



Callbacks to Creation

R. David Kasher – kasher@hadar.org

Parashat Shemot 5784

From the moment we begin the Book of Exodus, we are already being called back into Genesis. The very first words of Parashat Shemot are:

שמות א:א

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:

Exodus 1:1

And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Ya'akov, every man and his household came.

The first half of this verse is taken directly from Parashat VaYigash, during Ya'akov's actual journey down to Egypt, where the Torah gives us a list of all the members of his household:

בראשית מו:ח

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם יַעֲקֹב וּבָנָיו בְּכֹר יַעֲקֹב רְאוּבֵן:

Genesis 46:8

And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt: Ya'akov and his children: Ya'akov's eldest was Reuven.



The Ramban notes the replication:

רבמ"ן על שמות א:א

טעם ואלה שמות כי הכתוב ירצה למנות ענין הגלות מעת רדתם למצרים, כי אז גלו בראש גולים¹. ... אותו הפסוק בעצמו הוא שהחזיר בכאן, כי אף על פי שהם שני ספרים, הספור מחובר בדברים באים זה אחר זה.

Ramban Exodus 1:1

The reason it says “And these are the names...” is that the Torah wants to mark the subject of exile from the moment they descended to Egypt, for that is when they went into the first exile... So this exact verse is being repeated here, for though these are two books, the story is connected through events that happen, one after the other.

The Ramban, in his masterful fashion, manages to quickly give both a philosophical and a literary explanation for the repetition of the verse. Conceptually, he argues that the central problem in the Book of Exodus is not slavery, but exile. So it was the descent into Egypt in the earlier book that set the stage for the struggle the Children of Israel will be contending with in this book.

As a matter of reading strategy, then, he explains that the Torah uses the callback as a device to emphasize the interconnectedness of these two books. If the Torah wants us to remember the descent into Egypt, instead of a lengthy exposition, it can use six words from a scene in Genesis as a way of invoking that moment in the earlier narrative and importing its meaning into the text in front of us. Genesis and Exodus are thus connected not only through an ongoing storyline, but also through a set of interlocking word parallels.

¹ A paraphrase of Amos 6:7: יִגְלוּ בְּרֹאשׁ גָּלִים.



We can track the use of this callback technique as we continue into Parashat Shemot.² By the time we get to the seventh verse of our *parashah*, we are being called even further back into Genesis, all the way back to the seven days of creation. Listen for the Genesis language in this description of the Israelite birth rate in Egypt:

שמות א:ז

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם:

Exodus 1:7

The children of Israel were **fruitful**, and swarmed, and **multiplied**, and grew, very, very much, **and the earth became filled** with them.

The three bolded verbs tether us back to the first blessing (and the first commandment) that God gave to human beings: “פָּרוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת הָאָרֶץ” - be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28). The Children of Israel seem to be fulfilling the first divine mandate to reproduce, as if they were the very first humans, looking to fill an empty world. Our verse here in Exodus has also woven in some additional references from the creation narrative. The word, “*vayishraztu*” (and swarmed), reminds us of the fifth day of creation, when the water brought forth swarms of creatures (וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם שָׂרָץ). This language of swarming adds an exaggerating effect to our sense of the explosive birth rate here (Genesis 1:20).³ Then the superlative, “*me’od me’od*” (very, very much), hearkens back to the first usage of *me’od*: the notable addition of “**very** good” (Genesis 1:31) in God’s concluding evaluation of creation.⁴

² I remember vividly the class in which R. Nati Helfgot first led me through all these Genesis connections (and others) in Exodus, and left my head spinning. This Dvar Torah builds on the learning I am so grateful to have done with him.

³ It also may be the first hint that the Children of Israel were starting to be perceived as sub-human, like “vermin”—a precursor to the acceptability of their enslavement.

⁴ The doubled מְאֹד is also a callback to God’s promises to Avram in Genesis 17:2: “וְאָרְכָה אוֹתְךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד” - I will multiply you very, very much,” and Genesis 17:20: “וְהִפְרִיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֹתוֹ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד” - I will make [Yishmael] fruitful and multiply him very, very much.”



What a comparison: if the creation of the world was very good, then the creation of the people of Israel is very, very good.⁵

Having been called back to the “good”—that primary adjective God assigns to creation—we are now well prepared for a callback that moves us even further back in the creation narrative, all the way to the very beginning. In the second chapter of Exodus we are introduced to Moshe’s parents, a man and woman from the tribe of Levi:

שמות ב:ב

וַתֵּהֶר האִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא וַתְּצַפְנֶהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרֵחִים:

Exodus 2:2

And the woman conceived and bore a son, **and she saw** him—that **he was good**—and she hid him for three months.

