

Shavua Tov

Weekly  Parsha

A Road Awakening! Torah Commentary
By Glenn McWilliams

Torah Portion: *Shemot*

שְׁמוֹת

"Names"

These are the names of Israel's sons who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family:

Ve'eleh shemot beney Yisra'el haba'im Mitsraymah et Ya'akov ish uveyto ba'u

Scripture for study:

Shemot (Exodus) 1:1 - 6:1

*"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."
(Exodus 3:5)*

Without any question the focus of the Torah portion *Shemot* - "Names" - is the encounter with YHWH ELOHIM. In this portion we witness the heart of YHWH to be known. This theme is one that will continue throughout the book of Exodus. This book and our Torah reading take their names from the opening line of the portion: "Now these are the **names** of the children of Israel..."ⁱ It may also be appropriate that this book and its opening portion are called *Shemot* - "Names" - because it is in this book and portion that HASHEM, THE NAME, reveals His name, YHWH, to Moses, to Pharaoh and to the children of Israel. The question we may ask at this point is, "Did the children of Israel not know His name before this time?" The answer to this question is clearly yes! The Scripture tells us that men began calling on the name of YHWH all the way back in the days of Seth, the son of Adam and Eve.ⁱⁱ

Here let me remind all of you who are reading an English translation of the Bible, such as KJV, NKJV, NASV, or NIV, that everywhere you read the name LORD in all capital letters, it is covering the name YHWH, and should be read as such.

If the children of Israel already knew the name of Elohim, then we may ask, "Why is this revelation of the name so important?" The answer is found in this week's portion where Elohim tells Moses,

“I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of El Shaddai, but by My name YHWH was I not known to them.” (Exodus 6:3)

What YHWH is teaching us is that each of these names are not simply titles, but descriptions and attributes of who He is. ELOHIM, for example, is the name of the Creator of the universe. EL SHADDAI means Elohim the Sufficient One. Even though men knew the name YHWH, they had not yet experienced the fullness of this attribute of Elohim. Up to this time in the history of the children of Israel, they had only known Elohim as Creator and Sustainer. To the Patriarchs Elohim was an Elohim of promise and provision. But the children of Israel, born in and living in bondage in Egypt, would come to know yet additional attributes of Elohim. YHWH is the Elohim who is with them. YHWH is the Elohim who fulfills His promises. YHWH is the Elohim who shows mercy and delivers His people. These attributes of Elohim were now being revealed to those who were suffering in Egypt.

We should note that while the children of Israel knew this name, they did not experience it as anything other than a title until the attributes of this name became real to them. We should also note that our portion begins by telling us of the death of Jacob, Joseph, the brothers, and that whole generation that came down from Canaan into Egypt. This is a significant detail, for this was the last generation that had seen the promised land. Everyone that now remained in Egypt had also been born there and had never seen the promise land. We should also realize that Jacob and Joseph and his brothers were great spiritual influences. The further away from Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we get, the further we are from the original created image of Elohim. We witness that as people move away from Eden, the shorter life becomes. Jacob himself lamented this reality when he met with Pharaoh.

“And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.” (Genesis 47:9)

As that righteous generation died - the last generation to remember the Creator, the covenant, the promises, and the Patriarchs - so did the light of their righteousness diminish. We should remember here that Joseph's dream described his mother and father as the sun and the moon, and his brothers as stars.ⁱⁱⁱ As these spiritual lights diminished, darkness grew intense for the children of Israel in Egypt.

It should not surprise us then that the name of YHWH does not even appear in the book of Shemot/Exodus until the third chapter of the book. When it is mentioned, it is as if it is something new. This tells us that the children of Israel were in a terrible spiritual state. They were feeling distant and estranged from their Elohim. So it was that the children of Israel cried out for deliverance from the ever increasing affliction that had befallen them.

