# Issues in Parashat Sh’mot

## Monotheism, Moses, and the Universality of Justice

### Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, ז״ל

On the surface, the most gripping aspect of the Exodus narrative is the miracles it recounts: the ten plagues, the division of the Reed Sea, water from a rock, and food (manna) from heaven. But Maimonides rightly notes that the miracles are secondary. What is primary in the Book of Exodus is another aspect of monotheism altogether: the idea of a single God whose sovereignty extends everywhere.

In the ancient world, each nation had its gods, and they were territorially limited. They were gods of this place, not that. This is the essential meaning of Pharaoh's remark to Moses when he demands the Israelites' release in the name of God. Pharaoh replies: "Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." This does not mean that he did not know who the God of the Israelites was. It means that within Egypt, the gods of Egypt ruled.

The Book of Exodus is the first time we hear of a God not ter­ritorially bound, a God of anywhere and everywhere. The point of the plagues is precisely to show this. They are not (with the sole exception of the tenth plague) to punish the Egyptians or Pharaoh. They are to show that God—the one God—is everywhere: "that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

This is the meaning of Moses' remark in Deuteronomy: "Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation?" (Deuteronomy 4:34). Each nation had its gods, but none except Israel worshipped the God of everywhere and everyone, and this is a political point, not just a theological one. It establishes the concept of justice as a universal ideal transcending the idea of national sovereignty. To put the point in the language of today: the exodus represents the first inter­national intervention in the name of human rights.

The first time this happened in secular politics was the United Nations intervention in Kosovo, 1999. The point is significant. The moral justification for international intervention is based on the Nuremburg Principles, established after the Holocaust by the United Nations. These included the rule that there are crimes against human­ity, for the commission of which it is no excuse for the perpetrator to claim that he or she was "merely obeying orders." This principle—that one is morally bound to disobey an order that involves a crime against humanity—is itself part of the Exodus narrative. The two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who disobey Pharaoh's order to kill every male Israelite child, represent the first recorded incident of civil disobedience. Note here, as elsewhere in the Torah, divine justice and human justice are seen as essentially the same. God has powers and knowledge no human has; but God and humanity are bound by the same moral laws.

The concept of justice leads us directly to the central human figure of the drama of Exodus, namely Moses. Moses represents a new form of leadership of a kind not found in Genesis. In Genesis the patriarchs are just that: fathers of children, heads of an extended family. With the exception of the war fought by Abraham in Genesis 14, they are not political figures. As soon as the Israelites become a people—600,000 adult males, a significant force—they need a new kind of leader. That is what Moses was: a unique combination of prophet, liberator and lawgiver, the voice of God to his people, the voice of his people to God, and the represen­tative of both in his long confrontation with Pharaoh.

We are told little of his early life, but every detail and nuance counts. We see him as a young man intervening three times in the cause of justice: first, defending an Israelite against an Egyptian, a second time defending an Israelite against a fellow Israelite, and on the third occasion defending Jethro's daughters against the local Midianite shep­herds. With absolute economy, all the permutations are covered. Moses intervenes to protect people against attack, whether the victims or the perpetrators belong to his people or not. The story of the Exodus is about impartial justice, and Moses is a man of justice, prepared to act and take risks for its sake.

Three other details are fundamental. Moses, adopted by Pha­raoh's daughter, is brought up in Pharaoh's household. This means, as Ibn Ezra notes, that he has not experienced slavery or internalized its self-abasement. There is nothing hesitant about his manner. He has been brought up in the royal court. He is used to leadership. He is, as far as the Israelites are concerned, an outsider, and perhaps only an outsider can be an agent of change, the transformative leader they need.

Second, he spends most of his adult years far away, as a shepherd in Midian. He knows the ways of the desert. He has had time to mature, to reflect, to compare the urban civilization of Pharaoh's court with the nomadic life of the Midianites. He has had his own wilderness years [a reference to Winston Churchill’s political isolation in the 1920s and 1930s], and this too is part of his apprenticeship as the man who would eventually take the Israelites through their collective wilderness years.

Third is the strange detail of the encounter with God at the burn­ing bush, when Moses says repeatedly that he is "not a man of words," he is "heavy of mouth and of tongue," Whether or not this is to be construed literally, it signals to us that the words Moses speaks are not his own. Just as Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel could not have children naturally, to signify that their children were in some sense the children of God, so Moses cannot naturally speak, to signal that his words are the words of God.

