YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

**PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**Shades of Geula**

**By Rav Alex Israel**

This week we excitedly begin a new book of the Torah. When we read a book, any book, someone might ask us: "What is it about?" It is sometimes difficult to encapsulate a book in a short phrase or comment, but it is a task that forces us to think about the central messages and examine the storyline of the book in question. This is true about the Torah as well. Many of our sages tried to give titles or themes for the books of *Chumash*. As we begin *Sefer* *Shemot*, we might want to think about the central theme, the content of *Sefer* *Shemot*. What is the motif of the *Sefer*?

In his introduction to the *Sefer*, the Ramban makes this comment:

"The Book of *Shemot* is dedicated to the first *Galut* (Exile)…and to the Redemption from it."

Here the Ramban sets out the theme of the *Sefer* – Exile and Redemption, *Galut* and *Geula*. But the Ramban adds the following explanation:

"The Exile is not complete (ended) until they return to their land and to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers. Now when they left Egypt even though they had left the House of Slavery, they were still considered to be in a State of Exile, for they were in a foreign land, wandering in the Wilderness. However when they reached Mt. Sinai and set up the Mishkan, and God returned to them, establishing his Shekhina amongst them, THEN they returned to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers i.e. the presence of God upon their tents…. And THEN they were considered to be redeemed."

In conjunction with this Ramban I would like to make a few explanations and add some contemporary insights:

I.

First, the Ramban casts the Book of *Shemot* as a book of Exile AND Redemption. *Shemot* is much more than Exodus. It is not simply about *Yetzi'at* *Mitzrayim*, the escape from Egyptian slavery, for were that the case, if it were simply about Freedom, the book could close in Chapter 12 as the Bnei Yisrael cross the Egyptian border! But the book continues to Chapter 40. It talks about *Matan* *Torah*, Torah laws (*Mishpatim* etc.), the construction of the Mishkan. Why? How does this fit in to the Exodus?

Maybe we can gain some insight this by referring to an idea that was discussed by one of the great philosophers of the Twentieth Century. In a celebrated essay written in the 1960s, Isaiah Berlin argued that there were, in essence two types of Liberty: negative and positive. Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty when nothing imposes outside limits or restrictions to one's free actions. But Positive liberty is the possibility of acting - or the fact of acting - in such a way as to take control of one's life and realise one's fundamental purposes. It expresses a positive world-view, a goal and a plan to realise that goal.

*Shemot* is not simply about Freedom, Exodus. That is Negative Liberty. The Ramban explains this is a book about Exile AND Redemption. The question is not whether man is free. The question is what man is planning to do with that Freedom.

The Structure of Sefer Shemot reflects this quite clearly. If we can sketch a very rough structure of the book, it contains three themes, three major episodes:

Ch.1-15 The Slavery and Exodus

Ch.16-24 Journey to Sinai, the Torah and Revelation.

Ch.25-40 The Mishkan (Tabernacle)

Freedom becomes Redemption when it leads to something higher. In our case, we are talking about Torah (Mt. Sinai) and God's Shekhina, his proximity, expressed by God's manifest Presence in the Midst of the Camp, as represented by the Mishkan.

The story of *Sefer* *Shemot* is not merely the manner by which we became free. It is not simply about the escape from Egypt. It is the story of the development of a Jewish *raison d'etre*, a meaningful and purposeful Jewish culture, a sacred way of life.

II.

Here we come to a second point that is worth dwelling upon as we read the Ramban's introduction. The Ramban is a little confusing as he defines Redemption. First he says:

"The Exile is not complete (ended) until they return to their land and to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers."

But then he says:

"…when they reached Mt. Sinai and set up the Mishkan, and God returned to them, establishing his Shekhina amongst them, THEN they returned to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers i.e. the presence of God upon their tents…. And THEN they were considered to be redeemed."

The obvious contradiction is this. In the first sentence, the Ramban talks about the End of Exile as return to *Eretz* *Yisrael*. But in the second sentence he admits that once the Torah has been received and God's Shekhina been associated with the people (via the Mishkan), then they are considered as redeemed.

What is redemption? The return to *Eretz Yisrael* or the Shekhina amongst the Jewish People? If they are still in Exile, can they still experience Redemption?

I think that the Ramban is accepting the fact that Redemption does not need to take place in one fell swoop. There are certain stages in the Redemptive process. Our *pesukim* (see *Shemot* 6:6-7), our four cups of wine on Seder Night, reflect this fact: "*Vehotzeiti*, *Vehitzalti* (both indicating salvation – Negative Freedom) and then *Vega'alti*, *Velakachti*" (a connection with God – Positive Freedom.) Each stage is a new fresh dimension of *Geula*, a "cup" within its own right, upon which we may recite an independent *berakha*. *Geula* is made up of small steps, each one taking us closer to the ideal. And yet, each stage is a mini *Geula*, each step merits that special title. And hence, *Matan* *Torah* and Mishkan can be considered to be *Geula*, even though the Ultimate Redemption, the return to *Eretz* *Yisrael* still eludes the nation.

Here, I feel, is a point that is fundamental for our generation to grasp. Some people in our time refuse to see any religious significance in *Medinat* *Yisrael*. For them, they know the definition of *Geula*: It is the Temple rebuilt, Mashiach, the ingathering of the Exiles, World Peace, *Techiyat* *Ha-meitim*. That is *Geula* perfectly defined. Anything that falls short of that *Geula* is by definition – *Galut*! It is all or nothing! Black or white! It is a binary approach that offers no intermediate reality in between the two poles. There are no steps or stages that might link *Galut* to *Geula*. It happens in a quantum leap; the *Beit* *Ha-mikdash* will descend in flames from the heavens.

Maybe the Ramban teaches us a different perspective. He presents an alternative notion: *Geula* as a process. That there ARE shades of gray between black and white; that there are in-between, imperfect stages that lie upon the road from *Galut* to *Geula*, and that these intermediate points each signify a dimension of Redemption too! They are not the final perfect result, but they are also colored with the hues of *Geula*. I do not subscribe to a binary vision of the Redemptive process. It is not a question that may be answered with a simple Yes or No. Even an imperfect *Medinat* *Yisrael*, a partial ingathering of Exiles, may be experienced as both as a step upon the road to the Ultimate Redemption, but also as an inkling of redemption in its own right; A God given gift of redemption, however imperfect, in our time.

**Further Study.**

1. In his opening lines, the Ramban makes a comment regarding the theme of *Sefer* *Bereishit* and its relationship to *Sefer* *Shemot*.

**\*** What is the theme of *Sefer* *Bereishit*? How is this true AFTER the creation chapters?

**\*** How does he view the relationship between the two? (Chavel points us to the difficult, Kabbalistic comments of the Ramban to *Bereishit* 12:6 for more explanation.)

2. The Ramban notes that *Sefer* *Shemot* begins in a manner that echoes *Bereishit* 46:8-26.

**\*** In the view of the Ramban, why is it necessary for the Torah to repeat these details?

**\*** The Ramban expands his previous reason in his commentary to verse 1 *s.v. ve-eleh*. What does he point out there? What is the proof from *Divrei* *Ha-yamim*?

3. See Chavel's notes and the Midrash that he quotes to the notion of "*Merkava*" referred to at the end of the Ramban's introduction.