

PARASHAT SHEMOT

Exodus 1:1–6:1

Parashat Shemot begins by mentioning the *shemot*, or “names,” of Jacob’s sons and telling us that after they died a new pharaoh, who did not know Joseph, comes to power. Fearing the Jewish people, the new ruler orders taskmasters to enslave them and drown their male children in the Nile River. Defying that order, one mother places her son in a basket and casts the basket into the river. Pharaoh’s daughter who was bathing nearby rescues the child and adopts him as her own. She names him Moses. Some time after Moses has grown up, he sees an Egyptian beating a Jew. Defending the Jew, Moses strikes the Egyptian and kills him. When Pharaoh hears what has happened, he orders Moses put to death. So Moses flees from Egypt. When he arrives in Midian, he is welcomed by Jethro, a local priest, whose daughter, Zipporah, he later marries. While Moses is shepherding Jethro’s flock, God speaks to him out of a burning bush, promising that Aaron, his brother, will help him liberate the Israelites from oppression. Moses then returns to Egypt where he and Aaron go to Pharaoh to demand freedom for their people. Pharaoh refuses and imposes hard labor upon the people, who blame Moses for making their situation worse. When Moses complains to God, he is told, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might.”

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

The second book of the Torah is called *Shemot*, or “names,” since it begins with a list of the names of Jacob’s sons. It is also known as Exodus because it relates the history of

the Jewish people’s liberation from Egyptian slavery.

We are told that, after Joseph’s death, the Jewish population in Egypt increases, and a new pharaoh, who does not know Joseph, comes to power. Suspecting the loyalty of the Jewish people, the new pharaoh fears that, if Egypt is attacked, the Jews



will side with his enemy. So he orders the Israelites enslaved and puts them to work building the cities of Pithom and Raamses. Yet, the more the Israelites are oppressed, the more they increase in numbers.

Pharaoh speaks to Shiphrah and Puah, the Jewish midwives, and orders them to kill all male Jewish babies, but they refuse. Pharaoh then orders that all Jewish male babies be drowned in the Nile.

Hoping to save her son, one Jewish mother places him in a basket and floats it in the Nile near the place where Pharaoh's daughter is bathing. When Pharaoh's daughter rescues the child, the woman's daughter rushes forward and asks if she might find a mother to nurse him. Pharaoh's daughter agrees. She treats the child like a son

and names him Moses, which means "drew" him out of the water.

• 2 •

As a young man, Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Jew. When he notices that no one is looking, Moses strikes the Egyptian and kills him. Afterwards, he buries him. The next day he comes upon two Jews fighting. When he tries to stop them, one of them says to him, "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses realizes that others know what he has done and that he is in danger. When Pharaoh learns that Moses has killed an Egyptian, he orders him put to death.

So Moses flees Egypt. He travels to Midian, which is located in the southern part of the Negev desert. In Midian, Moses is taken in by Jethro, a

local priest and shepherd. He marries Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and they have a son whom Moses names Gershom, meaning "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

• 3 •

One day, while caring for Jethro's flock, Moses sees a strange sight: a bush that burns but is not consumed. When Moses approaches the bush, God speaks to him from the flames, telling him to return to Egypt to free the Israelites from bondage. Moses wonders how he will be able to prove to the Israelites that God has sent him.

"When they ask me, 'Who sent you?' what shall I say?" he says to God.

And God tells him, "Say that *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* [which means 'I will be what I will be'] sent you. The Lord, the God of your people, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you."

Because Moses still has his doubts, he asks God, "What if they do not believe me or insist on proof that God has spoken to me?" God then turns Moses' staff into a snake and makes his skin white with leprosy. God tells Moses that, if the Israelites do not believe him after seeing both these signs,

he is to take water from the Nile and pour it on the ground, where it will turn to blood.

Moses still hesitates about taking on the task of freeing the Israelites. He tells God that he is "slow of speech and tongue," meaning that he is no public speaker. God tells him that his brother, Aaron, will be appointed to speak to Pharaoh and to the Israelites.

