



PARSHAT SHMOT: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

This guide corresponds to the video: [What's In A Name?](#)

Shmot

1. Why is Shmot called Shmot?
 - a. Shmot, or names, show up in the very beginning of this book.
 - b. Is that really a good reason to name the whole book Shmot?
2. English and Latin translators call the book "The Book of Exodus"
 - a. Exodus from Egypt actually is the great event that dominates the book.
 - b. Once we are done with those first verses, the Torah seems to drop that 'names-thing'

Rashi's Starting Point

1. Rashi looks at this list of names of the people who came down to Egypt
 - a. He wonders, why is the list necessary at all?
 - b. As it turns out, way back in Genesis, the Torah had actually told us this.
2. Rashi: We've heard all this already. Why do it again?
 - a. Not only is recitation of names tangential to the theme of Shmot, it's also repetitious.

Rashi's Answer

1. Rashi seems to think that everything will make sense if we just realize that the people of Israel are compared by the Almighty to stars. As if that somehow answers everything.
 - a. Stars get named, so we get named. Stars apparently get named twice; once at night, when God 'takes them out', so to speak, and once in the morning, when He snuggles them back in their resting places.
 - b. So, just like the stars, we too get named twice – once when the Children of Israel are alive, when they first come down to Egypt, and once when they are dying out, in the beginning of Exodus. So it all makes sense right?
2. It sounds kind of far-fetched, even a bit surreal. What is Midrash trying to get to here?

Like the Stars

1. Midrash is alluding to something very deep here. Here's how we might puzzle out its meaning.
2. The Midrash says the key to understanding the naming of Israel in the beginning of Exodus is to remember that Israel is compared to stars.
 - a. When were the Children of Israel compared to stars?
 - b. The answer, of course, is that it happened in the times of Abraham.
3. Back in Genesis chapter 15, Abraham had worried that he was old, and he did not yet have an heir. Who will carry on his legacy?
 - a. In response, God had told him to go outside.
 - b. In telling Abraham that his children would be like the stars, God was issuing this almost playful challenge: Can you count the stars? Try counting them.
 - c. And the implication is: Abraham, you can't count them. They are innumerable! That's how your children will be, also.

4. Isn't that interesting: The moment God first associates Israel with stars is also the moment God brings up the idea of counting them. Which brings us straight to a fascinating paradox:
 - a. When God actually told Abraham the nation of Israel was going to be like stars, God's point was that Abraham's children would be impossible to count.
 - b. But this midrash, that specifically references that promise that Israel will be like the stars, says that God, with love, treats us just like the stars and counts each one of us.
 - c. Which is it? Are we countable like the stars, like the Midrash suggests, or uncountable like the stars, like God once told Abraham?
5. The answer, I think, might just lie in who is doing the counting.
 - a. Stars seem innumerable to people. People look up at the heavens and get dizzy.
 - b. But God has the opposite relationship to stars.
 - i. The book of Isaiah tells us: He counts every one. He names every one.
6. The Midrash sees that and says, God cares about the stars. And so, He will relate to us...

But When?

1. But here's the key: When will He relate to us that way? There is this moment, God tells Abraham, that his progeny will get too numerous to count, and then they will be like stars – but historically, exactly when was that moment?
2. The answer is: Right here. Right at the very moment in time you and I have been focusing on.
3. Right here, at the beginning of Exodus. Because, right after the Torah goes and counts the children of Israel, right after that, the next thing we hear about is a population explosion.
 - a. This is the moment God was talking about. The moment Israel bursts forth, and transforms itself from a mere family, into an incipient nation. This is the moment they become innumerable.
 - b. And once you realize that, you realize something very chilling. Because at that moment, something else was happening too. Something foretold to Abraham, the moment after God told him his children would be like the stars.
4. When you read that verse in Genesis, you don't know when it's going to happen. But Abraham's entire prophecy comes true right at the beginning of Shmot. Right after Abraham's children have become like the stars, right after that, they become enslaved.
5. Now think about that Midrash that Rashi cites. Your people, Abraham, are so innumerable, they will be just like the stars. It seems like a great blessing – and it is. But that blessing came coupled with something tragic – the darkest moments in our young history (slavery).
 - a. That is the reason that right before that slavery happens – right then, God pauses to count us, and to name us. God does it, because after all, to him, we are just like stars. God doesn't see you as a nation of nameless faces. He names us, because He loves us.

So Why is it Called Names?

1. After seeing this Midrash and beginning to understand what it might be alluding to, we can also understand why the name of this book of the Torah is 'names.' For what, really happens in this book? It is, of course, the book that recounts our experience as slaves and how God sees us.
2. Calling the book "Names" is not an attempt to evade discussion of Egyptian enslavement, but is itself a way of talking about that enslavement. Through it all, God knows our names. He cares about each and every one of us, in all of our pain, in all of our anguish. For we are, after all, like stars, indeed.