One other feature of Moses' early life should not be overlooked. Though he is the central figure in the drama of the exodus, there is a striking emphasis on the roles of six women, without whom there would not have been a Moses. There is Yocheved, Moses' mother, who had the courage to have a child at a time when all male Israelite children faced death. There is Miriam, Moses' sister, who followed his fate and ensured that he knew who his people were. There are Shifrah and Puah, the two midwives, who defy Pharaoh's decree of genocide. There is Tzipporah, Moses' Midianite wife, who accompanies him on his mission and at one stage saves his life. And most remarkably, there is Pharaoh's daughter, who rescues Moses and adopts him, knowing that in doing so she is acting in contravention of her father's will.

These are six stories of outstanding moral courage and they are all about women, at least two of whom, Tzipporah and Pharaoh's daughter, are not Israelites (the identity of the midwives is left uncertain, perhaps deliberately so). It is the women who recognize the sanctity of life and refuse to obey orders that desecrate life. It is the women who, fearing God, are fearless in the face of human evil. It is the women who have compassion—and justice without compassion is not justice. It is as if the Torah were telling us that Moses, the supreme embodiment of the pas­sion for justice, is not enough. There must be "a different voice"—the voice of empathy, sympathy and attachment, the values that make us human, if we are to create a society in which justice has a huma

## The signs: For whom were they meant and why?

### W. Gunther Plaut

In human terms, the revelation of God at the bush is a vision seen by Moses. It was his, and his alone; he hears a voice that he knows to be the voice of God. That is the basis of the story, and the message he hears is its core. All attempts to externalize his experience, there­fore, are of secondary interest.

Some interpreters, for instance, would have Moses seeing certain crys­tals that formed on desert plants and, in the evening light, mistaking their glow for a mys­terious fire that appeared to bum without consuming the bush. Such speculation leads nowhere; what is important is that Moses ex­periences the vision as a divine call. Those who deny that God can address human beings will not be convinced by any assertion to the con­trary; whereas those who believe in a God who can be heard by mortals will likely find the ac­count a realistic description of the encounter. The circumstances are marvelous and mysteri­ous, and Moses is afraid.

The divine self-disclosure reveals a God who cares for—and is attracted to—humankind; who takes account of our frailty, yet holds us in high regard. It is a relationship based on divine love, given freely and, at this juncture, outside a framework of reciprocal obligation.

This extraordinary event, however much it has awed Moses, does not quite accomplish its purpose of bending Moses to God’s will. The series of objections he raises before he accepts the mission reveals a person who not only feels unworthy of the task, but also has doubts about the efficacy of the mission it­self. Although Moses has been categorically told that Israel would listen to his message, he demurs and says, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?"

In contrast to Abraham, who never questioned his being singled out by God and never sought to learn the divine essence by asking for God's name, Moses is frankly doubtful; like Jeremiah later on, he resists the call and not long thereafter regrets that he ever agreed to accept his commission. Rashi, therefore, described Moses as one who had little faith, and the Talmud considered his response to God to have been a reason for not being allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Rashi's assessment is too simple, however. Resist­ance of the prophet to the divine demand is a complex fabric woven of faith and doubt, anxiety and a sense of unworthiness. The Bible doesn’t depict its heroes as cardboard saints who answer the divine challenge without question. (Abra­ham's apparent readiness to sacrifice his son is not necessarily an exception. He had evidently, by this time, reached a firm and unshakable faith.) Moses at the bush is at the beginning of his knowledge of God, and, while he is struck with awe and even fear, he remains also very much himself and preserves his right to refuse initially and then to doubt and question. He never loses this independence, even long after he becomes the intimate of his God.

It is most likely, therefore, that the “signs” God gives him were more for him and less for anyone else.

The Torah assumes that a prophet is capable of performing extraordinary signs, though signs alone do not confirm his authenticity, for even false prophets might perform them (see Deut. 13:2 ff.). It was an old and widespread tradition that heroes were capable of unusual feats. They could lift or throw objects of great weight, fight several opponents, kill dragons, stretch small provisions so that they could feed the multitude. Moses had already demonstrated such strength.

The signs appear to be meant first and fore­most to convince Israel rather than Pharaoh. Egypt’s king need not believe, for he will in any case be coerced. But Israel's belief is essential for bringing salvation about, and even God cannot coerce such faith. Hence God too cannot be certain and adds a third sign in case they refuse to heed. At the same time we cannot overlook the later story that Egypt's magicians could du­plicate the signs, at least in part. Of what use then were such signs if their performance did not in fact guarantee the undoubted authenticity of Moses?