• 4 •

Moses returns to Egypt and is met by Aaron. Together, they go to Pharaoh to request that he allow the Israelites to celebrate a festival. Pharaoh refuses and accuses them of troublemaking. He orders the taskmasters to increase the work of the slaves and to beat those who fail to produce. Finding themselves in trouble, the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron.

Their complaints stir up new doubts in Moses. He turns to God and asks, "Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not freed Your people at all."

God promises Moses that the people will be liberated.

THEMES

Parashat Shemot contains three important themes:

1. Pharaoh's war against the Jews.
2. Civil disobedience.
3. Moses' self-doubt and humility.

PEREK ALEF: *Pharaoh's War against the Jews*

The Book of *Shemot*, or Exodus, continues the history of the Jewish people. Jacob and his family follow Joseph to Egypt, settle in Goshen, and increase in numbers. A new pharaoh comes to power. He has forgotten Joseph's role in saving Egypt and decides to enslave the Israelites.

Why? What brings the Egyptian ruler to such a decision? Does he worry that the loss of slave labor will ruin Egypt's economy and his plans for building great cities and monuments to himself? Does he calculate that if he liberates the Israelites

others will demand their freedom? Or is it possible that the Jews themselves bring on their own persecution and enslavement?



Sarna

Biblical scholar Nahum M. Sarna speculates that the new pharaoh feared an invasion of foreigners from the East. Like many Egyptian leaders, he knew of his country's national humiliation and defeat by the invading Hyksos during an earlier

period (1700–1680 B.C.E.) and was determined that no such shame would happen during his rule. Sarna explains that the Israelites were living in the Delta region, where an invasion from the East would begin. Pharaoh's "anxiety," he writes, was "quite understandable." He feared that the Jews would join Egypt's enemies. For that reason he decided to enslave the Israelites and to reduce their numbers and power.

Sarna also provides another reason for Pharaoh's decision. He wished to build his capital in the midst of Goshen, or in the Delta region because it was a very fertile land, closer to the critical borders of Syria and Canaan. Enslaving the Jews produced a double benefit. It forced them to give up their lands and provided Pharaoh with an abundance of cheap labor for the construction of his capital cities. (*Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, Schocken Books, New York, 1986, pp. 15–17)

