

## Shemot

Our tradition of naming a book of the Torah by its first significant word sometime works well – Bereshit ‘In the beginning’ and Bamidbar ‘In the wilderness’ are good one-word summaries, but Shemot, ‘Names’ is not. The Greek ‘Exodus’ is much more descriptive. This first sedrah of the book of Names sets out the back story of that exodus and introduces the main players, Pharaoh, Moses, Aharon and Miriam, but the family relationships are far from clear. We are introduced to Moses in Chapter 2, the son of anonymous Levitical family, whose name is given by the unnamed Pharaoh’s unnamed daughter. We don’t find out the names of Moses’ parents until next week’s sedrah. In Chapter 4 the first mention of Aharon is when God angrily tells Moses at the burning bush “there is Aharon, your brother the Levite?” an odd construction that could mean Aharon is a fellow Levite, not a sibling. When Miriam is finally named, in Chapter 15, she is described as Aharon’s sister, not Moses’. For a book called Names, they really aren’t front and foremost in Shemot.

Before Moses’ first major meeting with the Hebrew elders he wants to support him in his mission, we have three enigmatic verses (Chap 4 v24-6) whose meaning is not helped by the lack of names. The meeting at night, on the way from Midian to Egypt, is reminiscent of an earlier encounter between Jacob and an angel, also on the road, at night, and also preceding a potentially difficult meeting with Esau. God, or in some readings an angel, tries to kill him (Moses? or a son?), and his wife Zipporah takes a flint and circumcises her son (Eliezer?, Gershom?), flinging down the bloody foreskin at his (?) legs and crying out “you are truly a bridegroom of blood to me”, and then, when he (God, the angel?) releases him, again cries out “a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision”. What is this all about?

In the preceding verses, when God is telling Moses what he should say to Pharaoh, he describes Israel as God’s first born son, and that Pharaoh’s refusal to let them go will result in God slaying Pharaoh’s firstborn son. Moses never actually utters these words to Pharaoh, an omission which goes unpunished, but this foretells a dark future where innocent children can be killed for their parent’s faults. It is unclear from the text who is at risk, who is circumcised, and who is saved, but based on these preceding verses, Targum Yonatan thinks it is Gershom, Moses’ firstborn. As Moses and Zipporah travel down to Egypt, they must have been wondering what was to happen to their own innocent sons, and what they could do to protect them from this frightening infanticidal deity.

Blood is central to this episode, and to Shemot. Through the rest of the Exodus story, whether in the river turned to blood in the first plague or the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn, blood connects to death. Yet for Jews blood is about life, protection and spirituality. Blood will separate and protect the Israelites on the night of Passover, and here Zipporah sheds Gershom’s blood in circumcision to protect his life. This theme is explored in the excellent exhibition ‘Blood’ at the Jewish Museum which also looks at how blood is at the root of our conception of our peoplehood, and of the anti-Semitic perception of Jews. I was struck by a cruel 16<sup>th</sup> century painting from Germany of the Circumcision of Christ (that was celebrated by Christians yesterday), in which the Jewish concept of circumcision as protecting and celebrating life is somehow inverted and becomes a prefiguring of the crucifixion and death of Jesus at the hands of the Jews, which itself is used to justify future enmity. Blood is a potent symbol of life and death throughout Names.