We must conclude that doing wonders was a ritual that Moses would be expected to perform, but which in itself was not the real proof of his mission. The Midrash, therefore, said that this proof came from what Moses said, not from what he did. The Israelites had a tradition that some day they would be redeemed, and Moses convinced them that the time had come. Not by accident does the text use the same words for God's readiness to act as it had for the promise of future redemption made by Joseph in his dying hour; even as Joseph had said “[God] will surely take care of you," now God says "I have most assuredly [or "indeed"] taken note," as Exodus 3:16 should be rendered.

The signs, then, were of secondary importance in convincing Israel and of no significance in convincing Pharaoh.

Perhaps their primary im­pact was on Moses himself. It is he who in a moment of great anxiety and upheaval needs some reassurance. The signs help him to gain confidence and to overcome his latest objection. They are a temporary device, of psychological import for him, and of ceremonial meaning to the people. In neither case, however, are they of the essence.

## The Rod of Moses and Pharaoh's Rule

### James K. Hoffmeier

A statue of a person

Description automatically generated with low confidence

: A statue of Rameses II shows him with a miniature shepherd's crook.

[It is difficult to picture Moses without a rod in his hand. It is when Moses is keeping Jethro's sheep that we are first introduced to the rod (or staff, matteh in Hebrew). God asks Moses, “‘what is in your hand?’ He said, 'A rod.’” It is then transformed into a serpent when cast upon the ground. This staff would later be used numerous times in the contest between Moses and Pharaoh. Apparently, Moses was carrying a common shepherd's crook, but it is much more than that. Its significance must be considered from an Egyptian perspective.]

Throughout Pharaonic history, one of the regular symbols of kingship was a small shepherd's crook. These are ubiquitous in royal statuary and iconography. William Hayes argued that the "adoption of the shepherd's crook as a divine and royal scepter and as a general symbol of authority goes back far into Egypt's pre­history.'' He finds this emblem in the iconography of the god Andjety, who is associated with shepherds from the eastern Nile Delta. This same crook is attested in Old Kingdom herding scenes, but from the Middle Kingdom onward, two types of crooks are regularly found in scenes where men tend cattle and various types of fowl. In the Middle Kingdom, the long crook is still found in the hand of mon­archs, but starting late in the Old Kingdom, this particular crook becomes reduced in size to that of a scepter carried by royalty and divinities (as Rameses II holds in the photo). In the Eighteenth Dynasty some high-ranking officials, like the Viceroys of Kush (Nubia) are shown holding this staff, clearly symbolizing authority or perhaps their roles as representatives of the king.

This staff or scepter originates in a pastoral context, as the earliest pictorial ev­idence suggests. The shape of the hieroglyph and tomb illustrations of the crook has been confirmed by actual dis­coveries of this staff from the Middle Kingdom.

In the "Wisdom for Merikare," c.. 2200, humanity is described in the follow­ing manner: "Well nourished is mankind, god's flock." If humans were considered god's "flock," then the association of the king as shepherd and humans as the flock can easily be made. John Wilson draws upon this idea as a chapter title, "The King as the Good Shepherd," in his classic book, The Culture of Egypt. He introduced this chapter by discussing how the role of the king had significantly changed from the Old to Middle Kingdoms.

Several points of Egyptological significance emerge. First, the crook/scepter hieroglyph is used in writing "rule" and "ruler," as well as in the word "scepter." Might the staff of Moses in the plague narratives present it­self as a challenge to the very rulership of Pharaoh?

Second, the Egyptian magi­cians initially think of Moses as just another magician, until they are unable to du­plicate or stop the third plague, gnats. Exodus 8:18 reads: "The magicians tried by their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. And the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'" B. Couroyer proposed an Egyptian understanding lies at the root of this statement. For him, the finger is God's power manifested through the rod. If Couroyer is correct, then there is additional support for my suggestion that the rod of Moses represented a challenge to Pharaoh's rulership and his ability to maintain order.

A final intriguing point presents itself for consideration. The Egyptian word hk3 (with a dot under the h) meant "ruler" and "scepter," while the hk3 (with a dot under the k) is the word for magic. A word­play may well have been involved between the Egyptian words, which would ren­der the differences between them inconsequential. Perhaps the Egyptian magicians saw the actions of this staff as merely magic at first, but when they could no longer duplicate Moses and Aaron's wonders, they saw it as a divine act. Clearly, God had shown himself to be the "ruler" of Egypt, and not Pharaoh.

