

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Shmot

A New Book, An Old Story

This parashah is the first in a new book. It represents a new beginning, not only of the narrative, but of the nation whose narrative it contains. And yet, so many of the elements of Shmot – both the parashah and the entire book which bears its name – seem strangely familiar, yet different to their parallels in the book of Bereishit. Are these elements of importance, or are they merely generic, stock “props” of epic literature? In other words, are there narrative elements in common between Bereishit and Shmot, or is our overactive imagination deluding us? And if these elements are, in fact, revisited, what is their significance? How is this new book connected to the previous book? To what extent is this a new beginning, and to what extent is Shmot a thematic continuation of Bereishit?

Let us consider some of the smaller details that may or may not connect the two books: Shmot finds the nascent nation on the banks of the Nile, a life-giving river that is reminiscent of the rivers that flowed from Eden and watered the land. In each of the books, we are introduced to one special tree-

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a tree that is unique, a tree that somehow enlightens. Although the burning bush is not off limits, Moshe immediately understands that it is to be observed from a respectful distance, and not to be approached. Similarly, when his staff is transformed into a serpent, Moshe recoils; perhaps he is reminded of an old adversary. We have seen the serpent before and the results were devastating.

The larger picture bears far more resemblance than the details that comprise it. In a sense, the entire Exodus story has already been told in microcosm in Bereishit, and the book of Shmot may be seen as an expansion, a retelling on a national scale, of the same story: Avraham and Sarah had gone down to Egypt due to a famine. After arriving there, Avraham sensed that his life, as a male, was in danger, while Sarah was the object of the Egyptians' desire. As a result of Pharoh's treatment of Avraham and Sarah, the palace was struck with plagues and Avraham and his family left with great wealth, and Hagar, quite possibly the princess of Egypt, throws in her lot with Avraham and Sarah, and returns with them to become a part of their household in the Land of Canaan.

So, too, with the descendants of Avraham and Sarah generations later: To escape famine in the Land of Israel, the sons of Israel went to Egypt, where they flourished. The Egyptian king plotted to dispose of the males and co-opt the females. God then struck the Egyptians with fearsome plagues, and the Children of Israel left Egypt with their heads held high, greatly enriched by the ordeal. The Egyptian princess who had saved Moshe and raised him in the palace, joined the Israelites on their grand march to freedom and independence.

Other episodes from Bereishit have echoes in the book of Shmot as well: In Bereishit, the terrible flood eradicated almost all of mankind; in Shmot, the Jewish People was threatened with annihilation by the decree to cast all the male children into the raging waters of the Nile. In Bereishit, one righteous man was singled out, and he and his family were saved by the ark in which they weathered the storm that destroyed the rest of the world. In Shmot, one righteous child is saved in an ark, but he becomes the catalyst for the salvation not only of his own family, but for the entire House of Israel. As is so often the case in Shmot, the

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particular becomes magnified. Personal narratives from the book of Bereishit are the buds from which the larger narrative of a nation will blossom.

Shmot, then, is a new book that revisits and develops old themes, shifting from micro to macro concerns. And yet, the resolutions in the Book of Shmot are far more hopeful: Whereas Bereishit recounted cataclysmic destruction of civilization - total destruction and rebirth after the “purifying” waters of the flood, the annihilation of the generation of the Tower of Babel, the eradication of Sodom and Ammorrah - Shmot is essentially a tale of redemption. The lad in the ark will not merely save himself, he will see to it that the entire Children of Israel make it through the sea. Time and again, Moshe will avert the annihilation of the sinners and reject God’s offer to start a new nation through him, much like He did with Noah. In the Book of Shmot, the redemption of one leads to the redemption of many; the emergence of Moshe and the emergence of the Nation of Israel hold within them the key to the redemption of all of humanity.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-shmot.html>