We should also note in this portion the reality that Elohim was already with the children of Israel in Egypt. Before Jacob left Canaan to be reunited with his long lost son Joseph in Egypt, YHWH appeared to him and gave him this promise,

“And Elohim spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here am I. And he said, I am Elohim, the Elohim of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation: I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again.” (Genesis 46:2-4)

There are three key elements to this promise made to Israel. The first is Elohim’s promise that He would be with them in Egypt. The second is His promise that He would make them a great nation. The third element is Elohim’s promise to bring them out again. As YHWH is the fulfiller of promises, we see in this portion that Elohim has fulfilled two of these three promises already. Though the children of Israel may have been blinded to these realities by the harshness and hardness of their afflictions, Elohim was nonetheless at work with them in Egypt. We should take note here of a couple of little easily missed details. The purpose of Israel coming to Egypt was to forge them in the fires of Egypt into a great nation. We read,

“And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls.” (Exodus 1:5)

What we do not see in the English translation of this verse is the fact that the second use of the word “soul” (in Hebrew, *nefesh*) is in the singular. In other words, the events surrounding the children of Israel coming down to Egypt had already begun to unite these twelve jealous, competitive, selfish, self-seeking brothers, their families, and their tribes together as if they were all of one soul. Along this same line is the declaration of Pharaoh,

“Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we.” (Exodus 1:9)

This is the first time that the children of Israel are called a “people.” The Hebrew word used here is *am*, which means “nation.” So it is that Pharaoh is declaring that Elohim has fulfilled His promise to make the children of Israel into a great nation.

Further evidence of YHWH’s presence with the children of Israel is witnessed in Elohim’s own words to Moses.

“And YHWH said, I have surely SEEN the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have HEARD their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I KNOW their sorrows; And I am COME DOWN to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians...” (Exodus 3:7-8)

Clearly YHWH is not some distant, far off deity sitting in the clouds, aloof and uncaring. But because the children of Israel cannot see Him in their afflictions, YHWH introduces Himself to this people in a dramatic fashion, that they should never forget His attribute of YHWH, the one who fulfills His promises; the one who *SEES, HEARS, KNOWS, and DELIVERS*. This is YHWH, our Elohim. This is what Elohim communicated to Moses at the burning bush. When

Moses asked Elohim by what name he was to make Him known to the children of Israel, YHWH responded,

“I AM THAT I AM (in Hebrew, EHYEH ASHER EHYEH^{iv}): and He said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM (EHYEH) has sent me to you.” (Exodus 3:14)

Here YHWH is revealing to the children of Israel that He was, He is, and He shall be with them always. He is eternally present. There is nowhere that He is not. There is no time that He is not. Even though circumstances and events in our own lives may cause us to feel estranged, distant, in the dark, and forgotten, this is only our perception and not reality. In reality YHWH is ever present and ever fulfilling His purposes and promises.

With this being true, the second part of this teaching will focus upon another question. How do we approach the ever present Elohim? When Moses sees the phenomenon of the burning bush, the Scripture tells us that he turned aside to see this spectacular and mystifying occurrence.^v As Moses approached the bush, YHWH spoke to him and said,

“Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5)

There are many lessons to be drawn from these words. First, we should realize that we come to YHWH only upon His drawing us. In the world we live in, the presence of Elohim seems miraculous, extraordinary, and supernatural. In truth, however, the presence of Elohim is quite natural, normal, and even ordinary. Again, it is only the circumstances of our lives, the darkness, the corruption, the defilement, the distortion of creation, and Elohim’s created order that make it seem otherwise. Second, we should realize that wherever Elohim is present, it is holy space and time. If YHWH is the ever present one, then we may ask, isn’t every time and space holy? YES! We are called to restore the sanctity of time and space by our own holy lives. Third, we should not presume to come into Elohim’s presence. Elohim warned Moses not to “draw nigh” for it was holy ground. While we are to be daily living in and with YHWH, we should never allow our relationship with Him to become so casual that we lose the fear of Elohim.

Moses was instructed to take off his shoes before standing in the presence of Elohim. On a *pshat*^{vi} level, we may simply see this as good manners. The act of taking off one’s shoes before entering a home is expressing a desire to protect the cleanliness of the home from the dirt of the outdoors. The same may be said of standing before YHWH. By taking off his shoes, Moses was protecting the holiness of Elohim from the defilement of his walk in the world. We may remember that the priests of Israel were instructed to wash their hands and feet before serving at the altar.^{vii} But I believe there is yet a deeper meaning behind YHWH’s instruction to Moses to remove his shoes.

Elsewhere in the Torah there is a teaching concerning the removing of ones shoes.

“Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn. If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel. And if the man like not to take his brother’s wife, then let his brother’s wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, My husband’s brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband’s brother. Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak unto him: and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her; Then shall his brother’s wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother’s house. And his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him that hath his shoe loosed.” (Deuteronomy 25:4-10)

This may seem a peculiar passage in connection with approaching Elohim, but as we shall see, it is very pertinent. The teaching on levirate^{viii} marriage begins with the principle that the working ox has a right to eat the grain that it is treading. In simple words, we may say that as long as the ox is willing to fulfill its calling, it has a right to the seed that will sustain it. This is the very principle behind the levirate marriage. Elohim commands that a woman married to one of the children of Israel and having no male^{ix} issue cannot, upon the death of her husband, simply go and marry a stranger; that is, someone outside of her deceased husband’s family, thereby cutting off the line of her dead husband. Because of this prohibition upon her, Elohim made provision that she should be the wife of her deceased husband’s brother. The brother is to go in unto the woman that she may have a child that she will raise in the name of her dead husband, thereby assuring that his line be continued. In other words, the woman who is willing to bear children to carry on her deceased husband’s line has a right to seed that will sustain her as she fulfills her calling. We should remember that there was no “welfare” in those days, and children were the means by which elderly parents were cared for. Thus the Torah teaches that this woman has a right to seed from the brother of her deceased husband. If the brother fails to perform this duty, he denies the woman her rights. At this point, the woman would take the brother to the city gates where all business transactions took place, and she would bring him before the elders. The Torah then says that she would remove his shoe, spit in his face, and say, “So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother’s house.” This seems like a pretty peculiar ritual, but when we read further in the Tanach, we find the hidden meaning.

In the book of Ruth we find a similar story taking place. Ruth was married to one of the sons of Naomi. When her husband died she went with Naomi back to the children of Israel. Here she is “redeemed” by Boaz. We read of this transaction in the book of Ruth.

“Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance. And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself; lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it. Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and

gave it to his neighbor: and this was a testimony in Israel. Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, Buy it for thee. So he drew off his shoe.” (Ruth 4:5-8)

What we witness here is a typical transfer of property. The seller is giving up all his rights upon the property to the purchaser. This is confirmed by the seller giving his shoe to the buyer. In the case of the widow mentioned above, the same is true. When the brother refuses to perform the levirate marriage, she takes his shoe as a sign that she has taken her rights to seed that will sustain her. In other words, she is now allowed to marry anyone she wants because she has taken her rights to seed. Thus we witness that the removing of the shoe is a sign of having surrendered one’s rights.

I believe that we see a similar situation with John the Baptist, who declares of himself in relationship to Messiah,

“He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.” (John 1:27)

In other words, John is saying, “Whatever I receive from him is by grace, for I have no rights to demand from him. I cannot purchase what he offers. I am unworthy to loose his shoe from his foot.”

This, I believe, is what Elohim is telling Moses when he tells him to take off his shoes. It is Elohim’s way of saying “I HAVE THE RIGHTS.” It is as if YHWH is telling Moses, “I am redeeming you,” or “I am claiming you; it is My right.” The removing of the shoe is the sign that we have surrendered our rights. When we approach YHWH we must do the same thing. We do not come in arrogance with our demands, for we have no rights with Elohim. He is the Creator. He is YHWH. He is the one who has the rights to all things. Therefore we must approach Him humbly. We must approach Him with a submitted heart. We must remove our shoes to Him. We recognize that He and He alone has all the rights. He holds the shoe! As the old saying goes, “The shoe is on the other foot” in this relationship. So it is that Moses would have to submit to YHWH’s rights. YHWH has a right to the seed. Ultimately Pharaoh would come to recognize these rights as well, and would release the seed to YHWH, the rightful owner of Israel.

SHAVUA TOV !

ⁱ Exodus 1:1

ⁱⁱ Genesis 4:26

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 37:9

^{iv} “I AM WHO I AM and WHAT I AM, and I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.”

^v Exodus 3:4

^{vi} The simple, i.e. literal meaning of the text.

^{vii} Exodus 30:19

^{viii} The term *levirate* is a derivative of the Latin word *levir*, meaning “husband’s brother.”

^{ix} The Septuagint translates *ben* (son) in the passage of Deuteronomy as “child.”