or is it Moses’ unique ability to negotiate freely and safely with the all-powerful Pharaoh that will authenticate his calling?

**you shall worship** This phrase is a subtle hint to Moses on how to handle negotiations with the Egyptians. The motif of the worship of God as an objective of the Exodus is uttered time and again before Pharaoh.

**13.** Moses’ second objection revolves around his sense of being unable to represent Israel without a clear mandate from the people and without even knowing the name of the God for whom he

**13. and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’** Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not need to know God’s name because God was a living presence in their lives. For the Israelites in

Egypt, however, it was harder to believe in the reality of God. Therefore, they needed to have God introduced to them (MRE). Jews have involved themselves in theology, speculating on

<sup>14</sup>And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’” <sup>15</sup>And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you

שָׁמוּ מִה אֵמַר אֱלֹהִים: <sup>14</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים  
אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה  
תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי  
אֵלֵיכֶם: <sup>15</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה

is now asked to speak. By asking for God’s name, Moses denies knowledge of it, as Rashbam notes.

**14. Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh** This phrase has been translated, “I Am That I Am,” “I Am Who I Am,” and “I Will Be What I Will Be.” It evokes *YHVH*, the specific proper name of Israel’s God, known also as the Tetragrammaton, “the four consonants.” The phrase also indicates that the earliest recorded understanding of the divine name was as a verb derived from a stem meaning “to be” (הוּוה). Because it is the sound of wind and breath, the way in which we sense the invisible, it could express the quality of absolute Being, the eternal, unchanging, dynamic Presence. Or it could mean “He causes to be.” “*YHVH*” is the third-person masculine singular; “*ehyeh*” is the corresponding first-person singular. The latter is used here because name giving in the ancient world implied the wielding of power over the one named; hence, the divine name can proceed only from God. God reveals to Moses a name symbolizing the help needed for his task, without offering a “real” name, which would put God under human control.

During the Second Temple period the Tetragrammaton (*Shem ha-M’forash*) came to be re-

garded as charged with sanctity and magical potency. Therefore, its pronunciation ceased. It was replaced in speech by *adonai*, “Lord.” Often the vowels of “*adonai*” would accompany the letters of “*YHVH*” in written texts, which gave rise to the mistaken form “Jehovah” found in some Christian translations. The original pronunciation of “*YHVH*” was lost; modern attempts at recovery, such as “Yahweh,” are conjectural and have no support from tradition.

Taken together with the statement in 6:3, it would appear that the name *YHVH* came into prominence only as the characteristic personal name of the God of Israel in the time of Moses. Whether it was known before that time or not is questionable. It is of interest, though, that the various divine names found in Genesis are not used in the later biblical books, except occasionally in poetic texts. A new stage in the history of Israelite monotheism begins with the revelation of the divine name *YHVH* to Moses.

**15. My name . . . My appellation** How I am addressed and referred to.

**forever . . . for all eternity** God’s unvarying dependability ensures that His promises will be fulfilled.

the nature of God, mostly when they have had to understand the ways their faith differed from the faith of those around them.

**14. Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh** The phrase defies simple translation. It has been taken to mean “I am whatever I choose to be,” “I am pure being,” “I am more than you can comprehend.” The psychologist Erich Fromm takes it to mean: I, God, am in the process of becoming; neither I nor human understanding of Me is yet complete. And you human beings, fashioned in the image of God, are also in the process of becoming.

The name is gender free, neither specifically masculine nor specifically feminine, as befits a God who embraces polarities of male and female, young and old, transcendent and near at hand. It may be connected to the phrase in verse 12, “I will be with you” (*ki ehyeh immakhi*). In that case, God’s name, God’s essence, would imply “I am not a far-off God, a

remote, uncaring philosophical conclusion. I am God who will be with you. You cannot understand My nature, but you will know Me by My presence, and you will walk with Me when you follow My commands.” Buber understands it to mean, “I cannot be summoned or manipulated, as the magicians of Egypt invoke and manipulate their gods. In accordance with My character, again and again I stand by those whom I befriend.”

It is significant that this name of God is not a noun but a verb. The essence of Jewish theology is not the nature of God (“what God is”) but the actions of God (“what God does,” the difference that God makes in our lives). What, then, does God’s name mean? It may mean any or all of the following: God exists. God is more than we can comprehend. God, or our understanding of God, is constantly growing. God is present in our lives. God is with us in our efforts to do what is right but difficult.

speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you:

This shall be My name forever,

This My appellation for all eternity.

<sup>16</sup>“Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, ‘I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt, <sup>17</sup>and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.’ <sup>18</sup>They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God.’ <sup>19</sup>Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might.

**16. elders** Moses’ first concern in his new role must be to win the confidence and support of the acknowledged leaders of the people. These are the elders (*z’kenim*) who are frequently mentioned in the Exodus narratives. The institution of elders is rooted in the tribal-patriarchal system that shaped the character of Israelite society in early times. Ancient Near Eastern archives show that the council of elders was entrusted with considerable judicial and political authority.

**I have taken note** Echoing the promise handed down from generation to generation and the dying words of Joseph (recorded in Gen. 50:24): “God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

**18. The LORD, the God of the Hebrews** This name of God appears only in Exodus, invariably when Pharaoh is addressed and always with a demand for permission to worship in the wilderness. Although Pharaoh does not know *YHVH*, he never claims to be ignorant of “the God of the Hebrews.” Perhaps this name, like “the God of the father,” belongs to the pre-Mosaic history of Israelite religion and was widely used among the pastoral nomads of the region. That might be the

כֹּה-תֹאמַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי  
אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק  
וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם  
זֶה-שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם  
וְזֶה זְכוּרִי לְדֹר דָּר:

חמישי <sup>16</sup> לך וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת-זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ  
אֲלֵהֶם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה  
אֵלַי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר  
פָּקֹד פְּקֹדֹתַי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת-הָעֲשׂוּי לְכֶם  
בְּמִצְרַיִם: <sup>17</sup> וְאָמַר אֶעֱלֶה אֶתְכֶם מֵעֵנִי  
מִצְרַיִם אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַפְּנִיעֵנִי וְהַחֲתִי וְהָאֲמַרִי  
וְהַפְּרֹזִי וְהַחֲוִי וְהַיְבוּסִי אֶל-אֶרֶץ זָבַת  
חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ: <sup>18</sup> וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקֹלְךָ וּבֹאֲתָ אֵתָהּ  
וְזָקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאָמַרְתֶּם  
אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרָיִים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ  
וְעַתָּה גִלְכָה-נָא דְרָךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים  
בְּמִדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ: <sup>19</sup> וְאָנֹכִי  
יָדַעְתִּי כִּי לֹא-יִתֵּן אֶתְכֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם

reason Moses carefully identifies it with *YHVH* each time he uses it.

**manifested Himself** Hebrew *nikrah*, as opposed to the usual *nir'ah*, “appeared,” emphasizes the sudden and unexpected nature of the encounter with the divine and explains to Pharaoh why no such demand had been made before.

**three days** In the biblical consciousness, this is a significant length of time, particularly in connection with travel. Here it may indicate that the intended sacrifice, regarded with revulsion by the Egyptians (see Exod. 8:22), would take place well beyond the borders of Egypt.

**to sacrifice** In terms of the state-organized forced labor gangs of that time, this request was not exceptional, as is proved by entries in extant logs of Egyptian slave supervisors. There is also archaeological evidence for the custom among pastoral nomads of making periodic pilgrimages to sacred shrines in the wilderness. The denial of these reasonable demands of the Israelites reveals the brutal nature of Pharaoh’s tyrannical rule.

**19. a greater might** Literally “a strong hand,” meaning the “hand” of God, mentioned again in verse 20, as opposed to the oppressive “hand of Egypt” of verse 8. It may simply mean

<sup>20</sup>So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go. <sup>21</sup>And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. <sup>22</sup>Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians.”

לְהִלָּךְ וְלֹא בְיַד חֲזָקָה: <sup>20</sup> וְשָׁלַחְתִּי אֶת־  
יָדִי וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹל נִפְלְאוֹתַי  
אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יִשְׁלַח  
אֶתְכֶם: <sup>21</sup> וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־חַן הָעַם־הַזֶּה  
בְּעֵינַי מִצְרַיִם וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלְכוּן לֹא תֵלְכוּ  
רִיקִים: <sup>22</sup> וְשָׁאַלְהָ אִשָּׁה מִשְׁכֵּנֶתָהּ וּמִגֵּרַת  
בֵּיתָהּ כְּלֵי־כֶסֶף וְכֵלֵי זָהָב וְשִׂמְלֹת  
וְשִׂמְתֶם עַל־בְּנֵיכֶם וְעַל־בְּנֹתֵיכֶם וְנִצַּלְתֶּם  
אֶת־מִצְרַיִם:

**4** But Moses spoke up and said, “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The LORD did not appear to you?” <sup>2</sup>The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?”

**ד** וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהֵן לֹא־יֵאֱמִינּוּ  
לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקִלְי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא־נִרְאָה  
אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה: <sup>2</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה מַזֶּה

“[by] force,” a prediction that God knows all attempts to leave will be unsuccessful until the Egyptians are forced to let them go.

