

Parashat Shemot, 5771, Meredith Trauner

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Exodus 1:1 - 6:1

Good shabbas!

Don't you love the end of the Torah service, when we get to hear name of the synagogue in the prayer?

Anyway – parshat Shemot covers an enormous part of the Exodus story. It opens with the beginning of the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt; then there is the killing of the Israelite baby boys; the rescue of Moshe; then Moshe grows up, kills an Egyptian, flees from Egypt; gets married, has a kid or two; sees the Burning Bush, teams up with his brother Aaron, goes back to Egypt, and asks the Pharaoh to free the Jews. Phew! That's a lot. I hope you're all comfortable in your seats!

No, no, I'm not really going to cover all that. In fact, I'm not going to cover *any* of that! I'm only going to talk about the first sentence.

We're on p. 317 in the Etz Chaim Chumash:

“These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household.

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ

Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehudah; Yisaschar, Zevulon, and Benyamin; Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher. (And Yosef was already in Egypt.)

So we're talking about Names. And the Parsha is called Names, and the whole book is called Names, and of course that's because these things are named after the first important word - but that word tends to have a greater significance as well.

So why does the parsha open with the names of the sons of Israel? We already know them for sure! In fact, we already heard that this particular gang of brothers went to Egypt, back in Genesis in Vayigash. This is old news! So what is this list really about?

Well, the Torah is full of all kinds of lists. But where else do we find lists of *names* in the Torah? Of course there are several lists of “begots,” mapping out ancestry. But the first list that really focuses on multiple members of a single generation is

in Bereishit, parshat Noach, 10:1. We get a list of the descendents of Noach after the flood, and we learn that they become 70 nations, and we are told:

“From these the islands of the nations were separated in their lands.”

מֵאֵלֶּה נִפְרְדוּ אֵיִי הַגּוֹיִם בְּאַרְצֵתָם

So, אֵיִי translates as “the coastlands,” or “the islands.” Every man became an island! And the phrase continues:

“each according to its language, by their families, in their nations.”

אִישׁ לְלִשְׁוֹנוֹ לְמִשְׁפָּחָתָם בְּגוֹיָהֶם

So the 70 descendents of Noach ended up not even sharing **languages** in common, and were certainly not considered a single nation. And we see this again with Abraham’s descendants – with his sons by his second wife, Keturah - they become different clans, different peoples, the Midianites, the Shuhites; and again, with the sons of Isaac, we see Esau’s children split up into different clans.

In Shemot, by contrast, we finally find a set of brothers who are not islands, brothers do not separate. After admittedly quite a bit of sibling rivalry and strife!, they all go down to Egypt together. The list beings a story of the beginning of a single community, in which the descendants stay together and are united with shared hardship, and later a shared journey and quest. So the Parsha opens with this kind of sweet sense of unity.

And every community must have a name, right? And we actually get two in Parshat Shemot. Now in the 2nd to last sentence of Genesis we have בני ישראל, the sons of Israel, but that literally is a reference to Jacob’s sons; but in Exodus בני ישראל for the first time refers to the people more broadly. And if you’ll forgive me, I’m going to sneak just a little further down the page from the first sentence... fifteen sentences into Parshat Shemot we have another new name, “the Hebrews,” with noun form הָעִבְרִיִּים. So we’ve made it, we’re a people, we’re a community!

And I’ve been interested for some time now in the name of our own community, Netivot Shalom, which means Paths of Peace.

As many of you know, it comes from the liturgy, when we’re putting away the torah:

It is a tree of life, עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא, for those who grasp it, and all who uphold it are blessed.

Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.

דְּרָכֶיהָ דִּרְכֵי נֵעַם וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם

And Etz Chaim, Tree of Life, is also a beautiful synagogue name - and one that was considered for this congregation, I've learned. And on a personal note, my childhood synagogue in New York was Etz Chaim. So I love that the phrase begins with Etz Chaim and ends with Netivot Shalom, the spiritual home that I've found as an adult. (And it did take walking down quite a few paths to end up here!)

And the phrase is very interesting in context, and it can take on a few different meanings. Let me read you the context from the Torah service (translation from Siddur Sim Shalom):

Precious teaching do I give you;
Never forsake my Torah.

לחם נתתי טוב לקח,
תעזבו על תורתני.

It is a tree of life for those who grasp it,
And all who uphold it are blessed.

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה
ותמכה מאשר

Its ways are pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.

So Netivot Shalom here are clearly paths of Torah, and the verse urges us to live our lives by Torah. Which is a very beautiful reference for a synagogue, a congregation, a community.

But interestingly, the rabbis who compiled the siddur took the phrases a bit out of context from their original placement. These verses are from Proverbs 3, verse 13.

