

## Sefer Shemot: The Emergence of a Nation

### I.

The essential motif of Sefer Shemot is the emergence of the Jewish nation. At the very outset of the sefer, we have the first description in the Torah of the Jewish people as a nation, as Pharaoh describes the threat to his nation, *va'yomer el amo, ben am bnei Yisrael rav v'atzum mimenu*.

While Pharaoh defines the Jewish people as an independent nation, relative to the distinct Egyptian nation, who, in addition, constitute a threat to the Egyptian people, Pharaoh does not, in any meaningful way, give substantive moral, ethical, cultural, or anthropological definition to that which defines the Jewish nation. By way of analogy, one can accurately state that Sweden is not Norway, nor is the latter Finland, without knowing anything substantive about these nations.

As such, a crucial line of inquiry as Sefer Shemot is concerned, insofar as its central motif is the emergence of the Jewish nation, is what exactly the essential and defining feature of that nation might be. This essay attempts to present three approaches to this question.

### II. Rambam's Approach: Sanctification of the Divine Name

In his Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Rambam enumerates the mitzvah of sanctifying the Divine name. In that context, Rambam emphasizes the national Jewish responsibility *l'farsem ha'emunah ha'emitit ha'zot ba'olam*, to publicize the fundamental truth of Divine unity in the world. Rambam, in this context, presents this as a national and defining mitzvah, a classification buttressed by Rambam's singular formulation of the mitzvah at in the Yad Ha'Chazakah, "*kol Beit Yisrael mitzuvin al kiddush ha'shem ha'gadol hazev*." The nature of the mitzvah is one which defines, apparently, being a member of Beit Yisrael. By contrast, as Rambam rules both in Sefer Ha'Mitzvot and in Yad Ha'Chazakah, gentiles have no such obligation.

As a defining national mitzvah, it is natural, as Rambam articulates in Sefer Ha'Mitzvot, that individual members of the Jewish people are called upon to sacrifice their lives to promulgate this essential theological truth.

Indeed, in an unprecedented formulation, Rambam relates, based on a passage in Yeshayahu, to the failure of the overwhelming majority of Jews to live up to the standards of kiddush Hashem during the epoch of Nevuchadnezzar as a national disgrace, *cherpah l'Yisrael*. While there have been many historical failures with respect to particular mitzvot, from the days of the Egel HaZahav and onwards, a failure is only a national disgrace if it undermines the essential mission of the Jewish people. As Rambam defines that mission as

sanctifying the Divine name by promulgating the essential theological truth of His unity and sovereignty, even at the point of the sword, the mass failure to do so indeed constituted a national disgrace.

This understanding of Rambam's position explains a number of otherwise anomalous dimensions of his presentation in Sefer Ha'Mitzvot. While it is clear from Yad Ha'Chazakah that the requirements of kiddush Hashem apply in a variety of scenarios, including she'at ha'shemad, bifnei asarah mi'yisrael, and of course, scenarios implication not only idolatry but shefichut damim and gilui arayot as well, Rambam privileges the "ma'amad ha'gadol" of public coercion to idolatry in the days of Nevuchadnetzar as the paradigmatic case of Kiddush Hashem. This formulation is fully consistent with Rambam's position that the essential mission of the Jewish people is to publicize the notion of Divine unity, and surely, this public scene where that very credo was being challenged therefore represented the most direct manifestation of this obligation.

Moreover, Rambam includes a Medrash Chazal in his presentation in Sefer Ha'Mitzvot from the Torat Kohanim, in which Rambam notes that it was for this reason- to promulgate Divine unity- that the Jewish people were taken out of Egypt. In other words, the basic narrative of Sefer Shemot, that of Exodus followed by giving of the Torah, is significant insofar as the Jewish people are now able to fulfill their national *raison d'être*, to publicize Divine unity in the world. If the Jewish people, as Rambam details graphically in the opening chapter of Hilkhos Avodah Zarah, nearly lost this great teaching of Avraham, the national patriarch, the very exodus itself was necessary to potentiate what had been the mission of a singular individual, and then a family, at the national level.