**20. wonders** Hebrew: *nifla'ot*, almost always used of God’s timely, direct intervention in human affairs—not necessarily expressed through the suspension of the laws of nature.

**21.** This fulfills the promise in Gen. 15:14.

**22. borrow** Hebrew: *sha-alah*, which here means “ask for.” Early Jewish interpretations looked upon these spoils as well-deserved com-

pensation to the Israelites for their centuries of unpaid forced labor (see Deut. 15:13).

**4:1.** Moses presents his third objection: He might be rejected by the Israelite masses. God had mentioned only the elders, not the people. Knowledge of the divine name might not be sufficient confirmation of a claim to be divinely commissioned.

#### THE SIGNS (4:2–9)

This time Moses’ argument is not refuted. In-

**20.** Readers may be bothered by the aspects of God’s plan that delay the redemption while slaves continue to suffer and die—and that manipulate Pharaoh’s response, “hardening his heart” so that the Egyptian people are afflicted with 10 plagues. Part of the answer lies in the Torah’s view that God wanted Israel to go through the experience of slavery and redemption, to teach them compassion for the oppressed and gratitude for their freedom. The purpose of the Exodus is not only to free the Israelites but to demonstrate the greatness of God over the idols and human rulers of Egypt. Had God moved Pharaoh to deal generously with Israel from the outset that lesson would not have been learned.

Moreover, just as paleontologists discover fossils of creatures that lived long ago and use them to study the process of physical ev-

olution, it may be that here and in a few other places in the Bible, we have “remnants” of an earlier moral outlook that we can use to trace the evolution of Jewish moral thought in the Bible and in postbiblical commentaries. These remnants include the acceptance of slavery, the vulnerable position of women, capital punishment for *Shabbat* violators and disrespectful children, and the command to wipe out Canaanite women and children. In the Bible itself and among the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash, there are signs that people who lived more than 2000 years ago were often as troubled by these passages as we are today and strove to understand or reinterpret them in ways that sustained the more evolved moral view of a later age without in any way diminishing their reverence for the Torah.

And he replied, “A rod.” <sup>3</sup>He said, “Cast it on the ground.” He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail”—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand—<sup>5</sup>“that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.”

<sup>6</sup>The LORD said to him further, “Put your hand into your bosom.” He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! <sup>7</sup>And He said, “Put your hand back into your bosom.”—He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body.—<sup>8</sup>“And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second. <sup>9</sup>And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed

מִהֲיִזָּה בְיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה: <sup>3</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר  
הַשְּׁלִיכְהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁלִיכְהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיְהִי  
לְנָחַשׁ וַיִּנָּס מֹשֶׁה מִפָּנָיו: <sup>4</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה  
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה שְׁלַח יָדְךָ וּפָחוּ בְזַנְבוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח  
יָדוֹ וַיִּחְזַק בּוֹ וַיְהִי לְמִטָּה בְּכַפּוֹ: <sup>5</sup> לְמַעַן  
יֵאֱמִינוּ פִּי־נִרְאָה אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי  
אֲבֹתָם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי  
יַעֲקֹב:

<sup>6</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לוֹ עוֹד הִבֵּאתָ יָדְךָ  
בְּחִיקְךָ וַיִּבֵּא יָדוֹ בְּחִיקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֶהָ וְהִנֵּה  
יָדוֹ מְצֹרֶעַת בְּשֵׁלֶג: <sup>7</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר הָשֵׁב יָדְךָ  
אֶל־חִיקְךָ וַיִּשֵׁב יָדוֹ אֶל־חִיקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֶהָ  
מִחִיקוֹ וְהִנֵּה־שָׁבָה כַּבָּשָׂר: <sup>8</sup> וְהָיָה אִם־  
לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לָךְ וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקֹל הָאֵת  
הָרִאשׁוֹן וְהֵאֱמִינוּ לְקֹל הָאֵת הָאַחֲרוֹן:  
<sup>9</sup> וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ גַם לְשֵׁנֵי הָאֵתוֹת  
הָאֵלֶּה וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּן לְקֹלְךָ וּלְקַחְתָּ מִמִּימֵי

stead, he is instructed how to dispel popular skepticism should it materialize. It is not surprising that the signs Moses will produce in Egypt possess a distinctly Egyptian coloration, for magic was part of everyday life in Egypt. The signs taught to Moses are intended to validate his claim to be the divinely chosen instrument for the redemption of the Israelites. They also function to establish the superiority of Moses over the Egyptian magicians and to affirm the greater might of Israel's God over the gods of the Egyptians.

*The First Sign* (vv. 2–5)

**2. What is that in your hand?** The query serves to verify that the object is an ordinary shepherd's crook, not invested with magical powers.

**3.** Moses recoils before the transformed rod, thereby expressing his astonishment at the marvel, and intimating that God, not he, is in command of the situation.

**a snake** The rod in ancient Egypt was a symbol of royal authority and power; and the snake represented the patron cobra-goddess of Lower Egypt in the north. Worn over the forehead on the headdress of the pharaohs, the snake symbolized divinely protected sovereignty and served as

a menacing emblem of death dealt to enemies of the crown.

**4. by the tail** Normally a foolhardy act, because snakes are picked up by their necks, it manifests Moses' faith in God.

*The Second Sign* (vv. 6–7)

**6. encrusted** The Hebrew word *tzara-at* is usually translated “leprosy.” But it has none of the major symptoms of that malady, and the descriptions of it in Lev. 13–14 are incompatible with Hansen's disease. The comparison to snow is not in regard to its whiteness but to its flakiness. The appearance and disappearance of the encrustation is sudden and, therefore, quite startling. The Bible regards the affliction as an ominous sign of divine retribution for human wrongdoing.

*The Third Sign* (vv. 8–9)

**8. pay heed to** Literally, “listen to the voice of.” The sign “speaks”; it testifies to the divine commission.

**9.** The third sign will become the first plague. The Nile—the life-blood of Egypt—was deified. Thus this sign, like the first, signifies God's sovereign rule over nature and the subordination of Egypt and its gods to YHWH.

you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it—the water that you take from the Nile—will turn to blood on the dry ground.”

<sup>10</sup>But Moses said to the LORD, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” <sup>11</sup>And the LORD said to him, “Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? <sup>12</sup>Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.” <sup>13</sup>But he said, “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.” <sup>14</sup>The LORD became angry with Moses, and He said, “There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. <sup>15</sup>You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—<sup>16</sup>and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, <sup>17</sup>and take with

הַיָּאֵר וְשִׁפְכֶתָּהּ הַיַּבְשָׁה וְהָיוּ הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר  
תִּקַּח מִן־הַיָּאֵר וְהָיוּ לְדָם בַּיַּבֶּשֶׁת׃  
10 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא  
אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם  
מִשְׁלֶשֶׁם גַּם מֵאֵז דְּבַרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי  
כַבֵּד־פִּי וּכְבֹד לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי׃ 11 וַיֹּאמֶר  
יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שֵׁם פִּה לְאָדָם אוֹ מִי־יָשׁוּם  
אֵלֶם אוֹ חֵרֶשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶח אוֹ עוֹר הֲלֹא אֲנֹכִי  
יְהוָה׃ 12 וְעַתָּה לָךְ וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ  
וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹר׃ 13 וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי  
שְׁלַח־נָא בִיד־תְּשֻׁלַּח׃ 14 וַיַּחֲרֵאֲף יְהוָה  
בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֵן אַחִיךָ הַלֵּוִי  
יִדְעֵתִי כִּי־דַבֵּר יִדְבֹר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה־הוּא  
יֵצֵא לְקִרְאתְךָ וְרָאֶךָ וְשָׁמַח בְּלָבוֹ׃  
15 וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשַׁמַּתְתָּ אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו  
וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְעִם־פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי  
אֶתְכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן׃ 16 וְדַבַּרְתָּ הוּא  
לָךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי־לָךְ לְפִה  
וְאַתָּה תְהִי־לּוֹ לֵאלֹהִים׃ 17 וְאַתָּה־הִמָּטֵה

**10.** Moses puts forth his final objection: he is inadequate to the task of being God’s spokesman before the Egyptian court. The precise nature of the deficiency is unclear, but it should be noted that other prophets, such as Jeremiah, made similar claims. Traditional commentators understood it as a speech defect. Prophetic eloquence is not an inborn talent but a divine gift granted for a special purpose.

**14. Aaron** Mentioned here for the first time, he is three years older than Moses.

**the Levite** A strange designation, because Moses too was from the tribe of Levi. The Hebrew can be translated as “your brother Levite.”

**16. your spokesman** Hebrew: *peh*, literally “mouth,” i.e., mouthpiece. Moses will be to Aaron as God is to Moses. It is the role of the prophet to speak the word of God (see Exod. 7:1).