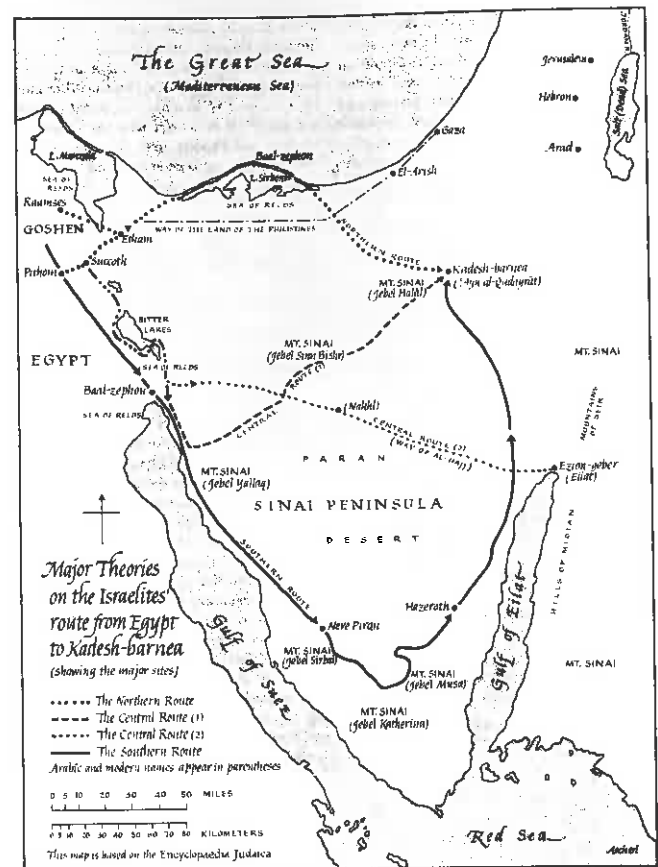
Under the Hyksos

Under the Hyksos domination, Egyptian culture had sunk so low that the period has been described as the "Great Humiliation." But the successful war of liberation against the Hyksos led to an Egyptian revival on such a grand scale that the period of the New Kingdom which followed, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties (about 1570–1200 B.C.E.), has been called the Golden Age. . . . (Harry M. Orlinsky, Understanding the Bible through History and Archaeology, Ktav, New York, 1972, p. 54)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides also believes that Pharaoh began his campaign against the Israelites for both strategic and economic reasons. Pharaoh, he says, was afraid that the Israelites would join an invading enemy and escape with a considerable portion of Egypt's wealth. Instead of killing off the Israelites, Nachmanides explains, Pharaoh cleverly developed a plan for taxing their property and for put-



ting them to work on his projects. He chose Egyptian officers to command them and then allowed the Egyptians to enslave the Jews for their own projects and homes. In this way all of Egypt profited from Jewish slave labor. (On Exodus 1:10)



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch believes that Pharaoh's war against the Jews had to do with the weakness of his government. He had just come to power and was seeking a way of rallying the people behind his rule. So he encouraged the masses to oppress the Jews, hoping that his popularity would increase because he had allowed his people to engage in violence and to enrich them-

selves through theft against strangers living in their midst. (On Exodus 1:8–10)

Hirsch's view is not far from an interpretation offered by a group of ancient rabbinic commentators. Based on the Torah's observation that "a new king arose who did not know Joseph," these commentators taught that the people had come to Pharaoh demanding the right to attack the Israelites. At first he refused, telling them that it would be wrong to harm them since Joseph had saved all the people from ruin. But the people did not listen. They threatened to remove Pharaoh from power. Finally, he was persuaded to go along with their plan to enslave the Jews. The Torah calls him "a new king" because he ceased his protest and accepted the "new" view of those who plotted to destroy the Jewish people. (*Exodus Rabbah* 1:8)

The cause for the oppression

The root and beginning of this indescribable maltreatment was the supposed lack of rights of a foreigner, as such. . . . In Egypt, the cleverly calculated lowering of the rights of the Jews on the score of their being aliens (foreigners) came first, the harshness and cruelty followed by itself, as it always does and will, when the basic idea of Right has first been given a wrong conception. (S.R. Hirsch, translator, The Pentateuch, L. Honig and Sons Ltd., London, England, 1959, on Exodus 1:14)

In contrast with those who believe that Pharaoh's persecution and enslavement of the Israelites may be blamed on the Egyptian leader's political, economic, or strategic considerations, others argue that Jewish suffering was the fault of the Jews themselves.

For instance, some interpreters believe that after Joseph died the Israelites of Egypt stopped practicing the ritual of circumcision. They said to one another, "Let's be like all the other Egyptians." Other rabbis say that they began to attend sports events at amphitheaters and to visit circuses for entertainment. Their attraction to such events became more important to them than their own traditions and faith. They also moved into homes

in Egyptian neighborhoods rather than remaining together in their own "Jewish communities."

Because Jews chose to abandon their traditions and to assimilate, they were oppressed by Pharaoh. He became suspicious of their motives. So did the Egyptian people, who did not want Israelites invading their neighborhoods or competing with them for business opportunities. These commentators maintain that, had the Jews remained loyal to their people and not tried to act like Egyptians, they might not have become targets for Pharaoh's oppression. (*Exodus Rabbah* 1:8–9, *Yalkut Shimoni, Ha-Emek Davar*, as in Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 2–3)

Causes of anti-Semitism

Historian Barbara Tuchman identifies three "principles" regarding anti-Jewish sentiment: (1) "It is vain to expect logic—that is to say, a reasoned appreciation of enlightened self-interest"—when it comes to anti-Semitism. (2) Appeasement is futile. "The rule of human behavior here is that yielding to an enemy's demands does not satisfy them but, by exhibiting a position of weakness, augments them. It does not terminate hostility but excites it." (3) "Anti-Semitism is independent of its object. What Jews do or fail to do is not the determinant. The impetus comes out of the needs of the persecutors and a particular political climate." (Newsweek, February 3, 1975)



Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz blames the Israelites for not protesting against Pharaoh's decision to enslave them. She says that the Jews were without heroes, without those who were brave enough to stand before Pharaoh and say no to his oppression. There was no resistance, no battle for their rights. As a result, Pharaoh easily did away with their freedoms and enslaved them. (*Studies in Shemot* pp. 15–17)

As we can see, a number of theories have been

developed by interpreters to explain the causes for Pharaoh's oppression of the Jewish people. In many ways the ancient story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt is a parallel to the treatment of Jews and other minorities by host nations. Oppression is often the tragic result of suspicions, jealousies, inferiority complexes, together with economic and social rivalries. Only when these are overcome can mutual trust and respect lead to peaceful and productive coexistence.

PEREK BET: *When Is Civil Disobedience Justified?*

The power of Pharaoh in Egypt was absolute. No one dared defy his rule or his whim. He was honored, not only as the king of Egypt, but as a god. His command was the law of the land. Those who disobeyed him were subject to death.

That is what makes the story of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, so unusual. Pharaoh commands them to kill every male child born to a Jewish woman. It is an easy order to follow. After all a new mother is weak and defenseless at the birth of her child. Yet, according to the Torah, both Shiphrah and Puah refused to carry out Pharaoh's command.

Why? What moved them to say no to Pharaoh, endangering their own lives by disobedience to his rule?

Many commentators believe that the answer is quite clear. The midwives were Jewish. As Jews they had no choice. No Jewish midwife could kill a Jewish baby. Jewish tradition forbids murder.



Rashi



Ibn Ezra



Ramban (Nachmanides)

This line of reasoning is followed by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nachmanides. They base their opinions on the earlier observation of the famous talmudic teachers, Rav and Samuel. Rav taught that Shiphrah was another name for Yocheved, Moses' mother, and that Puah was actually Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Samuel disagreed, holding that Puah was not Miriam but rather

Elisheva, Aaron's wife. (*Sotah* 11b, *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13)

Other rabbinic interpreters praise Shiphrah and Puah as brave Jewish heroines. These interpreters point out that the two midwives revived babies that were close to death because of difficult deliveries, and, when Pharaoh summoned them to his court and asked, "Why are you not obeying my orders?" they refused to answer. Instead, they defiantly offered him simple excuses: "The Hebrew women are vigorous. They have their babies before we arrive to help them."

Rabbi Isaac argues that Puah, who he believes was Miriam, not only defied Pharaoh, but also bravely criticized her own father, Amram. He maintains that Amram became so depressed about Pharaoh's order to kill all Jewish male babies that he stopped having sexual intercourse with his wife for fear that she would become pregnant. Then he divorced her. When other Hebrew slaves saw what he had done, they also decided to divorce their wives.

According to Rabbi Isaac, Puah confronted Amram and told him that he was acting more cruelly than Pharaoh. "The king ordered the death of all Jewish male children, but you are preventing the conception and birth of all children. Furthermore, because you are a leader, others are following you." Hearing her criticism, Amram immediately remarried his wife, and the other Israelite men followed his example. (*Exodus Rabbah* 1:13)

What the midwives did

The rabbis whose comments are included in the Midrash praise the midwives for many acts of kindness during the oppression of Pharaoh: (1) They took food and drink from the rich and brought it to the houses of the poor and hungry. (2) They prayed that each child would be born in good health and not crippled in any way. (3) They prayed that no child or mother would die at childbirth. (4) They made Abraham's hospitality a model for themselves by opening their homes to all who required food and shelter. (Exodus Rabbah 1:15)

