

SEFER SHMOT - Introduction

Is Sefer Shmot simply a continuation of Sefer Breishit - or is there something that makes it unique?

For example, are the Ten Commandments and the laws of Parshat Mishpatim included in this book, simply because they were given 'first' - or should we look for a thematic connection between those laws and the story of the Exodus?

As our series of shiurim rests on the assumption that each "sefer" [book] of CHUMASH [= the five 'books'] carries a unique theme, we will begin our study of Sefer Shmot in an attempt to identify its primary theme. Afterward, we will consider that theme in our study of each individual chapter or unit.

In our study of Sefer Breishit, we employed this approach to uncover its primary theme of "bechira", showing how that theme helped us understand the deeper meaning of each story and the progression of its events. Now, in our study of Sefer Shmot, we will employ a similar approach.

Let's begin by undertaking a quick overview of Sefer Shmot, in an attempt to find not only its underlying theme, but also its thematic connection to - and distinction from - Sefer Breishit.

A TABLE OF CONTENTS

To identify a common theme of any book, it is helpful to first make a list of its major topics and then to contemplate what connects these topics together.

Let's see what happens when we apply this approach to Sefer Shmot.

If we limit ourselves to a discussion of the most general categories, I think that everyone would agree with the following table of contents for Sefer Shmot:

- 1) "Yetziat Mitzraim" (the Exodus/ chaps. 1->17)
[including the journey to Har Sinai]
- 2) "Ma'amad Har Sinai" (the Theophany / chaps. 18->24)
[including the mitzvot of Parshat Mishpatim]
- 3) "The Mishkan" (the Tabernacle / chaps. 25->31)
[God's commandment to build the Mishkan]
- 4) "Chet ha'Egel" (the sin of the Golden Calf/ 32->34)
[including the story of the second luchot]
- 5) "Building the Mishkan" (its construction/ 35->40)
[concluding with the "shchina" dwelling thereupon]

Therefore, to identify an overall theme for the entire book, we must search for a theme that connects all of these topics together.

RAMBAN'S APPROACH - GALUT & GEULAH

Ramban, in his short introduction to Sefer Shmot, attempts to do exactly this, i.e. to identify a common theme for the entire book. [It is recommended that your first read this Ramban.]

After defining Sefer Breishit as "sefer ha'yetzira" [the book of the creation of the world and of the people of Israel (and hence the patterns of its history)], Ramban proceeds to explain why Sefer Shmot begins with the story of Yetziat Mitzraim:

"... after completing Breishit, a special sefer is dedicated to describe the first "galut" [exile] as specifically decreed [in Sefer Breishit [see 15:13-16] and Bnei Yisrael's redemption from that GALUT..." (see Ramban's intro to Shmot1:1)

After explaining why Sefer Shmot begins with 'the redemption from exile' (as forecasted in Sefer Breishit), next Ramban must explain the jump in Sefer Shmot from Yetziat Mitzraim to Ma'amad Har Sinai, and then to the Mishkan:

"... and the GALUT is not over until they [Bnei Yisrael] return to the level of their forefathers... and even once they achieve their freedom from Egypt, they are not considered redeemed

yet, for they still wander in the desert... But once they arrive at HAR SINAI to receive the Torah and build the MISHKAN, and God's shechina dwells upon them - then they return to the level of their forefathers... and are then considered totally REDEEMED..."

Note how Ramban understands the concept of "geulah" [redemption] as the underlying theme of the **entire** Sefer. This allows him to identify a common theme to the various topics of Yetziat Mitzraim, Matan Torah, and Mishkan. Although one could argue with Ramban's conclusions, he clearly assumes - as we did in our introduction - that there is a need to study each "sefer" in search of its unifying theme. In fact, Ramban opens his commentary to each "sefer" of Chumash in a very similar manner, i.e. with an attempt to identify its overall theme.

In our own study of Sefer Shmot, we will follow a direction similar to Ramban's, showing how all the various stories in Sefer Shmot all carry a common theme (even though we may arrive at a slightly different conclusion). However, we begin our own study by focusing a bit more on its thematic connection to Sefer Breishit.