#### CHAPTER 4

**10. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue** A Jewish legend tells that when the infant Moses was sitting on Pharaoh’s lap, he reached up and took off Pharaoh’s crown. Pharaoh feared that this was a sign that this child would one day try to replace him, so he devised a test. He set before Moses a crown and a hot coal, thinking, “If he reaches for the crown, I will have him killed.” The baby Moses was about

to reach for the shiny crown when an angel redirected his hand away from it toward the coal. Burning his fingers, he put his hand in his mouth and injured his tongue, rendering him “slow of tongue” ever after (Exod. R. 1:26). Perhaps the Torah is telling us that, whatever our limitations, God can use us to do great things.

**14. he will be happy to see you** This is a striking and welcome contrast to the accounts of sibling jealousy in the Book of Genesis.

you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs.”

<sup>18</sup>Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, “Let me go back to my kinsmen in Egypt and see how they are faring.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.”

<sup>19</sup>The LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead.” <sup>20</sup>So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God with him.

<sup>21</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go. <sup>22</sup>Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD:

הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה-בּוֹ אֶת-  
הָאֹתוֹת: פ  
שׁי <sup>18</sup> וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב | אֶל-יֵתֵר חַתָּנוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר  
לוֹ אֲלֵכֶה זָא וְאֲשׁוּבָה אֶל-אֲחֵי אֲשֶׁר-  
בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶרְאֶה הָעוֹדִים חַיִּים וַיֹּאמֶר  
יָתֵרוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם:  
<sup>19</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן לֵךְ שָׁב  
מִצְרַיִם כִּי-מֵתוּ כָּל-הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים  
אֶת-נַפְשְׁךָ: <sup>20</sup> וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ  
וְאֶת-בָּנָיו וַיִּרְכַּבֶם עַל-הַחֲמֹר וַיָּשָׁב אֶרְצָה  
מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מַטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים  
בְּיָדוֹ:  
<sup>21</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּלִכְתָּךְ לָשׁוּב  
מִצְרַיִמָּה רְאֵה כָּל-הַמִּפְתִּימִם אֲשֶׁר-שָׂמְתִי  
בְּיָדְךָ וְעַשִׂיתָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְאֲנִי אֲחַזֵּק  
אֶת-לְבָבוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת-הָעָם: <sup>22</sup> וְאָמַרְתָּ  
אֶל-פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנִי בְכָרִי

#### THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP: INITIAL FAILURE (4:18–6:1)

This section covers the events between the two great divine manifestations of 3:1–4:17 and 6:2–8.

##### LEAVE-TAKING AND DEPARTURE (4:18–23)

**18.** Moses returns to Midian with the sheep. He needs to obtain his father-in-law’s formal permission to leave his household (see 2:21). He does not reveal the true reason for returning to Egypt, probably because Jethro might think the mission to be impossible and withhold his consent.

**my kinsmen** The phrase links the return with the original flight, which was a consequence of his having gone out “to his kinsfolk” (2:11).

**how they are faring** Literally, “whether they are still alive.”

**19.** Apparently still fearing for his personal safety, Moses delays; hence the divine directive and reassurance.

**20. his wife and sons** According to 18:2–5, Jethro brought Zipporah and the two sons from Midian to Sinai after the Exodus. This shows that they were not in Egypt all the while.

**sons** Only Gershom has so far been mentioned (2:22, but see 18:3–6). The ancient translations read “son” here.

**rod of God** The shepherd’s crook mentioned in verses 2–4. In the ancient Near East, gods were depicted carrying rods as symbols of authority and as emblems of supernatural power.

**21. stiffen his heart** The motif of the stiffening, or hardening, of Pharaoh’s heart appears exactly 20 times in Exodus. Half of the references are descriptions of Pharaoh’s character (i.e., he hardens his own heart). Half of them are attributed to divine causality, a form of “measure for measure” (see *D’rash* to 7:3). In the biblical conception, psychological faculties are considered to be concentrated in the heart. Human behavior is determined in the heart, which is regarded as the seat of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual life of the individual. “Hardening of the heart” thus expresses a state of arrogant moral degeneracy, unresponsive to reason and incapable of compassion. Pharaoh’s personal guilt is beyond question. Pharaoh’s character is now his destiny. Deprived of any chance of relenting, he is irresistibly drawn to a doom of his own making. Note that repentance is not even considered a possibility here. It is a religious notion that evidently developed after the time of the Exodus story.

**22. Thus says the LORD** Hebrew: *koh amar YHVH*. This is the first use of what was to become

Israel is My first-born son. <sup>23</sup>I have said to you, “Let My son go, that he may worship Me,” yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.”

יִשְׂרָאֵל: <sup>23</sup>וְאָמַר אֵלַיךָ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנִי וְיַעֲבֹדְנִי וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַנֵּה אֲנֹכִי הֹרֵג אֶת־בְּנֶךָ בְּכַרְךָ:

<sup>24</sup>At a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and sought to kill him. <sup>25</sup>So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s

וַיְהִי בַדְרֹךְ בַּמַּלְּאָךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ: <sup>25</sup>וְתִקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צָר

the formula for introducing a prophetic address. It is the regular messenger formula (Gen. 32:5, 45:9), similar to the opening words of ancient Near Eastern royal heralds. It secures the attention of an audience while emphasizing the unimpeachable authority behind the ensuing proclamation. Moses is to approach the Egyptian king as the emissary of the sovereign Lord of the universe.

**My first-born son** The relationship of Israel to God is expressed poetically. All peoples are recognized as children under the universal fatherhood of God, but Israel has the singular status of the first to acknowledge *YHVH* and thus to enter into a special relationship with Him. As such, Israel enjoys God’s devoted care and protection. It is this that lies behind the demand of verse 23 that the Israelites be allowed to worship in the wilderness. Denial of this right by Pharaoh will incur punishment.

**23. your first-born son** Pharaoh here stands for all Egyptians, parallel to the collective “Israel.” The threat alludes to the 10th plague, the one that finally breaks the tyrant’s obstinacy.

NIGHT ENCOUNTER AND CIRCUMCISION (vv. 24–26)

This strange story is not easily understood. It must echo an ancient myth whose background has been lost to us. The account of Moses’ return to Egypt is interrupted by a three-verse story that seems disconnected from the previous narrative and makes

no mention of Moses. Like Jacob’s wrestling with the angel at the Jabbok River, the confrontation with God is so terrifying that it makes the confrontation with Pharaoh minor.

This sketchy tale of the mysterious night incident is not entirely dissociated from the larger context. The introductory phrase, “At a night encampment on the way,” establishes a chronologic linkage with verse 20. It is connected with the passages that immediately precede and follow it by several verbal tie-ins. Thus the phrase “sought to kill” in verse 24 echoes “who sought to kill you” in verse 19; “her son’s” in verse 25 recalls “sons,” “My . . . son,” “your . . . son” in verses 20, 22, and 23; and the Hebrew for “encountered him” (*va-yifg’sheihu*) in verse 24 is identical with that for “met him” in verse 27. There is also a correspondence between the blood of circumcision and the visible sign of blood on the paschal sacrifice. In both instances, God comes as a destroyer, and blood averts evil (4:26, 12:7,13,22–23). This brief narrative underscores the vital significance of the institution of circumcision and the serious consequences of its neglect.

**24. kill him** The sequence of verses suggests that it was Moses’ firstborn, Gershom, whose life was imperiled. If it was Moses who was attacked, the purpose was to temper him, making him more prepared for the dangers that await him.

**25. Zipporah** As the daughter of a Midianite priest, she may have been familiar with the rite of circumcision, a practice found among the an-

**22. Israel is My first-born** Parents can love all of their children equally but differently and often invest their firstborn with special hopes, obligations, and responsibilities, so that younger children will be able to learn from the

firstborn’s example. This would seem to be the role that God chose for Israel.

**25.** Once again, it is a woman, this time Zipporah, who understands and does what has to be done to sustain life. If Zipporah, daughter

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**4:25. cut off her son's foreskin** According to Jewish law, the father bears primary responsibility to have his sons circumcised, but community authorities or, as here, the mother can arrange for the circumcision if the father fails to do so. Ultimately, if a Jewish man has not been circumcised, he bears the responsibility to have himself circumcised (BT Kid. 29a).

foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!"<sup>26</sup> And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."

<sup>27</sup>The LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. <sup>28</sup>Moses told Aaron about all the things that the LORD had committed to him and all the signs about which He had instructed him. <sup>29</sup>Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. <sup>30</sup>Aaron repeated all the words

וַתְּכַרְתְּ אֶת-עַרְלַת בְּנֵה וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו  
וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתַן-דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי: <sup>26</sup> וַיֵּרָף  
מִמֶּנּוּ אַזְ אָמְרָה חֲתַן דָּמִים לְמוֹלַת: פ

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן לָךְ לְקַרְאֵת  
מֹשֶׁה הַמְדַבֵּר וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ בַּהֲרַ  
הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשְׁק-לוֹ: <sup>28</sup> וַיַּגֵּד מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן  
אֵת כָּל-דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַח וְאֵת  
כָּל-הָאֵתוֹת אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: <sup>29</sup> וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה  
וְאַהֲרֹן וַיֵּאסְפוּ אֶת-כָּל-זִקְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:  
<sup>30</sup> וַיְדַבֵּר אַהֲרֹן אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-

cient Semites and prevalent among the priestly classes in Egypt. It is not known how she came to attribute her son's illness to the fact that he was uncircumcised. Moses may have neglected this rite because of the danger of exposing a newly circumcised child to the rigors of a wilderness journey. Josh. 5:5,7 states that the generation born during the wilderness wanderings was not circumcised.