Rabbi Akiba agrees with those who argue that Shiphrah and Puah were brave Jewish women. He even goes so far as to state that “God liberated the Jewish people from Egypt because of the heroic and righteous deeds of the women.” Akiba justifies his observation by pointing out that, when they saw their husbands suffering as slaves—overworked, starved, and beaten—they did not think selfishly of themselves, but they went out to comfort them in the fields. They took food. They brought them water and bathed them. They even insisted on having sexual intercourse, telling their husbands that they had to preserve the Jewish people. They did not allow their husbands to become physically weak or to lose faith in the future. For all of their disobedience to Pharaoh’s orders, Akiba says, these women are credited with the liberation from Egypt. (*Exodus Rabbah* 1:12)

Not all interpreters, however, agree that Shiphrah and Puah were Jewish. Nor is there any proof within the Torah text that the midwives were Yocheved, Miriam, or Elisheva. The meaning of the Hebrew of the Torah is unclear. While *meyaldot ha-Ivriyot* could mean “Hebrew midwives,” it could also mean “midwives of the Hebrews” and be understood as Egyptian midwives of the Hebrews.

Both the commentator-philosopher Philo, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt (20 B.C.E.–40 C.E.), and the historian-general Flavius Josephus (37 B.C.E.–105 C.E.) maintain that Shiphrah and Puah were Egyptian. Others agree.

Abravanel



Luzzatto

Both Don Isaac Abravanel and Samuel (Shemuel) David Luzzatto, known also as Shadal, argue that the midwives must have been Egyptian. “How,” they ask, “would Pharaoh order Jewish women to put to death children of their own people and not expect that they would make such a plan public?” It is only logical, they conclude, to assume that the Egyptian king gave his orders to Egyptians, whom he thought he could trust to carry them out.

They were converts

Some interpreters, noting that the Torah says that Shiphrah and Puah “feared God,” believe that they were Egyptians converted to Judaism. Out of reverence and loyalty to God, Jews are commanded to die rather than commit idolatry, incest, or murder. Therefore, the Egyptian midwives must have converted to the Jewish faith. (Imrei Noam, as in N. Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot, p. 34)

If Shiphrah and Puah were Jewish or converts to Judaism, then their defiance of Pharaoh’s order was a heroic act against the oppression of their people. By demanding that they murder every Jewish male newborn, Pharaoh had declared war on the Jewish people. Once Pharaoh began to oppress them, their loyalty was to their people and to God, not to the ruler or to the laws of Egypt. As Jews, they were victims. Their disobedience of Pharaoh’s orders was justified by their obedience to the law of God and to the survival of their people.

But, if Shiphrah and Puah were Egyptian, what justification might they offer for their “civil disobedience” to Pharaoh?

Modern biblical scholar Nahum M. Sarna observes that the Torah provides us with an explanation of their motivation. We are told that Shiphrah and Puah refused to follow Pharaoh’s order out of “fear of God.” They believed in the sanctity of human life. For them each human being was sacred and filled with possibilities for creativity and good. They acted out of a conviction that there is a “Higher Power” than Pharaoh “who makes moral demands on human beings” for the preservation of life. Their belief, Sarna explains, led them to reject the Egyptian ruler’s command to murder the newborn babies of the Hebrews. “Here we have history’s first recorded case of civil disobedience in defence of a moral cause.” (*Exploring Exodus*, pp. 24–26)

Questions for civil disobedience

Civil rights leader Bayard Rustin once suggested these questions as a guide for civil disobedience:

"(1) Have I exhausted the available constitutional methods of bringing about the desired change? (2) Do the people I urge to join me sincerely seek to improve the society or do they wish to excite passions that would destroy society itself? (3) What is likely to be the effect of the resistance on me, on others, and on the community? (4) Are my own motives and objectives clear to myself and to others; is my aim genuine social change or mere self-gratification? (5) Given that I oppose specific laws, am I prepared, out of my deep respect for law itself, to suffer the consequences of my disobedience." (New York Times Magazine, November 26, 1967)



Peli

Civil disobedience and liberation

We may understand how Hebrew women would muster the courage to disobey the king's orders and refuse to kill Hebrew children. But consider the significance of their deed if Shiphrah and Puah were valiant Egyptian women who rebuffed the great pharaoh. They did not say, "My country, right or wrong. . . ." The case of the Hebrew midwives is proof that dissenting individuals can resist evil and thus start a whole process of liberation. (Pinchas Peli, Torah Today, B'nai B'rith Books, Washington, D.C., 1987, p. 58)