FROM BREISHIT TO SHMOT

We can readily understand why Sefer Shmot begins with the story of Yetziat Mitzraim, as that story appears to continue the narrative of Sefer Breishit. However, if Sefer Shmot simply continues the story of Sefer Breishit, why is it necessary to begin a new book?

To help clarify how these books differ, let's consider Sefer Breishit as God's '**master-plan**', while Sefer Shmot can be understood as the first stage of its '**implementation**'.

In other words, the "bechira" process - that emerged as the primary theme of Sefer Breishit - can be viewed as God's master plan for the creation of a special nation that will one-day represent Him and sanctify His Name. As such, the book began with the underlying reason for God's need of this nation (chapters 1->11), followed by His choice of the forefathers of that nation - and hence the stories of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov -focusing on the covenantal promises and which specific children would be chosen (chapters 12->50). This 'planning stage' reaches its conclusion as all of Yaakov's children are not only chosen, but also united (after the events of "mechirat Yosef") - and the 'seeds' of this nation have planted in the land of Egypt.

Sefer Shmot can be viewed as the first stage in God's implementation of this plan. Hence, it begins as Yaakov's offspring develop into a nation in Egypt; become enslaved, upon which God fulfills His covenant to redeem them from their 'bondage in a foreign land' ("brit bein ha'btarim"/ Breishit 15:13-18) - better known as the story of Yetziat Mitzraim.

However, God's plan was not simply for Israel to become a free nation - it was to become God's special Nation. Hence, after their freedom from slavery, they must also receive a special set of laws, better known as the story of Matan Torah. Afterward, Bnei Yisrael will also require a symbol for their special relationship with God - i.e. the Mishkan - to remind themselves (and to show others) how God dwells in their midst (see 25:1).

The events of "chet ha'egel" raise a question concerning the very possibility of this special relationship. In its aftermath, the Mishkan is finally built and God's presence dwells with His Nation. Everything is now set for what should be the implementation of the next stage of God's master plan - i.e. Bnei Yisrael inheritance of the land of Israel. [Why that does not happen, will emerge as a primary topic in Sefer Bamidbar.]

SOME EXAMPLES

For the sake of clarity, let's cite a few more specific examples that highlight this thematic connection between Breishit and Shmot.

Recall God's opening promise to Avraham Avinu that he will become a "goy gadol" - a great nation (see 12:1-3). That's the 'plan'- therefore, Sefer Shmot begins by explaining HOW Beni Yisrael became that great nation.

Recall as well that in His covenant with Avraham Avinu ("brit bein ha'btarim" /see 15:13-18), God informed Avraham that his children would endure a period of slavery and oppression in a foreign land prior to their emergence as a great nation (see 15:13). Furthermore, that covenant also promised how the nation who will oppress them shall be punished. In this sense, the first section of Sefer Shmot (Yetziat Mitzraim/ chapters 1-15) can be understood as God's fulfillment of that covenant.

The next major topic - "Ma'amad Har Sinai" - flows directly from the story of Yetziat Mitzraim - for in order for God's plan to be fulfilled, Bnei Yisrael must receive the special laws that they must keep to become that nation - and hence Matan Torah (see Rashi & Ramban on Shmot 3:12,). When we study Ma'amad Har Sinai, we will also show how God's covenant with Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai fulfills the principles of the covenant as described in "brit mila" ("l'hiyot Icha l'Elokim -see Breishit 17:7-9).

From this point on, however, the logic behind the progression of topics in Sefer Shmot becomes more difficult to ascertain. Considering that Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai to receive the entire Torah, we would expect Sefer Shmot to record ALL the mitzvot they received at that time. Instead, Sefer Shmot records only SOME of those mitzvot (the "dibrot" & Parshat Mishpatim), and then focuses primarily on the mitzvot relating to the Mishkan. The rest of the mitzvot (given at Har Sinai) are recorded elsewhere in Chumash - in Vayikra, Bamidbar, or Devarim.