**a flint** Rather than a metal knife, even though the events occurred in the Late Bronze Age. A stone knife is still widely preferred in primitive societies that practice circumcision, because flint can be given a sharper edge than metal and the knife must be very sharp.

**cut off** Circumcision is called "the sign of the covenant" in Gen. 17:9–14. Gen. 17:14 states that whoever fails to fulfill that rite—the first command given to Abraham and his descendants—"shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant." An uncircumcised Israelite would be alienated from the community of Israel and excluded from the paschal sacrifice and the redemption from Egypt. Josh. 5:5 explicitly records that all the males who came out of Egypt had undergone the rite. It would have been paradoxical indeed had the son of the central figure in the story of the Exodus been an outsider.

**touched his legs** Whose legs is unclear, as is

the symbolism of the gesture. "Legs" may be a euphemism for the genital organs, either of the child or of Moses. The act might signify that the foreskin has been cut off and that the requirement of circumcision has been fulfilled. Or it may be a reference to daubing the child with blood, for the Hebrew verb used here (rendered "touched") is the same as that used for daubing the blood of the paschal lamb on the lintel and doorposts in 12:22 (rendered "apply"). In both cases, the purpose would be the same: The blood would act as a protective sign against plague; the destroyer would not smite.

**a bridegroom of blood** This could refer either to Moses or to his son. It is the traditional English rendering of the unique Hebrew phrase "*hatan damim*," for which no parallel has been found in ancient Near Eastern literature. In Arabic, the stem חתן denotes "to circumcise" as well as "to protect." Hence, the phrase could convey, "You are now circumcised [and so] protected for me by means of the blood of circumcision."

**26. He let him alone** The subject is God. The crisis has passed.

#### MOSES' LEADERSHIP IS ACCEPTED (vv. 27–31)

**27. he kissed him** This was the usual biblical greeting between close relatives.

**29.** The directive given in 3:16 is carried out.

of a Midianite priest, joined herself to the people of Israel and to the God of Israel, she would be an early example of the convert to Judaism who takes its demands more seriously than the native-born Jew. Buber sees this strange inci-

dent as an "event of the night," which typically happens to religious leaders as a psychological reaction to their newly won certainty, an intuition that the task they have undertaken on God's behalf will be harder than they thought.

that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and he performed the signs in the sight of the people,<sup>31</sup> and the people were convinced. When they heard that the LORD had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.

**5** Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.”<sup>2</sup> But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go.”<sup>3</sup> They answered, “The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days

דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיַּעַשׂ הָאֵתוֹת לְעֵינֵי הָעָם: <sup>31</sup> וַיֵּאֱמֹן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ בִּי־פִקְדוֹת יְהוָה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת־עַנְיָם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ:

**ה** <sup>שביעי</sup> וְאַחֲרַיִם בָּאוּ מִשָּׁה וְאֶהְרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלַח אֶת־עַמִּי וַיְחַגּוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר: <sup>2</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה מִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמַּע בְּקִלּוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־יְהוָה וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אָשַׁלַּח: <sup>3</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים נִקְרָא עָלֵינוּ נִלְכָּה נָא

**31.** As predicted (vv. 8–9), the signs are accepted as testimony to the reliability of Moses and the truth of his message.

**bowed low** Here, this is a gesture of thanksgiving.

FIRST AUDIENCE WITH PHARAOH (5:1–6:1)

The diplomatic approach attempted by Moses and Aaron ends in failure, leading to another new phase in the history of Israel in Egypt. The struggle for freedom begins in earnest. This chapter is also the introduction to the narrative of the plagues.

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION WITH THE COURT (vv. 1–5)

**1. Afterward** Upon meeting with popular acceptance.

**God of Israel** This title more precisely defines the name YHVH.

**celebrate a festival** The Hebrew for “festi-

val” (*hag*) is a sacrificial feast associated with a pilgrimage to a sanctuary.

**2. Who is the LORD?** A contemptuous retort. It contrasts starkly with the humble response of Moses to the divine call: “Who am I?” In Egyptian doctrine, Pharaoh was the incarnation of a god, with unlimited power. Part of God’s purpose is to make the divine name known.

**I do not know** I do not acknowledge His authority.

**3.** The reaction of Moses and Aaron is restrained. They seem surprised and cowed by the king’s aggressive arrogance.

**God of the Hebrews** They use the language prescribed in 3:18, but they omit “the LORD” because the monarch already has denied any knowledge of Him.

**lest He strike us** For disregarding our obligation. Pharaoh should be concerned about this, because he will lose our labor. “Us” may be an intimation that the Egyptians too will be stricken.

CHAPTER 5

**1. Moses and Aaron went** What happened to the elders and leaders who were to go with them? A *midrash* tells us that the whole group set out to confront Pharaoh, but one by one, the others dropped out for reasons of timidity. Only Moses and Aaron remained, two old men standing against the power of the Egyptian empire (Exod. R. 5:14).

**2.** Pharaoh refuses to free the slaves, not because it is in his economic interest to keep them, but because he “does not know God,” i.e., he does not recognize that certain kinds of behavior, such as abusing other people, are wrong. “Divine sovereignty is precisely what Pharaoh mocks at the outset of his power struggle with Moses. It is not a matter of oversize egos in battle but of the limits of human authority” (Schorsch).

into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest He strike us with pestilence or sword.”<sup>4</sup> But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? Get to your labors!”<sup>5</sup> And Pharaoh continued, “The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors!”

<sup>6</sup>That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, <sup>7</sup>“You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. <sup>8</sup>But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God!’ <sup>9</sup>Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises.”

<sup>10</sup>So the taskmasters and foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says

דְרָךְ שְׁלֶשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחַהּ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ פֶּן-יִפְגְּעוּנוּ בַדָּבָר אֹו בַחֲרָב׃ <sup>4</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמָּה מִשָּׂה וְאַהֲרֹן תִּפְרִיעוּ אֶת-הָעָם מִמַּעֲשֵׂיו לָכוּ לְסַבְּלֹתֵיכֶם׃ <sup>5</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה הֲנִי רַבִּים עִתָּה עִם הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁבַּתֶּם אֹתָם מִסַּבְּלָתָם׃

<sup>6</sup> וַיִּצַו פַּרְעֹה בַיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-הַנְּגִשִׁים בָּעָם וְאֶת-שֹׁטְרֵיו לֵאמֹר׃ <sup>7</sup> לֹא תֹאסְפוּן\* לָתֵת תְּבֹן לָעָם לְלֶבֶן הַלְּבָנִים כְּתַמּוֹל שְׁלֹשׁ הֵם יִלְכוּ וְקִשְׁשׁוּ לָהֶם תְּבֹן׃ <sup>8</sup> וְאֶת-מִתְכַּנֵּת הַלְּבָנִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם עֹשִׂים תַּמּוֹל שְׁלֹשׁ תִּשְׂימוּ עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא תִגְרְעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי-נִרְפִים הֵם עַל-פֶּן הֵם צָעֲקִים לֵאמֹר נִלְכָּה נִזְבַּחַהּ לֵאלֹהֵינוּ׃ <sup>9</sup> תִּכְבֹּד הָעֶבֶדְהָ עַל-הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-בָהּ וְאֵל-יִשְׁעוּ בְּדַבְרֵי-שֹׁקֶר׃

<sup>10</sup> וַיִּצְאוּ נְגִשֵׁי הָעָם וְשֹׁטְרֵיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-

v. 7. יתיר א'

**pestilence or sword** These are conventional symbols of divine judgment that will make their appearance later in Egypt.

**4.** Pharaoh treats the request for time to worship as a scheme to avoid work.

**5.** This statement may explain the economic reasons for refusing the request: The Israelites are so numerous that any interruption of their labors would entail an enormous loss of productivity. It might also take up the original theme of Exod.1:7,9–10 that the huge population would constitute a power to be reckoned with were they to quit working. Either way, the second half of the verse is an exclamation.

**people of the land** Meaning the common laborers, perhaps a derisive term.

#### A PEREMPTORY REFUSAL (vv. 6–9)

Moses and Aaron are silent. The audience with the king is terminated abruptly. The tyrant loses no time in issuing orders designed to drive home to the Israelites the futility of entertaining any hope of easing their labors.

**6. taskmasters and foremen** In the Egyptian slave-labor system the workers were organized

into manageable gangs, each headed by a foreman from among their own. He, in turn, was directly responsible to his superior, the “taskmaster.” The foremen were Israelites; the taskmasters, Egyptian.