(And I'm going to use a slightly different translation, just because that's what's available for the full stanza.) Here we go:

Happy is the man who finds **wisdom**,
The man who attains **understanding**.

אשרי אדם מצא המכח
ואדם יפיק תבונא

Her value in trade is better than silver,
Her yield, greater than gold.

And it continues with our phrase:

Her ways are pleasant ways,
And all her paths, peaceful.

So here, the “she” that is personified in the phrase is not Torah, but Wisdom! Which is also a very beautiful meaning, and I think a wonderful pairing of meanings – two meanings that complement each other, suggesting that: We should live our lives, and also our spiritual lives, and our Jewish journeys, walking on a path infused with Torah; and we should also bring our personal wisdom to that path, our understanding of the world, our ethics, and the wisdom of our hearts.

On another note, they taught me in Hebrew School that “shalom” has not just one but *three* different meanings in everyday Hebrew. So perhaps ungrammatically, but happily I think, “Netivot Shalom” could plausibly be translated as “Paths of ‘Hello!’” Or, perhaps more elegantly, as “Paths of Greeting.”

And there’s no question in my mind that Netivot does a very wonderful job of welcoming newcomers and visitors. I felt very welcome when I started coming three and a half years ago. More than one of you patiently introduced yourselves over and over again until I managed to learn your names! (And I know I’m still working on that with some of you!) And some of you have opened your homes to me for meals; and some of you have roped me in to leadership positions. So let me take a moment to say thank you – thank you for making me welcome, and even more importantly, thank you for continuing to welcome newcomers.

But I didn’t want to drash about the congregation’s name in a vacuum – I’m not an island either! So I spoke to a number of the founders about the choosing of the name, and I’ll share some of those stories with you.

And I want you to understand that although I heard what sounded like remarkably different stories, I believe that they’re also all true. These are midrashes, they’re interpretations and aspects of what happened and why we have this name.

So the congregation got started about 20 years ago, and there was a core group of founders who would meet in each other’s living rooms.

Rabbi Stuart Kelman, the founding rabbi, told me a very spiritually oriented story and also a very peaceful story about choosing the name. He said that the group solicited names from everybody, and they ended up with a list of 7 or 8 names. They took a vote, and Netivot was on that list! And the meaning had to do with Torah and liturgy, and everyone liked that. And people also liked the uniqueness, because at the time there were no other synagogues in the country with that name.

Charlene Stern, another founding member, said to me (and this is a direct quote): “It took us *one hour* to decide to become a synagogue, and it took us *ten minutes* to decide to buy prayerbooks. But choosing a *name* dragged on for months and months!”

She said that there was a lot of concern about the other two congregations in Berkeley, Beth Israel (orthodox) and Beth El (reform). And no one wanted to be another Beth something, by the way, that would just be too much! But even more importantly, several of the founders left those congregations to join this one, and many of the founders still had friends and family in those congregations. So they very much wanted to tread gently and do as much as possible to not ruffle feathers.

And finally someone suggested that in order to show that they meant well, it would be a good idea to use the word “shalom” in the name. Right? “We come in peace!” And it also came from the prayerbook, and everyone liked that.

Robert Alter, a founding member who is also a professor of Hebrew Language and Literature, told me: The first priority was to choose a name that didn’t have a gutteral in it, so that everyone could pronounce it! And “Netivot Shalom” also worked well because everyone knows “shalom”!

However, I learned from Celia Concus, the founding president, that even with “Shalom,” our name was originally a problem for some people. Too many syllables! Too complicated! So after the name was decided on, when she did the announcements at the end of the service, Celia would have the whole group say the name together out loud to get used to it. OK, are you ready for a little audience participation? “Netivot Shalom. Netivot Shalom.” Excellent! A little historical reenactment.

A few people also mentioned that people liked the word “shalom” because as a group, the founding members tended to lean left, and “shalom” hints at that direction. And complementing that, one person mentioned that “Netivot,” as a plural word, reflected that everyone in the congregation comes from different paths, and are looking for multiple answers, not just one answer.

This *last* point is really what *I* was thinking about when I started thinking about the name – the sweetness of having diversity within community. And this is particularly special in a congregation with a participatory model like we have.

Like the 12 sons, like the 12 tribes of Israel, we have very significant differences among us – but we’ve settled here together, and we’re on a journey together, and even if we arrive at different answers - my answers will be richer for having heard each of yours.

So let me conclude by again saying thank you. Thank you for sharing each of

your ideas and points of view, and music and songs; and thank you for doing it so beautifully. I can't tell you how happy I am to be a part of this community.

Shabbat shalom.