

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Shemot
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פרשת שמות
י"ט בטבת תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 1:1-6:1

In this *parasha*, Bnei Yisrael become slaves to Pharaoh; Hashem instructs Moshe to liberate the people; Moshe and Aharon approach Pharaoh, who refuses their request for liberation.

We can all list the cast of characters involved in the Exodus: Moshe, Aharon, Miriam, Amram (Moshe's father), Yocheved (Moshe's mother), Yitro (Moshe's father-in-law), Tziporah (Moshe's wife), Yehoshua (Moshe's right-hand man), Shifra and Puah (the midwives in chapter 1), and, of course, Paro (Pharaoh).

The only character on this list whose name we do not actually know is Paro. Despite what many people think, "Paro" is not the name of the king. It is the Egyptian appellation for "king," much like "Czar" in Russia or "Caesar" in Rome.

There is much speculation about the Pharaohs in the Torah and who they were historically. There are actually three Pharaohs involved in the Biblical story: the one who made Yosef his viceroy (*Bereshit* chapter 41), the one who "did not know Yosef" (*Shemot* 1:8), and the one who followed that Pharaoh (*Shemot* 2:23).

Current scholars believe that the first Pharaoh mentioned above was a member of the Hyksos, an Asian tribe that invaded the Nile Delta and unseated the indigenous king for a few generations. The Pharaoh who "did not know Yosef" is believed to be Ramses II (reigned 1279-1213 BCE), who re-conquered Egypt and exiled the Hyksos. This explains why he did not know Yosef, as Yosef had served under a foreign king. It would also explain why he was so leery of foreigners, as the Torah says (*Shemot* 1:10), "פֶּן-יִרְבּוּהוּ, וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מְלַחְמָה וְנוֹסִף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ..." – lest they multiply and if war comes about, they will join with our enemies and fight against

us...” Further, it was traditional for the ruler to name a city after himself, and we know that one of the cities that the Bnei Yisrael built was called Ramses (*Shemot* 1:11).

The Pharaoh of the Exodus is currently believed to be Merneptah (reigned 1213-1203 BCE), based on the discovery of the Merneptah Stele, an engraved black granite stone found at Thebes in 1896. On this stone is written “[The People of] Israel is wasted, bare of seed,” which, scholars surmise, would be written by a king who is boasting about his victories, even in the face of defeat. However, there are some scholars who believe that the Merneptah Stele was erected by Amenhotep III (reigned in the 14th century BCE), which would make him the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

The Torah could have obviated all of this deductive work by simply naming the various Pharaohs. Why are their identities clouded in mystery? One opinion states that it minimizes the Pharaoh’s self-aggrandizement and power. We know even the names of the lowly midwives with whom he spoke, yet we don’t know his identity. It puts into stark contrast the tension between the power of God and the power of the Pharaoh. It makes clear to everyone that these were men, not demi-gods, and that they had no divine power whatsoever.

As the Torah will elucidate in the portions read over the next three weeks, God’s power reigned more obviously and destructively against Pharaoh and his subjects than ever before or since.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think the Torah does not mention the names of any of the Pharaohs?
- If the Bnei Yisrael left Egypt and crossed the Reed Sea while the Egyptian army drowned, why did Merneptah write on the Stele that the people of Israel had been wiped out?
- Why did the Pharaohs name cities after themselves? Can you think of other people who have cities named after them? Why do we do this in the modern age?