**7–8.** The new directive did not demand “bricks without straw,” as the English saying goes. Rather, it ordered the brickmakers to collect their own straw; until then it had been supplied by the state. Chopped straw or stubble was a crucial ingredient in the manufacture of bricks. It was added to the mud from the Nile, then shaped in a mold and left to dry in the sun. The straw acted as a binder, and the acid released by the decay of the vegetable matter greatly enhanced the plastic and cohesive properties of the brick, thus preventing shrinking, cracking, and loss of shape.

**to our God** Pharaoh does not recognize the Lord and so refrains from using the divine name.

**9. deceitful promises** This refers back to 4:29–31. Egyptian intelligence must have reported about the promises of redemption.

#### THE OPPRESSION INTENSIFIES (vv. 10–14)

**10. Thus says Pharaoh** As opposed to “Thus

Pharaoh: I will not give you any straw. <sup>11</sup>You must go and get the straw yourselves wherever you can find it; but there shall be no decrease whatever in your work.” <sup>12</sup>Then the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. <sup>13</sup>And the taskmasters pressed them, saying, “You must complete the same work assignment each day as when you had straw.” <sup>14</sup>And the foremen of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. “Why,” they were asked, “did you not complete the prescribed amount of bricks, either yesterday or today, as you did before?”

<sup>15</sup>Then the foremen of the Israelites came to Pharaoh and cried: “Why do you deal thus with your servants? <sup>16</sup>No straw is issued to your servants, yet they demand of us: Make bricks! Thus your servants are being beaten, when the fault is with your own people.” <sup>17</sup>He replied, “You are shirkers, shirkers! That is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ <sup>18</sup>Be off now to your work! No straw shall be issued to you, but you must produce your quota of bricks!”

<sup>19</sup>Now the foremen of the Israelites found themselves in trouble because of the order, “You must not reduce your daily quantity of bricks.” <sup>20</sup>As they left Pharaoh’s presence, they came upon Moses and Aaron standing in their path, <sup>21</sup>and they said to them, “May the LORD look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us.” <sup>22</sup>Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this

הָעָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר פְּרַעֲהַ אֵינֶנִּי נֹתֵן לָכֶם תְּבֹן: <sup>11</sup> אַתֶּם לְכוּ קַחוּ לָכֶם תְּבֹן מֵאֲשֶׁר תִּמְצְאוּ כִּי אֵין נִגְרַע מֵעֲבַדְתְּכֶם דְּבַר: <sup>12</sup> וַיִּפֶץ הָעָם בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לִקְשֹׁשׁ קֶשׁ לְתֹבֵן: <sup>13</sup> וְהַנְּגִשִׁים אָצִים לֵאמֹר כֹּלֹו מֵעֲשִׂיכֶם דְּבַר־יּוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר בְּהַיּוֹת הַתְּבֹן: <sup>14</sup> וַיִּכּוּ שְׂטָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־שָׂמוּ עֲלֵהֶם נִגְשֵׁי פְרַעֲהַ לֵאמֹר מִדּוּעַ לֹא כָלִיתֶם חֲקֵכֶם לְלִבָּן בְּתַמּוֹל שְׁלֹשׁ גַּם־תַּמּוֹל גַּם־הַיּוֹם:

<sup>15</sup> וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂטָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּצְעֲקוּ אֶל־פְּרַעֲהַ לֵאמֹר לָמָּה תַעֲשֶׂה כֹה לַעֲבָדֶיךָ: <sup>16</sup> תְּבֹן אֵין נֹתֵן לַעֲבָדֶיךָ וּלְבָנִים אֲמָרִים לָנוּ עֲשׂוּ וְהִנֵּה עֲבָדֶיךָ מְפִים וְחָטְאוֹת עִמָּךְ: <sup>17</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר נִרְפִים אַתֶּם נִרְפִים עַל־כֵּן אַתֶּם אֲמָרִים נִלְכָּה נִזְבַּחַה לַיהוָה: <sup>18</sup> וְעַתָּה לְכוּ עֲבְדוּ וְתֹבֵן לֹא־יִנָּתֵן לָכֶם וְתִכֵּן לְבָנִים תִּתְּנוּ:

<sup>19</sup> וַיִּרְאוּ שְׂטָרֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתֶם בָּרַע לֵאמֹר לֹא־תִגְרַעוּ מִלְּבַנֵיכֶם דְּבַר־יּוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ: <sup>20</sup> וַיִּפְגְּעוּ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן נֹצְבִים לְקִרְאתָם בְּצִאתָם מֵאֵת פְּרַעֲהַ: <sup>21</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם יִרְא יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֲשֶׁר הִבְאִשְׁתֶּם אֶת־רִיחוֹנוּ בְּעֵינֵי פְרַעֲהַ וּבְעֵינֵי עֲבָדָיו לְתַת־חֶרֶב בְּיָדָם לְהַרְגָנוּ: <sup>22</sup> וַיֹּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִפְּטִיר אֲדֹנָי לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה לָמָּה זֶה

מפסיר

says the LORD” (4:22; 5:1). Pharaoh is now on a collision course with the God of Israel.

**13–14.** According to the chain of command, the pressure would have fallen on the Israelite foremen.

THE FOREMEN PROTEST (vv. 15–18)

**16. the fault is with your own people** We are being treated unfairly.

DEMORALIZATION (5:19–6:1)

**21. making us loathsome** Literally, “causing our breath to be malodorous in the eyes of.” The mixed metaphor means “brought us into contempt” (see Gen. 34:30).

**22–23.** Moses’ bitter disappointment at his initial failure points both to his unrealistic expectations of early success and to his original reluctance to accept the divine commission.

people? Why did You send me? <sup>23</sup>Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.”

שְׁלַחַתְּנִי: <sup>23</sup>וּמֵאָז בָּאתִי אֶל-פַּרְעֹה לְדַבֵּר  
בְּשִׁמְךָ הִרַע לְעַם הַזֶּה וְהִצִּיל לֹא-הִצִּילָתָּ  
אֶת-עַמְּךָ:

**6** Then the LORD said to Moses, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.”

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה עַתָּה תֵרְאֶה  
אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפַרְעֹה כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה  
יִשְׁלַחֶם וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה יִגְרָשֶׂם מֵאֶרֶצוֹ: ס

*returned to the LORD* He retreated into seclusion to commune with God.

*6:1. a greater might* Literally, “a stronghand.”

Note the irony. Pharaoh not only will let you go; he will force you to go. See Comment to Exod.

3:19.

# הפטרות שמות

## HAFTARAH FOR SH'MOT

ISAIAH 27:6–28:13, 29:22–23 (*Ashk'nazim*)

This *haftarah* alternates between promises of hope for the people Israel and threats of destruction. It opens with a vision of national renewal and it concludes the two sections of threats against Israel (27:7–11, 28:1–13) with passages promising redemption and renewal (27:12–13, 29:22–23). The prophet predicts fulfillment of the central hope for an ingathering of the people Israel from the distant reaches of Assyria and Egypt (Isa. 27:13). This will be a new exodus, a counterpoint to the original Exodus anticipated in the *parashah*.

The tension between hope and doom, between promises and threats, is expressed through the imagery of botany. The opening verse depicts Israel striking roots in the land, to sprout (*yatzitz*) and to blossom with a prodigious growth (27:6). By contrast, the faithless receiving punishment are depicted as broken boughs stripped of all growth, with no future (27:10–11). The people gathered from their exile are imagined as collected grain (27:12). The destruction of Ephraim—which symbolizes the northern kingdom—is imagined in terms of “an early fig / Before the fruit harvest” devoured by all comers (28:4). The “proud crowns” (*ateret gei-ut*) of “glorious beauty” (*tz'vi tif'arto*) on the head of Ephraim are likened to “wilted flowers” (*tzitzat novel*) “trampled underfoot” (28:1,4). This image is counterpoised to the splendor of God, who “shall become a crown of beauty (*ateret tz'vi*) and a diadem of glory (*tz'firat tif'arah*) for the remnant of His people” (28:5). The contrast provides a unifying figure for the overall proclamation and marks the difference between doom and divinity.

### RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The Book of Exodus begins with a reference to “the sons of Israel who came (*ha-ba-im*) to Egypt

with Jacob,” where they settled and “increased very greatly, so that the land was filled (*va-timmalei*) with them” (Exod. 1:1,7). Similarly, the prophetic lesson opens with reference to the people of Jacob/Israel who “[in days] to come [*ha-ba-im*]” shall “strike root” in their homeland, and “the world shall be covered [*u-mal-u*] with fruit” (Isa. 27:6). Through such verbal echos, the Sages linked the promise of the *haftarah* to the descent of ancient Israelites to Egypt.

Just as Moses had beseeched Pharaoh to permit the Israelites to worship God in the wilderness (Exod. 5:1), Isaiah foresees service of the Lord as part of a new exodus: “in that day, a great ram’s horn shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come (*u-va-u*) and worship the LORD on the holy mount (*har ha-kodesh*), in Jerusalem” (Isa. 27:13). The physical restoration of the nation to its homeland will have a spiritual component as well. The final words of the prophecy add a more inward dimension, betokening a transformation of the spirit, with the promise that a future generation will perceive the presence of the Lord in its midst and “hallow (*yakdishu*) My name” (29:23).

