



# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Eight day of Pesach

Shabbat Pesach

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## Seeing God in Salvation and the Struggle

By Lisa Septimus

The beginning of *Sefer Shemot* is very purposeful in its choice of language, communicating a clear distinction between the previous book of the Torah and the beginning of a new era. *Sefer Bereishit* centers on building a family and that family's relationship with God. As part of that relationship, God had told *Avraham* that his children would go down to Egypt where they would be slaves, and so the beginning of *Sefer Shemot* seems to be the next natural stage. Indeed, the first few *pesukim* repeat the names of *Yaakov* and his children who traveled to Egypt. But the next *pasuk* abruptly reports that they all died. And the *pasuk* after that tells us that the Children of Israel multiplied wildly and rapidly, using six quick, consecutive adjectives relaying their fecundity.

We're told that the small and intimate family with whom God developed a relationship has been dramatically transformed and replaced by a quickly growing nation, the Nation of Israel. Still, an essential ingredient is missing at the beginning of the *Sefer Shemot*—God. Not only is *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* hidden from view, but the identity and personalities of the people of *Bnei Yisrael* seem hidden too. In fact, the only Jew mentioned by name in the first few chapters is *Moshe*. We are not told about the people; the only details we are given describe their remarkable fertility.

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The first chapter has 22 verses. Four separate verses mention this remarkable fertility, and several others address *Pharaoh's* fear of *Bnei Yisrael* multiplying.

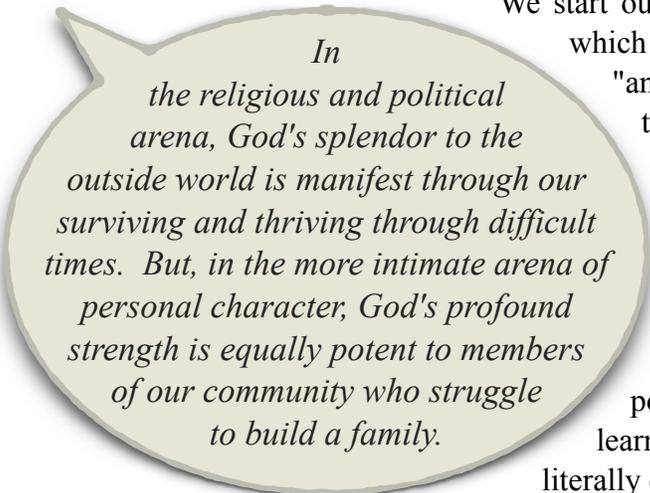
We can learn much from the different mentions of fertility in *Sefer Shemot*. The first mention is relayed to us as a dry fact; the second by *Pharaoh* reporting to his advisers on the magnitude of *Bnei Yisrael*; the third by the midwives about the "animalistic" ways the Jewish women are giving birth. Finally, at the end of the chapter, we are told that God increased *Bnei Yisrael* even more. With this progression, the Torah slowly reveals that God is responsible for the Jewish people's remarkable procreation and that He is using this fertility to signal the start of the most important motif in *Shemot*.

*Sefer Bereishit* focuses on building a family that worships God. *Sefer Shemot* focuses on the creation of a nation that worships God. In the first *perek*, the birth of the nation takes place, and as we read in the *Hagaddah* each *Pesach*, *matchil b'gnut u m'sayem b'shevach*. We speak of our humble origins (slavery) and end in praise (a nation with the Torah and a *Mishkan*). But the book is not just about a nation worshipping; it is about a nation that serves as a vehicle for God's revelation to the world. When instructing *Moshe* what to say to *Pharaoh* – who called himself a god – *Hashem* describes *Bnei Yisrael* as His firstborn (*Shemot* 4:22). Their extraordinary transformation into a nation becomes the first way of getting the Egyptians to recognize *Hashem*.

There is a certain irony that fertility is being used as a symbol of God's presence and relationship with *Bnei Yisrael*. After all, one of the more prominent motifs of God's connection with the *Patriarchs* and *Matriarchs* is the infertility they face and their continued commitment in the face of adversity. (*Bereshit* 22:22 and 35:15).

Procreation and raising a family are at the center of Jewish communal life. We celebrate the glory of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* at every *shalom zachor*, *brit millah*, *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, and wedding. Moreover, intergenerational family connection stands at the heart of Jewish life, with the holidays, especially *Pesach*. The *Hagaddah* is structured to keep the children asking, learning, and celebrating. But at this point, amidst the celebration of communal fertility, we may ask, where are the individuals and couples who do not have children or have struggled to build a family?

Let us remember that before we were a nation, we were a small but holy family. We were individuals that, despite extraordinary faith and fidelity to God, were not automatically given an abundance of blessings. In the religious and political arena, God's splendor to the outside world is manifest, among other ways, through the strength of *Bnei Yisrael* as a nation and its survival and thriving through difficult times. But, in the more intimate arena of personal character, God's profound strength is equally potent to members of our community who struggle to build a family—whether it's difficulty finding a spouse, struggling to conceive, or facing more significant challenges than most due to their children's struggles.



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We start our *Pesach seder* by reciting the famous *Ha Lachma anya*, in which we refer to the matzah as the "bread of affliction" and invite "anyone who needs" to join us and "partake in our *Pesach*." But the same term, *lechem oni*, is interpreted by *Shmuel* in the *Gemara* to mean "bread of edification," (*Pesachim* 115b). Often, affliction and edification go hand in hand and a *midrashic* reading of the opening recitation—"this is the bread of affliction/edification"—reminds us of precisely that. *Kol ditzrich yesei v'yifsach*; "anyone who knows what it means to struggle profoundly, they are in a particularly strong position to teach us; let them come and lead our *Pesach* learning." We invite them to do so by extending an invitation literally or by being aware of all they have to teach us by example.

If *Israel* is the nation best positioned to model a relationship with God amidst adversity, then *Bnei Yisrael* are also the best positioned to do so as individuals. They are the *Patriarchs* and *Matriarchs* of our day.

This *Pesach*, may all of us find the fortitude to endure and grow from whatever challenges afflict us, the wisdom to learn from the even fiercer challenges faced by others, and the strength to celebrate the birth of our nation even amidst those challenges.

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