Sefer Shemot, in Rambam's telling, is about the emergence of a nation dedicated to the proposition that the Almighty is one and fully sovereign over the world. In so doing, they carry the baton forward of their great founder, Avraham, and it is for this reason alone that they were not abandoned to the "dustbin of history", but miraculously extracted.

Clearly, this mission will reach its denouement in the eschatological period, when the Jewish people will finally achieve their pedagogical mandate, and all nations will recognize "that the Lord is one, and His name is one."

### **III. Ramban's Approach: In the Shadow of the Divine**

In both his introductory essay to Sefer Shemot and concluding poem, Ramban terms Sefer Shemot as the Book of Redemption, Sefer Ha'Geulah. As Ramban expresses in those contexts, redemption is not meant primarily as a term implying national liberation from Egyptian bondage, but restoring the nation to the spiritual station of their fathers, *ma'alat avotam*.

Ramban explains that this was achieved even before the Jewish people returned to Israel, but, at Sinai and, subsequently, once the Divine glory of Sinai had transferred to the mishkan itself, when the Jewish people

were encamped directly around the Mishkan, where the Divine presence, as it were, rested. In Ramban's terminology, "*hem hem ha'merkavah*", at that point, the Jewish people, at the national level, came to represent the "Divine chariot", that is to say, the vehicle through which Divine presence was brought into the world.

For Ramban, characteristically, this formulation is completely consistent with overarching motifs in his thought and writing. In particular, the specific role, and privilege, of the Jewish people, to live in direct Divine proximity, is enabled only through the awarding of the Land of Israel to the Jewish people. In Ramban's cosmology, while the Almighty controls the entire world, his presence is mediated via a series of intermediaries outside the Land of Israel. In Israel itself, *eretz asher Hashem elokecha doresh otah, tamid eini Hashem elokecha bah*, the Jewish people are afforded singular and precious access to the Divine presence, enabling them to fulfill their national destiny as a nation that lives in a redeemed state, in the shadow of the Almighty.

For Ramban, one can hardly overstate the catastrophe of exile. It is not merely the loss of a series of mitzvot which depend on the sanctity of the Land of Israel, nor the additional cost of losing a sense of national and geographic cohesion, but the very *raison d'être* of the Jewish people, to live as a nation in the Divine presence, by very definition, can not be achieved.

#### IV. Netziv's Approach: The Nation of Torah Study

Observing that Ba'al Halachot Gedolot referred to Shemot as Sefer Ha'Sheni, Netziv argues that Shemot is best understood as the second half of Sefer Bereishit. As he elaborates in his introductory essay to Sefer Shemot, the world's creation was contingent upon the Jewish people accepting the Torah at Sinai, and only then, could creation be said to be complete.

For Netziv, much as the purpose of humanity is to cultivate universal standards of morality and decency, *torat ha'adam*, in furthering *yishuvo shel olam*, the Jewish nation achieves its particular telos, and by extension, serves its cosmic purpose, through not only receiving the Torah, but, cultivating and developing it through intensive study and creative development, *chiddushei Torah*.

Characteristic of the mentality of Volozhin, the essential Jewish activity is not only Torah study, but original and penetrating Torah study, through which the Jew realizes his fullest purpose, and serves, in a broader sense, his cosmic mission, as the existence of the world depends upon the development of Torah.

In a sense, Netziv's conception harkens back to Sa'adiah Gaon, but his emphasis on original study and development- *chiddush ha-Torah*- is unique. While Netziv recognizes that not every individual Jew will necessarily achieve this goal, it remains at the very center of the national mission, and those individuals who do achieve this goal, serve, in this respect, as the vanguard of the nation.

## V.

If Pharaoh first described the Jewish people as a nation, the essential and defining aspects of our national mission emerge from the sources of our own tradition. Ultimately, Rambam, Ramban, and Netziv's conceptions, while undoubtedly distinct, need not be perceived as mutually exclusive.

Indeed, the prospect of a people immersively devoted to cultivating the *kli chemdah* with which we have been endowed, living in the shadow of the Divine, and outwardly radiating out the veracity of His unity and cosmic sovereignty, may be mutually reinforcing identities.

The people which first emerged some nearly four millennia ago from the iron cauldron of Egypt continues to aspire towards the full realization of its national identity.