The *parashah* states that God put His awesome signs “upon” or (literally) “in the midst” (*b'kirbo*) of the Egyptians, so that they might recognize His greatness and release the people Israel from bondage (Exod. 3:20). The *haftarah* (Isa. 29:23) complements that image, stating that the renewal of the people Israel will be realized through an awakening to God’s mysterious work “in his midst” (*b'kirbo*). This will be a transformation of mind and heart, a release from mere earthliness to godly sensibility. This too will be a new exodus, that is, a re-rooting of the self in days to come (Isa. 27:6).

27 <sup>6</sup>[In days] to come Jacob shall strike  
root,  
Israel shall sprout and blossom,  
And the face of the world  
Shall be covered with fruit.

<sup>7</sup>Was he beaten as his beater has been?  
Did he suffer such slaughter as his slayers?  
<sup>8</sup>Assailing them with fury unchained,  
His pitiless blast bore them off  
On a day of gale.

<sup>9</sup>Assuredly, by this alone  
Shall Jacob's sin be purged away;  
This is the only price  
For removing his guilt:  
That he make all the altar-stones  
Like shattered blocks of chalk—  
With no sacred post left standing,  
Nor any incense altar.  
<sup>10</sup>Thus fortified cities lie desolate,

כז <sup>6</sup>הַבָּאִים יִשְׂרָשׁ יַעֲקֹב  
יִצְיִץ וּפָרַח יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וּמְלֵאוֹ פְּנֵי-תֵבֶל  
תְּנוּבָה: ס

<sup>7</sup>הַכְּמַפֵּת מִכֹּהוּ הִכָּהוּ  
אִם-פִּהֲרַג הֲרָגוּ הָרָג:  
<sup>8</sup>בְּסֵאסְאָה בְּשִׁלְחָה תִרְיַבְנָה  
הַגָּה בְּרוּחוֹ הַקָּשָׁה  
בְּיוֹם קָדִים:

<sup>9</sup>לִכֵּן בְּזֹאת  
יִכְפֹּר עוֹן-יַעֲקֹב  
וְזֶה כָּל-פְּרִי  
הַסֵּר חֲטָאוֹתָו  
בְּשׁוּמוֹ | כָּל-אֲבָנֵי מִזְבֵּחַ  
כְּאֲבָנֵי-גֵר מִנְפָצוֹת  
לֹא-יִקְמוּ אֲשֵׁרִים  
וְחִמְנִים:  
<sup>10</sup>כִּי עִיר בְּצוּרָה בְּדָד

**Isaiah 27:6. [In days] to come** The Hebrew word *ha-ba-im*, “coming,” has been understood by many medieval (Ibn Ezra and Radak) and modern commentators as an abbreviation for *ba-yamim ha-ba-im* (in days to come). This reading aligns it with the formula *ba-yom ha-hu* (in that day) in verse 12 and 28:5. Alternatively, the word *ha-ba-im* has been understood as the “coming” or “ingathering” of Israel to its homeland (Septuagint and Targ.). Such a reading would juxtapose the Israelites’ arrival in Egypt to their return from future exile and bondage.

**7. Was he beaten as his beater had been?** The Hebrew captures the alliterative sound of blows, *ha-k'makkat makkeihu hikkahu*. The phrase is obscure, and the beater here is not identified. Another version interprets the verse in terms of divine justice: “Has He smitten him as He smote those who smote him?” (OJPS). Alternatively, some medieval commentators identify the agent with Assyria (Ibn Ezra) or with Egypt (Radak).

**8. Assailing them with fury unchained** The

Hebrew translated as “assailing them” (*t'rivennah*) means something like “striving with her.” This suggests that when God contended with Israel, He sent it into exile as a punishment in full measure (*b'sass'ah*) for its crimes. This may allude to Assyria's devastation of the community in Samaria, Israel's ancient capital (722–721 B.C.E.). The Talmud and Targum understood *b'sass'ah* as referring to punishment measure for measure (from *se-ab*, “measure”). Israel would not be punished unfairly. Divine justice would fit the crime.

**bore them off** For this meaning of the verb *hagah*, see 2 Sam. 20:13.

**9. This is the only price** The nation's sin was to be expiated through banishment and the destruction of false worship. This is the required condition (see Ibn Ezra).

**no sacred post** The sacred post is proscribed most likely because of its association with Canaanite worship of the goddess Asherah.

**10–11.** What these verses refer to is difficult to determine. If the focus is on Israel, the verse projects the devastation that would accompany

Homesteads deserted, forsaken like a wilder-  
ness;  
There calves graze, there they lie down  
And consume its boughs.  
11When its crown is withered, they break;  
Women come and make fires with them.  
For they are a people without understanding;  
That is why  
Their Maker will show them no mercy,  
Their Creator will deny them grace.

נֹה מִשְׁלַח וְנִעֲזַב כַּמְדָּבָר  
שָׁם יִרְעֶה עֵגֶל וְשָׁם יִרְבֵּץ  
וְכֹלָה סִעֲפִיהָ:  
11 בִּיבֹשׁ קִצִּירָהּ תִּשְׁבְּרָנָה  
נָשִׁים בָּאוֹת מֵאִירוֹת אוֹתָהּ  
כִּי לֹא עִם-בִּינוֹת הוּא  
עַל-כֵּן  
לֹא-יִרְחַמְנוּ עִשָּׂהוּ  
וְיִצְרוּ לֹא יִחַנְנוּ: ס

12And in that day, the LORD will beat out [the  
peoples like grain] from the channel of the Eu-  
phrates to the Wadi of Egypt; and you shall be  
picked up one by one, O children of Israel!  
13And in that day, a great ram’s horn shall be  
sounded; and the strayed who are in the land  
of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land  
of Egypt shall come and worship the LORD on  
the holy mount, in Jerusalem.

12 וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם הַהוּא יַחֲבֹט יְהוָה מִשְׁבֻּלֵת  
הַנְּהַר עַד-נַחַל מִצְרַיִם וְאַתֶּם תִּלְקָטוּ  
לְאַחַד אֶחָד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ס  
13 וְהָיָה | בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִתְקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל  
וּבָאוּ הָאֲבָדִים בְּאֶרֶץ אַשּׁוּר וְהַנְּדָחִים  
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לַיהוָה בְּהַר  
הַקֹּדֶשׁ בִּירוּשָׁלַם:

**28** Ah, the proud crowns of the drunkards  
of Ephraim,  
Whose glorious beauty is but wilted flowers  
On the heads of men bloated with rich food,  
Who are overcome by wine!

**כח** הוֹי עֲטַרֹת גְּאוֹת שְׁכָרֵי אֶפְרַיִם  
וְצִיץ נֹבֵל צְבִי תִפְאַרְתּוֹ  
אֲשֶׁר עַל-רֹאשׁ גֵּיא־שְׁמָנִים  
הַלְוִמֵי יֵיזן:

2Lo, my Lord has something strong and  
mighty,  
Like a storm of hail,  
A shower of pestilence.

2 הִנֵּה חֹזֵק וְאַמִּץ לְאֲדָנָי  
כְּזֶרֶם בָּרָד  
שֶׁעַר קָטַב

divine judgment (Ibn Ezra). If the focus is on  
Israel’s enemy, the verse projects that foreign  
nation’s doom after Israel abandons idolatry  
(Rashi). The decision as to which nation has “no  
understanding” would vary accordingly.  
13. *the strayed . . . and the expelled* These  
terms, translations of *ov’dim* and *niddahim*, re-  
spectively, reflect a sense of loss and abandonment  
(see also Jer. 27:10 and Ezek. 34:11–16). The  
promise gives comfort to the scattered exiles that  
their restoration is near.

**Isaiah 28.** The prophet condemns Ephraim  
(the northern kingdom) for its besotted ways. The  
focus is on the nation at large; the reference to  
“these are also” (v. 7) extends the condemnation  
to priests and prophets. Some commentators have  
taken this reference to mark the inclusion of Ju-  
deans in the rebuke (Ibn Ezra). The projection  
of doom suggests that this unit precedes the de-  
struction of Samaria in 722–721 B.C.E.  
1. *Ab* Hebrew: *boy*. Isaiah’s cry of woe punc-  
tuates his oracles of doom in chapters 28–33.

Something like a storm of massive, torrential  
rain

Shall be hurled with force to the ground.

<sup>3</sup>Trampled underfoot shall be

The proud crowns of the drunkards of  
Ephraim,

<sup>4</sup>The wilted flowers—

On the heads of men bloated with rich  
food—

That are his glorious beauty.

They shall be like an early fig

Before the fruit harvest;

Whoever sees it devours it

While it is still in his hand.

<sup>5</sup>In that day, the LORD of Hosts shall become  
a crown of beauty and a diadem of glory for the  
remnant of His people, <sup>6</sup>and a spirit of judgment  
for him who sits in judgment and of valor for  
those who repel attacks at the gate.

<sup>7</sup>But these are also muddled by wine

And dazed by liquor:

Priest and prophet

Are muddled by liquor;

They are confused by wine,

They are dazed by liquor;

They are muddled in their visions,

They stumble in judgment.