It is hard for a reader of the Torah to come across the phrasing, “she saw him that he was good,” and not think of the opening words of the Torah, in the first moments of creation, just after God has spoken light into being:

בראשית א:ד

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב

Genesis 1:4

And God saw the light—that **it was good**.

The sages of the Talmud pick up on this connection and bring the light from the one verse into the other:

⁵ They are first called a “people” (עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) two verses later.



תלמוד בבלי סוטה יב.

וחכמים אומרים: בשעה שנולד משה, נתמלא הבית כולו אור. כתיב הכא: "ותרא אותו כי טוב הוא",
וכתיב התם: "וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב".

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a

The Sages say: When Moshe was born, the whole house filled with light. For it is written here, "She saw the light, that it was good," and it is written there, "And God saw the light, that it was good."

That primordial light was the first thing God ever created, and the first thing ever named as "good." If Moshe can also be "seen" to be good in this way, he must be radiating some of that divine light. Moshe's birth thus represents the beginning of a new creation—with his mother cast in the role of the creator.

That is a fittingly grand welcome for the future prophet, who will usher in a new era of liberation and revelation. But it is also a statement about the significance of birth itself. Every birth is the creation of a new world,⁶ for any one new life carries the potential to change the world.

As this child is marked with the "good" of the first light, the Torah is sounding a note of hope. In the very next verse, however, another Genesis callback puts all that hope in peril:

שמות ב:ג

וְלֹא יָכֹלָה עוֹד הַצִּפּוֹנִי וְתִקְחָה לּוֹ תִּבְתָּ גִמְא וְתַחֲמֶרָה בַּחֲמֶר וּבִזְפֹת וְתִשָּׂם בָּהּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד וְתִשָּׂם בְּסוּף עַל שִׁפְתֵי הַיָּאֵר:

⁶ This notion builds on the formulation in Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5: "Anyone who sustains a one life, the Torah considers it as if they had sustained an entire world."

Exodus 2:3

She could not hide him any longer, so she took a **basket** of wicker and caulked it with tar and pitch and placed the child into it, and placed it among the reeds by the banks of the Nile.

Moshe is thus sent down the Nile in a desperate attempt to save him from Pharaoh's infanticidal decree. One word in this verse takes the immediate danger of destruction and places it on a massive scale. The word תִּבְיָה (*teivah*), translated here as "basket," functions as a strong callback, for it is only used in one other context in the Torah: it is the word for the "ark" in the Noah story (see e.g. Genesis 6:14), the vessel that will keep one family alive as the rest of the world is annihilated. That, too, was a story of a world just created, and already facing destruction.

If Moshe's birth represents the creation of a new world, his placement into this "little ark" reminds us how precarious all new creation is. Worlds can be destroyed, hope can be lost, the light of salvation can all too easily be extinguished. Moshe is cast into the water to an uncertain fate, with all the hopes of the generation on him—just as Noah once was.⁷

The people of Israel, also newly created, will eventually flee Pharaoh's destructive force by rushing into water. As Moshe's basket now floats among the reeds (רִיטָב), so the Israelites will one day be plunged into the Sea of Reeds (רִיטֵי־יָם). When those sea waters subside the Children of Israel—like Noah's family—will emerge on the other side alive, but only after many

⁷ For more on the hopes pinned on Noah, see my essay, "Naming Noah," available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/naming-noah>, and R' Avi Stausberg's recent essay on the 10th of Tevet, "The Imperative of Hope," <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/imperative-hope>



others have drowned.⁸ Like Noah, they will then be given a new covenant—a new relationship to God, and a new set of laws.⁹ A new world will begin as the old world dies.

The beginning of Exodus is shot through with callbacks to Genesis to indicate that the formation of the people of Israel represents a new creation, an entirely new reality. But the stormy arc of Genesis also reminds us that for every creation there is the potential for destruction. Every new life is already haunted by the shadow of death. All of this is terribly fragile.

We build our little arks, we place our greatest hopes into them, and we cast them into the water.

⁸ My thanks to Jeremy Tabick for suggesting this connection.

⁹ Noah will also be told, after the flood: “פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ שִׂרְצוּ בָאָרֶץ - be fruitful and multiply and swarm upon the earth” (Genesis 9:7; see also: Genesis 8:17). He is the only figure, other than the Children of Israel, for whom all these verbs are used together.