It was this same Pharaoh in Exodus 5:2 that said, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go." The plagues finally convinced this intransigent monarch to let Israel depart. But in the final showdown at the sea, God discloses to Moses the ra­tionale for this final act of judgment: "I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh" (Exodus 14:17- 18). Indeed, the gods of Egypt and their power are shown to be impotent in the plagues narrative. In the final analysis, however, the "signs and wonders" represent God's triumph over Pharaoh, as is emphasized by the twice repeated claim "I will get glory over Pharaoh."

## The Divine Name Ehyeh

### W. Gunther Plaut

In this first theophany, the divine Presence is called by three names: "God" (Elohim). "the Eternal" (the Tetragrammaton, God’s 4-letter name we pronounce “Adonai”). and the name "Ehyeh." (The study of the latter two names has commanded an enormous amount of scholarly atten­tion without, however, producing anything ap­proaching a consensus.) Of these, only the last name is new to Moses, the other two are familiar to him and are not explained: Elohim is the basic generic name for any god and hence also for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and "the Eternal"—the Tetragrammaton—is God's own, personal name, known to him, but, as chapter 6 will show, not yet understood in its full meaning. Here it is merely restated that, whatever the additional and newly revealed name Ehyeh betokens, God's own name will not be affected, it will remain the same (verse 15).

The name Elohim is known to the reader from the story of Creation on. It is an expansion or variant of the name El, which generally describes the godhead in Semitic languages (Ugaritic El; Babylonian Elu; Arabic Allah). Prevailing scholarly opinion connects it with a root meaning "to be strong." In the Hebrew Bible, Elohim is used both for the God of Israel and generically for the gods of the nations.

The Tetragrammaton is the distinguishing name by which the Israelites called their God. After the theophany related in chapter 3, Moses will bring the message of salvation to Israel as well as to Egypt, and the result of this mission will necessitate a further revelation of God, who (in chapter 6) will give to the old name a new dimension.

In the first meeting with God, Moses is sat­isfied that his knowledge of the divine name—­that is, his knowledge of God's nature—will be sufficient to arm him for the mission ahead, though we are not told how a knowledge of the Name, if it was unknown to the people, would validate Moses' claim. But, in any case, upon his inquiry he isn’t given the clear answer he seeks; instead he is told that the Eternal may, in addition to being and continuing to be “the Eternal,” also be known as Ehyeh or Ehyeh-­Asher-Ehyeh. This revelation only deepens the mystery, for the new name isn’t further ex­plained. Still, Moses makes no additional inquiry, and we may therefore assume that the name was meaningful to him, or at least that he believed he understood its import. What then was it? Over the centuries, a number of answers have been attempted, though none has won universal acceptance.

Ehyeh is quite evidently the first person singular of the word "to be." One problem is that the tense isn’t clear; it could mean "I am" or "I will be" (or "I shall be"). This uncer­tainty is multiplied in the name *Ehyeh-Asher-­Ehyeh*, for the first *Ehyeh* might be one tense (for instance, "I am") and the second another (for instance, "I will be"), or they might both be the same tense ('I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be"). To add to the difficulty, *asher* could mean either "who" or "what."

The majority of the commentators have un­derstood both occurrences of Ehyeh to convey the future tense and to mean: "I will be what tomorrow demands," that is, God emphasizes being capable of responding to human need. This was the message, they say, Moses was to take back to the enslaved people and thereby assure them that the God whom they called “the Eternal” was also "Ehyeh," who would be ready in the near future to redeem them. A variant interpretation was offered by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch who saw a philosophical meaning in Ehyeh-Asher-­Ehyeh: "I will be what I want to be," that is, the name stresses a divine freedom to act as God wills, in contrast to earthly creatures who are never totally free. But is it likely that Moses could take such an opaque message to the peo­ple and satisfy their thirst for the knowledge that God was still *their* God?

It appears therefore that the impact of this story lies elsewhere. The most important factor to be taken into consideration is that, though Moses is given the new name to take back to Israel, not a single instance is reported in the Torah where he is shown to have actually used it. From this we can conclude that the revelation was never meant for the people at all, nor did Moses really inquire for the sake of the people.

Moses had asked for himself, and the answer he re­ceives is also meant for him, for God understands what Moses wants, and the very vagueness of the answer is purposeful. When Moses asks, "What shall I say to them?" he is asking to satisfy his own needs and does so by pretending to ask for the sake of others.