The midwives bravely said no to Pharaoh's command that they kill every male Jewish baby. They refused to follow their national leader because they considered his order to be immoral. Instead of making excuses that they were "only following orders" or that "good citizens uphold the law even if they believe it is unjust," Shiphrah and Puah refused to carry out Pharaoh's demand. Forced into making a difficult decision, one that risked their safety, they chose the higher principle of saving life over carrying out Pharaoh's command. Their conviction that each human being is created

"in the image of God" led them to disobey Pharaoh's order to murder Jewish babies.

PEREK GIMEL: Moses: Fear, Courage, Self-Doubt, or Humility?

When Moses is called by God to return to Egypt to lead the Jewish people to freedom, his first response is a question: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" When God tells him, "I will be with you," Moses is unsatisfied and asks for proof. After God tells him what to say to the Israelites, Moses still has his doubts. "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?" he asks. Even after God shows him signs and gives him a staff with which to perform magical wonders, Moses continues to hesitate. He offers excuses. "I have never been a man of words," he says, hoping that God will choose someone else to lead the Israelites to freedom.

Why didn't Moses happily and quickly accept God's call to leadership? Why does he offer excuses? Is he afraid? Has he no courage? Is it his way of showing humility?



Zugot

What should a person do?

Rabbi Hillel taught: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But, if I am only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, when?"
(Avot 1:14)

Rabbi Judah taught: "Which is the right path to choose? One that is honorable in itself and also wins honor from others."
(Avot 2:1)

Rabbi Hillel said: "In a place where people are without courage, act bravely!"
(Avot 2:6)

Interpreters throughout the ages have wondered about Moses' reaction and response to God. For example, the rabbis who wrote the Midrash speculate that it took God an entire week to convince Moses to return to Egypt to work for the liberation of his people. Some of the rabbis explain that he hesitated because he did not want to hurt or anger his older brother, Aaron. Aaron had led the people in Egypt for eighty years. Moses felt that he could not suddenly return and announce that he was replacing him.

Others argue that Moses was truly humble. He feared that he did not possess the political or spiritual skills to liberate his people, especially the talent of public speaking. So he pleaded with God to choose someone else for the task. (*Exodus Rabbah* 3:14,15)

Rabbi Nehori, who lived in Israel during the second century C.E., claimed that Moses weighed the situation and decided that what God was asking him to do was impossible. The rabbi imagines Moses arguing with God: "How do You expect me to take care of this whole community? How shall I shelter them from the heat of the summer sun or the cold of winter? Where shall I find food and drink for them once I have taken them out of Egypt? Who will care for the newborn babies and all the pregnant women?" For Rabbi Nehori, Moses was a realist asking hard questions and concluding that he was being asked to take on an impossible mission. (*Exodus Rabbah* 3:4)

RASHBAM

Rashbam, the grandson of Rashi, also believes that Moses hesitated to accept God's call to liberate the Jewish people because he was a realist and saw no chance for success. Seeking to understand Moses' logic, Rashbam explains that Moses must have asked himself: "Is Pharaoh such a fool as to listen to me and send his slaves away to freedom?" Filled with such doubts, Moses, says Rashbam, concluded that his mission to free the Israelites would end in failure. (On Exodus 3:11)

Shadal provides another excuse for Moses' hesitation. He says that by the time God called Moses

to return to liberate his people, Moses was an old man. He was weak and felt infirm from many years of shepherding from early in the morning until late at night. Since he had spent most of his time in silence, he could not imagine himself standing before Pharaoh and arguing for the freedom of his people. So, argues Shadal, Moses made excuses to God and asked that someone else be sent to free the Jewish people. (On Exodus 4:10)