<sup>8</sup>Yea, all tables are covered

With vomit and filth,

So that no space is left.

<sup>9</sup>“To whom would he give instruction?

To whom expound a message?

To those newly weaned from milk,

Just taken away from the breast?

<sup>10</sup>That same mutter upon mutter,

כְּזֶרֶם מַיִם כְּבִירִים שֹׁטְפִים

הַנִּיחַ לָאָרֶץ בְּיָד:

<sup>3</sup>בְּרַגְלֵים תִּרְמָסְנָהּ

עֲטֹרַת גְּאוֹת שְׂכוּרֵי אֶפְרַיִם:

<sup>4</sup>וְהָיְתָה צִיָּצַת נֶבֶל

צְבִי תִפְאַרְתּוֹ

אֲשֶׁר עַל-רֹאשׁ גֵּיא שְׂמָנִים

כְּבִכּוּרָהּ בְּטָרֵם קִיץ

אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה

הָרְאָה אוֹתָהּ

בְּעוֹדָהּ בְּכַפּוֹ יִבְלַעְנָהּ: ס

<sup>5</sup>בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לְעֵטֶרֶת

צְבִי וְלַצְפִּירַת תִּפְאַרֶת לְשֹׂאֵר עַמּוֹ:

<sup>6</sup>וּלְרוּחַ מְשֻׁפָּט לַיּוֹשֵׁב עַל-הַמְּשֻׁפָּט

וְלַגְבוּרָהּ מְשִׁיבֵי מַלְחָמָה שְׁעָרָה: ס

<sup>7</sup>וְגַם-אֱלֹהֵי בֵּינָן שָׁגוּ

וּבִשְׂכָר תָּעוּ

כַּהֵן וְנָבִיא

שָׁגוּ בִשְׂכָר

נִבְלָעוּ מִן-הַיַּיִן

תָּעוּ מִן-הַשְׂכָּר

שָׁגוּ בְּרָאָה

פָּקוּ פְּלִילִיָּהּ:

<sup>8</sup>כִּי כָל-שִׁלְחָנוֹת

מְלֵאוּ קִיא צֹאָה

בְּלֵי מְקוֹם: ס

<sup>9</sup>אֶת-מִלֵּי יוֹרָה דַּעָה

וְאֶת-מִי יִבִּין שְׂמוּעָה

גְּמוּלֵי מַחְלָב

עֲתִיקֵי מְשָׁדִים:

<sup>10</sup>כִּי צוֹ לְצוֹ לְצוֹ לְצוֹ

**10,13. mutter upon mutter, / Murmur upon murmur** The prophet despairs of making sense to the nation. He speaks to the people in a kind of prattle, ironically alluding to divine law and

Murmur upon murmur,  
Now here, now there!

קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ  
זַעִיר שָׁם זַעִיר שָׁם:

<sup>11</sup>Truly, as one who speaks to that people in a stammering jargon and an alien tongue <sup>12</sup>is he who declares to them, “This is the resting place, let the weary rest; this is the place of repose.” They refuse to listen. <sup>13</sup>To them the word of the LORD is:

“Mutter upon mutter,  
Murmur upon murmur,  
Now here, now there.”  
And so they will march,  
But they shall fall backward,  
And be injured and snared and captured.

<sup>11</sup>כִּי בְלַעְגֵי שִׁפְהָ וּבְלִשׁוֹן אַחֲרֵת יִדְבֹר  
אֶל-הָעַם הַזֶּה: <sup>12</sup>אֲשֶׁר | אָמַר אֲלֵיהֶם  
זֹאת הַמְנוּחָה הַנִּיחֹ לָעֵיף וְזֹאת  
הַמְרַגְעָה וְלֹא אָבֹא \* שְׁמוֹעַ: <sup>13</sup>וְהָיָה  
לָהֶם דְּבַר-יְהוָה  
צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ  
קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ  
זַעִיר שָׁם זַעִיר שָׁם  
לְמַעַן יִלְכוּ  
וּכְשָׁלוּ אַחֲוֹר  
וְנִשְׁבְּרוּ וְנִקְשְׁוּ וְנִלְכְּדוּ: פ

**29** <sup>22</sup>Assuredly, thus said the LORD to the House of Jacob, Who redeemed Abraham:

No more shall Jacob be shamed,  
No longer his face grow pale.

**כט** <sup>22</sup>לִכֵּן כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי בֵּית  
יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר פָּדָה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם

לֹא-עַתָּה יִבוֹשׁ יַעֲקֹב  
וְלֹא עַתָּה פָּנָיו יִחְוָרוּ:

<sup>23</sup>For when he—that is, his children—behold what My hands have wrought in his midst, they will hallow My name.

<sup>23</sup>כִּי בִּרְאֵיתוֹ יִלְדָּיו מֵעֲשֵׂה יָדַי בְּקִרְבּוֹ  
יִקְדִּישׁוּ שְׁמִי

Men will hallow the Holy One of Jacob  
And stand in awe of the God of Israel.

וְהִקְדִּישׁוּ אֶת-קְדוֹשׁ יַעֲקֹב  
וְאֶת-אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יַעֲרִיצוּ:

v. 12. יתיר א'

punishment (cf. v. 11), apparently mocking the way God’s words sound to the people. Thus the words “mutter and murmur” (*tzav l'tzav kav l'kav*) are playing with the notions of commandment (*tzav*) and measure (*kav*), both of which were ignored by the people. Alternatively, the prophet mockingly suggests that what the people

hear as mere blather (*tzav/kav*) is in truth God’s own command (*tzav*) and measure of judgment (*kav*) against them.

**Isaiah 29:22–23.** The prophecy concludes on a positive note. God, who redeemed Abraham, will redeem his descendants, and all will hallow the Lord for His mighty acts.

# הפטרות שמות

## HAFTARAH FOR SH'MOT

JEREMIAH 1:1–2:3 (*S'fardim*)

In this *haftarah*, Jeremiah is commissioned as a messenger to deliver God's word. Jeremiah's inauguration is reinforced by two visionary signs (1:11–12, 13–15), which introduce the themes of divine providence and approaching doom.

The call to prophecy (1:4–10) is presented as an autobiographical fragment. God's word strikes terror in Jeremiah's heart, but his fear is countered by a promise of divine protection and verbal inspiration, a promise repeated at the end of the chapter in the image of an inviolable city (vv. 18–19). The prophet's cry of woe (*ahab*) and the divine exhortation not to fear capture the mood of anxiety.

A highly stylized literary pattern captures this private moment in Jeremiah's life, presenting him as a true prophet in the standard mode. The same pattern is also preserved in the prophetic call of Moses (see Exod. 3:10–12, 4:15; cf. Isa. 6:5–7; Ezek. 2:3–3:11). Like Moses before him, Jeremiah is sent forth to prophesy against his personal inclination but with divine assurances. The *haf-*

*tarah* closes as usual with a hopeful assertion (2:1–3).

### RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The *parashah* and the *haftarah* are linked through the prophetic commissions of Moses and Jeremiah, dramatizing the continuity of divine guidance throughout the generations and repeating a pattern of divine address, human resistance, and divine assurance. Moses and Jeremiah function as intermediaries between the divine spirit and the people. Through them it is taught that Israel's life is determined not by earthly political powers but by divine care and judgment. They thus challenge the peoples' perceptions of the everyday (the Israelites' weariness of spirit in the time of Moses and Israel's political vision in Jeremiah's day). The prophets, who sense the enormity of their task and their personal inadequacy, are strengthened by divine reassurances as they set out to confront the resistance of others.

**1** The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup>The word of the LORD came to him in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign, <sup>3</sup>and through-

אֵל דְּבַרְי יִרְמְיָהוּ בֶן־חִלְקִיָּהוּ מִן־  
הַכֹּהֲנִים אֲשֶׁר בְּעֲנָתוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ בְּנֵי־מִן;  
אֲשֶׁר הָיָה דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֵלָיו בִּימֵי יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ  
בֶן־אָמוֹן מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה בְּשָׁלֹשׁ־עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה

**Jeremiah 1:1. Jeremiah** The Hebrew vocalization (*yirmiyahu*) is derived from either the root רמה or the root רוּם. Thus the name "Jeremiah" means "The LORD loosens," or "the LORD is exalted." The name is attested in Hebrew seals from the 8th century and in letters (written on potsherds) found in the city of Lachish shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem.

**Anathoth** A levitical city in the territory of Benjamin (see Josh. 21:18). The oracles of Jere-

miah, who was a resident of Anathoth (Jer. 29:27), incurred the wrath of the local people (11:21). His family also had land holdings there (32:7).

**2. in the thirteenth year of his reign** The reign of King Josiah. This corresponds to 627 B.C.E., a volatile time when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon rebelled against his Assyrian overlord. That was the first stage in Babylon's gradual rise to political dominance in the region.

out the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month.