This view alone makes it possible to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of God's mysterious self-revelation. Moses wants to know the nature of God by inquiring about the inner meaning of the divine name, but God will not be fully known and therefore evades a clear answer. The response is intentionally vague, for it is a response to Moses only, and not a name suitable for communication. "You ask to know My name," God says, "and I will tell you: I am what I am, I will be what I will be. And when you tell your people of this experience tell them it is the same Adonai they know about." God self­-manifests to Moses as to no other human being (Deut. 34:rn), but God remains wrapped in mystery even to Moses. It is an aspect of God's freedom to conceal the divine essence, and hence Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh must remain elusive. There­fore, it is well to keep the divine response in its original form: Convey it, untranslated and inexplicable, as Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh. The Midrash conveys a similar interpretation: while called by many names, God is what God is by virtue of deeds. That is to say, you cannot really know God without an experience of encounter in your own life.

In the unfolding tale of redemption this knowledge—or, rather, limitation of knowl­edge—which Moses grasps will prove to be in­sufficient. After the message of deliverance is brought to Israel and to Pharaoh, the people in their increased suffering and the king in his in­creased stubbornness lack a comprehension of God's might. God will therefore reveal another aspect of the Tetragrammaton, and we shall learn of it at the second revelation in chapter 6.

## The Bridegroom of Blood

### W. Gunther Plaut

There can be little doubt that the cryptic telling of this incident represents a contraction of an originally fuller tale. The abbreviation was probably due to the anthropomorphic nature of the story, which resembles the attack a divine agent made on Jacob, but lacks the earlier tale's figurative overtones. In both cases, the demonic aspect is prominent: Both Jacob and Moses are on their way home; as in similar ancient tales, both heroes on their return have to master some challenge; and both have to overcome an onslaught by mys­terious powers that block their way But be­yond this, while in the tale of Jacob "the man" who wrestles with him is an ambiguous figure, the tale of Moses is itself highly ambiguous and open to various explanations.

The major prob­lem arises from the lack of identifiable subjects: We cannot be sure who was attacked (Moses or his son, and, if the latter, which one); who was the assailant (God or an unnamed messenger as in the Jacob story); and to whose legs the fore­skin was touched (Moses' or the child's).

Nor can we be certain that it was the son's circumcision that was at stake. It has been suggested that Moses himself had never been sub­jected to the rite and that his son's circumcision was here substituted for his own. This may be hinted at in the Torah, for when describing the speech defect of Moses it calls him twice a man of "uncircumcised lips" (6:12, 30); thus the expression "bridegroom of blood" (*chatan damim*) may refer to Moses.

This explanation is made quite plausible by the etymological relationship, in Arabic, of circumcision and bridegroom. (The Hebrew word for bridegroom, chatan, is related to the Arabic chatana, a circumciser.) If in­deed Moses had never been circumcised, then the passage might be understood as follows: At a night encampment on the way, the Eternal en­countered Moses and made him deathly ill. So Tzipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' genitals with it, saying [to Moses], "You are now truly for me a bridegroom [you have been cleansed by the blood of this sub­stitute circumcision]." And when Moses recovered. she said: "Bridegroom of blood at cir­cumcision" (4:26).

The majority of commentators have held, however, that Moses' omission to have his child circumcised was the reason for the attack and that God, through a messenger, was the one who threatened to punish him. Moses, so it is argued, had lived under Midianite law—hence the child was called ha son—and circumcision of young children may not have been the custom in that land, as it was customary in Egypt. For this reason also, says the Midrash, Moses called his first-born Gershom ("I was a stranger there") and his second son—who was presumably born outside Midian and therefore circumcised properly—Eliezer ("My God is help"). All in all, this incident is said to highlight the overriding importance of the sacred rite, which is greater than that of any single person, even a Moses.

The most likely meaning of the story, how­ever, is to be found elsewhere and can, in fact, be deduced from the context. Immediately pre­ceding is the statement that Israel is God's first­born son and that, because Pharaoh will refuse to grant him freedom to worship, his own first­born will be taken.

Moses now is on his way to deliver this dictum, and on this bridge between message and confrontation his own first-born is brought into the orbit of God's claim. Gershom, like all Israel's first-born males later on, is God's own, and his blood averts the angel of death even as the blood on the doorposts will later avert calamity from the first-born of Israel.

We have here, then, a tale that, though all too brief in its present form, is filled with the symbolism of the first-born, from Pharaoh to Israel to Moses, and all leading to the climactic and dark events of the night of reckoning in Egypt.