Modern writer Elie Wiesel speculates that Moses had another reason for refusing God's request that he return to Egypt. Wiesel writes that "Moses was disappointed in his Jews." When he had defended a Jew being beaten by an Egyptian, no Israelite came forward to help him. Instead, two Jews criticized him the next day for what he had done. Nor had any Israelites offered help to him when Pharaoh put out a warrant for his arrest. "Clearly," Wiesel comments, "Moses had no wish to return to his brothers, no wish to reopen a wound that had still not healed." (*Messengers of God*, Random House, New York, 1976, pp. 188-190)

Jewish tradition and humility

No crown carries such royalty as that of humility.
(Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah)

The summit of intelligence is humility. (Ibn Gabirol)

The test of humility is your attitude to those who are working for you. (Orhot Tzadikim 12c, ch. 2)

Humility for the sake of approval is the worst arrogance. (Nachman of Bratzlav)

In contrast to Wiesel's explanation of Moses' reluctance to return to Egypt, Rabbi Daniel Silver suggests that Moses' response to God was very typical of Middle Eastern behavior at the time. It was a matter of good manners to plead that you were unworthy of taking on major responsibilities. To say "I am not capable" or "I do not possess the right talents" or "let others more able than I do the job" was considered not only correct behavior but also a demonstration of strength of

character. Bragging about yourself or singing your own praises was unacceptable. It was a sign of weakness and false pride. So Moses demonstrated his fitness for leadership through his hesitation to accept God's command to free his people. His humility was proof that he was truly the right person for the job.

Prophetic reluctance

When Amos was questioned about being a prophet, he told Amaziah, the priest of Bethel: "I am not a prophet, and I am not the son of a prophet. I am a cattle breeder and a tender of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me away from following the flock. . . ." (Amos 7:14-15)

It is reported that, when Isaiah was chosen by God to become a prophet, he responded by saying: "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. . . ." His lips were then touched with burning coals, and he was sent on his way to speak to the people of Israel. (Isaiah 6:5-6,9)

After Jeremiah was appointed by God to become a prophet he responded: "Ah, Lord God! I don't know how to speak, for I am still a boy." And God answered him: "I will put My words into your mouth." (Jeremiah 1:6,9)

Moses' hesitation to take on the task of leading his people is very similar to the reluctance later expressed by the great prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. They also doubted their abilities and asked God to find other messengers. Like Moses, they feared that they were incapable of doing what God wanted of them. Their hesitation arose out of genuine modesty, a feeling that they were unworthy of the burden of leadership. Judging from their accomplishments, however, their humility was proof of their real strengths and of their loyalty to God.

Moses, too, has serious doubts about his ability to rescue his people. He knows that the challenge

is enormous and that the dangers are great. Pharaoh is the most powerful ruler in the world. The Israelites are weakened by years of slavery, beaten into submission. Moses' fears and hesitations are understandable. There is realism and wisdom in his modesty. He knows that the liberation of his people depends upon his ability to inspire their confidence, courage, and hope. He wonders if he will ever be able to convince them that God is calling them to march out of Egypt into freedom.

Great leaders are not blind to the difficulties they face. They realize the difficulties of the challenges before them. At times they feel unworthy and filled with doubts about themselves and those they lead. Sometimes they want to run away and hide rather than face the hard decisions that need to be made.

Perhaps that is how Moses felt when God called him to return to Egypt. He may have hesitated out of fear that he was incapable of doing what God asked or out of a sense that he could do nothing about a hopeless situation. In the end, however, he had the strength and faith to take on the task. He returned to Egypt and worked for liberation of his people.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Author Israel Zangwill has commented: "If there were not Jews, they would have to be invented [as a] guaranteed cause for all evils." Did Pharaoh need a scapegoat, or was it out of fear that he oppressed the Israelites? Would you agree that those who assimilate or abandon Jewish tradition may cause anti-Semitism?
2. Shiphrah and Puah refused to carry out Pharaoh's orders to kill Jewish babies. Under what other conditions is civil disobedience necessary and justified?
3. Moses expresses doubts about his ability to lead his people out of Egyptian oppression. How do you interpret his motives? Was his "humility" a demonstration of weakness or strength, of fear or leadership?