לְמַלְכוֹ: 3 וַיְהִי בַיָּמֵי יְהוֹיָקִים בֶּן-יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ  
מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה עַד-תֵּם עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה  
לְצִדְקִיָּהוּ בֶן-יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה עַד-  
גָּלוּת יְרוּשָׁלַם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי: 4

<sup>4</sup>The word of the LORD came to me:

4 וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:

<sup>5</sup>Before I created you in the womb, I selected you;  
Before you were born, I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations.

5 בְּטֶרֶם אֶצְוֶרְךָ אֶצְרָךְ בְּבֶטֶן יִדְעֵתִיךָ  
וּבְטֶרֶם תֵּצֵא מִרֶחֶם הַקֶּדֶשׁתִּיךָ  
נָבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ:

<sup>6</sup>I replied:

Ah, Lord God!

I don't know how to speak,

For I am still a boy.

<sup>7</sup>And the LORD said to me:

Do not say, "I am still a boy,"

But go wherever I send you

And speak whatever I command you.

<sup>8</sup>Have no fear of them,

For I am with you to deliver you

—declares the LORD.

6 וָאָמַר  
אָהֵהָ אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה  
הִנֵּה לֹא-יָדַעְתִּי דְבַר  
כִּי-נָעַר אָנֹכִי: 7  
7 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי  
אֶל-תֹּאמַר נָעַר אָנֹכִי  
כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ תֵּלֵךְ  
וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תִּדְבֹר:  
8 אֶל-תִּירָא מִפְּנֵיהֶם  
כִּי-אֲתִיב אֲנִי לְהַצִּילְךָ  
נֹאם-יְהוָה:

<sup>9</sup>The LORD put out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: Herewith I put My words into your mouth.

<sup>10</sup>See, I appoint you this day

Over nations and kingdoms:

To uproot and to pull down,

9 וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיַּגַּע עַל-פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר  
יְהוָה אֵלַי הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי דְבָרַי בְּפִיךָ:  
10 רְאֵה הַפְּקֹדֶתִיךָ | הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה  
עַל-הַגּוֹיִם וְעַל-הַמַּמְלָכוֹת  
לְנָתוּשׁ וּלְנָתוּץ

**3. until the end of the eleventh year . . . in the fifth month** Jerusalem actually fell on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's 11th year (Jer. 39:2, 52:5–6).

**5. Before I created you** This translation follows the version of the Hebrew text as read (*k'rei*). This yields the word "*etzorkha*," which is derived from the root יצר (create). The motif of creation in the womb occurs in ancient Near Eastern royal annals (Assyrian and Egyptian), where it indicates the divine appointment of a king. The version of

the Hebrew text as written (*k'tiv*) yields the word "*atzurkha*," derived from צור and translated as "I formed you" (Rashi, Kara).

**a prophet concerning the nations** This phrase has long puzzled commentators, because Jeremiah often speaks to the Israelites—not only to the nations. Rashi and Radak refer to verse 7 to maintain that both Israel and the gentiles were included in Jeremiah's mission. However, one could maintain that only foreign nations are referred to in this verse, because the commission re-

To destroy and to overthrow,  
To build and to plant.

וְלִהְיוּ אֲבִירֵי וְלִהְיוּ  
לְבָנוֹת וּלְנִטּוּעַ: פ

<sup>11</sup>The word of the LORD came to me: What do you see, Jeremiah? I replied: I see a branch of an almond tree.

<sup>11</sup>וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר מַה־אַתָּה רֹאֶה יִרְמְיָהוּ וְאָמַר מִקַּל שָׁקֵד אֲנִי רֹאֶה:

<sup>12</sup>The LORD said to me:  
You have seen right,  
For I am watchful to bring My word to pass.

<sup>12</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי הֵיטֵבְתָּ לְרֵאוֹת כִּי־שָׁקֵד אֲנִי עַל־דְּבָרֵי לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: פ

<sup>13</sup>And the word of the LORD came to me a second time: What do you see? I replied:

<sup>13</sup>וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה | אֵלַי שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר מַה אַתָּה רֹאֶה וְאָמַר

I see a steaming pot,  
Tipped away from the north.

סִיר נִפְּוֹחַ אֲנִי רֹאֶה וּפְנִי מִפְּנֵי צְפוֹנָה:

<sup>14</sup>And the LORD said to me:  
From the north shall disaster break loose  
Upon all the inhabitants of the land!

<sup>14</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי מִצְפוֹן תִּפְתַּח הָרָעָה עַל כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ:

<sup>15</sup>For I am summoning all the peoples  
Of the kingdoms of the north  
—declares the LORD.

<sup>15</sup>כִּי | הִנְנִי קֹרֵא לְכָל־מְשֻׁפְּחוֹת מַמְלָכוֹת צְפוֹנָה

They shall come, and shall each set up a throne

נְאֻם־יְהוָה

וּבָאוּ וְנִתְּנוּ אִישׁ כִּסֵּאוֹ

Before the gates of Jerusalem,  
Against its walls roundabout,  
And against all the towns of Judah.

פָּתַח | שַׁעְרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם

וְעַל כָּל־חוֹמוֹתֶיהָ סָבִיב

וְעַל כָּל־עָרֵי יְהוּדָה:

<sup>16</sup>And I will argue My case against them  
For all their wickedness:

<sup>16</sup>וְדַבַּרְתִּי מִשְׁפָּטֵי אוֹתָם עַל כָּל־רָעָתָם

They have forsaken Me  
And sacrificed to other gods  
And worshiped the works of their hands.

אֲשֶׁר עֲזָבוּנִי

וַיִּקְטְרוּ לֵאלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים

וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לְמַעֲשֵׂי יְדֵיהֶם:

<sup>17</sup>So you, gird up your loins,  
Arise and speak to them  
All that I command you.  
Do not break down before them,  
Lest I break you before them.

<sup>17</sup>וְאַתָּה תִּאָּזֵר מִתְּנִיךְ

וְקַמְתָּ וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם

אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי אֶצְוֶךָ

אֶל־תַּחַת מִפְּנֵיהֶם

פֶּן־אֶחְתָּק לְפָנֵיהֶם:

fers to the nations who will exact judgment on Israel (vv. 5,10), a theme that dominates the vision of the pot (vv. 13–15).

**13–14. steaming pot** The translation states that the “steaming” (*nafu-ah*) pot is “tipped away from the north” (v. 13), thereby symbolizing the

18I make you this day  
 A fortified city,  
 And an iron pillar,  
 And bronze walls  
 Against the whole land—  
 Against Judah's kings and officers,  
 And against its priests and citizens.  
 19They will attack you,  
 But they shall not overcome you;  
 For I am with you—declares the LORD—to  
 save you.

18 וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה נֹתְתִיךָ הַיּוֹם  
 לְעִיר מְבֻצָּר  
 וְלַעֲמֹוד בְּרֹזֶל וְלַחֲמוֹת נְחָשֶׁת  
 עַל-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ  
 לְמַלְכֵי יְהוּדָה לְשָׂרֵיהֶּ  
 לְכַהֲנֵיהֶּ וְלַעַם הָאָרֶץ:  
 19 וְנִלְחָמוּ אֵלֶיךָ  
 וְלֹא-יִוָּכְלוּ לָךְ  
 כִּי-אֲתֶךָ אֲנִי נֹאֲמֵי-יְהוָה לְהַצִּילְךָ: פ

2 The word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the LORD:

I accounted to your favor  
 The devotion of your youth,  
 Your love as a bride—  
 How you followed Me in the wilderness,  
 In a land not sown.  
 3Israel is holy to the LORD,  
 The first fruits of His harvest.  
 All who eat of it shall be held guilty;  
 Disaster shall befall them  
 —declares the LORD.

ב וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: 2 הֲלֹךְ  
 וְקִרְאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר  
 יְהוָה  
 זְכַרְתִּי לָךְ  
 חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ  
 אֲהַבַת פְּלוּלְתֶיךָ  
 לְכַתֶּךָ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר  
 בְּאָרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:  
 3 קֹדֶשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַיהוָה  
 רֵאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָה תְּבוּאָתוֹ  
 כָּל-אֲכָלֵיו יֵאשְׁמוּ  
 רָעָה תָּבֵא אֲלֵיהֶם  
 נֹאֲמֵי-יְהוָה: פ

outbreak (*tippatah*) of the destruction from that region (v. 14). But the Hebrew formulation is unclear, and commentators have suggested, with good reason, that the pot was actually facing north to receive the evil (Radak, Kara, Luzzatto).

**Jeremiah 2:2.** The positive portrayal of Israel's youthful past and the marital symbolism of the Covenant contradict the repeated episodes of Israel's faithlessness found in the Torah. The various depictions of Israel's relationship with God reflect different streams of tradition.

3. Jeremiah's depiction of the nation as a

holy people articulates the theology of Deuteronomy (see Deut. 7:6), which revises the conditional nature of the people's holy status found in Exod. 19:4–6. In that context of Exodus, Israel may become holy if it observes God's teachings. The revision in Deuteronomy deems Israel holy per se and, therefore, obligated to fulfill its covenantal obligations.

In its original context, this verse described past events (see 2:4–8). But as the climax to this haftarah, its meaning shifts; it becomes a prophecy of hope.