Therefore, in our study of Sefer Shmot, we will need to explain why this Sefer records only certain mitzvot (i.e. primarily the laws in Parshat Mishpatim) and why its focus then shifts solely to the Mishkan.

Our shiurim will also discuss how (and why) the Mishkan can be viewed as an extension of Ma'amad Har Sinai, and we will conclude by showing the intricate thematic connections between "chet ha'egel," the Mishkan and Ma'amad Har Sinai.

More specifically, our opening shiur (on Parshat Shmot) will discuss the significance of God's "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush, while the shiurim on Parshiot Va'eyra & Bo will focus on Moshe's mission to prepare Bnei Yisrael for their redemption. Our shiur on Parshat B'shalach will discuss the need for the various events that take place during Bnei Yisrael's journey from Egypt to Har Sinai. In Parshiot Yitro & Mishpatim we will discuss the dialectic nature of the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai, as well as the special nature of the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim and their covenantal significance. Finally, our shiurim from Parshat Terumah through Parshat Pekudei will focus on the conceptual relationship between the Mishkan, Ma'amad Har Sinai and "chet ha'egel."

As usual, it is highly recommended that you use the study questions to prepare for the shiurim (even though the shiurim are written so that you can follow even without advanced preparation). Also, it is helpful to study using a Tanach Koren (or similar). This will make it much easier for you to determine the flow of topic and theme from 'parshia' to 'parshia.'

b'hatzlacha!
menachem

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**INTRO PART II /
For Parshat Shmot**

USING OUTLINES

We conclude our introductory shiur by bringing an example of how 'outlining' the flow of 'parshiot' can serve as an excellent study tool, especially helpful when searching for a central theme in any given unit.

In the following table we first list each 'parshia' in Parshat Shmot - and assign a short title to describe its primary topic. Afterward, we will attempt to transform this list into an outline, by considering its thematic progression. [It will help show how Parshat Shmot 'sets the stage' for the upcoming events in Sefer Shmot, as discussed in our introductory shiur.]

'PARSHIA'	TOPIC
1:1-7	Bnei Yisrael's settlement in Egypt. (linking Sefer Breishit to Sefer Shmot)
1:8-22	The enslavement and hardships begin
2:1-22	The birth and life of Moshe [up until his arrival in Midyan]
2:23-25	God hears the crying out of Bnei Yisrael
** 3:1-4:17	God's "HITGALUT" TO MOSHE AT THE "SNEH" [Moshe receives his MISSION & clarifications].
4:18-26	Moshe leaves Midyan to fulfill his mission.
4:27-4:31	Moshe meets the elders, to inform the nation in regard to their forthcoming redemption
5:1-3	Moshe & Aharon go to Pharaoh, requesting permission to worship God in the desert
5:4-6:1	The mission appears to backfire.

[Chapters 6 thru 14 describe how the mission is completed!]

BUILDING UP TO THE BURNING BUSH

We posit that the story of God's "hitgalut" [revelation] to Moshe at the burning bush should be considered the highlight of Parshat Shmot, for the mission that Moshe receives at the "sneh" - to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt - will emerge as the primary topic of the first half of Sefer Shmot, while the first two chapters serve as important background for that "hitgalut". Let's explain how and why:

Recall from our shiurim on Sefer Breishit how its primary theme [the "bechira" process] progressed with each "hitgalut", i.e. each time that God spoke to the Avot. For example, in God's first "hitgalut" to Avraham Avinu, He introduced the concept of a special nation. In each subsequent "hitgalut" to the Avot, the details of God's future relationship with that nation slowly unfolded.

In a similar manner, we will see how the primary theme of Sefer Shmot is first introduced in God's opening "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush (see 3:1->4:17).

Even though this "hitgalut" is not described until chapter three, nevertheless, the first two chapters of Sefer Shmot can be understood as their 'backdrop':

- The first parshia in Sefer Shmot (1:1-7) explains how Bnei Yisrael became a NATION in the land of Egypt, thus fulfilling God's promise to Yaakov in the final "hitgalut" of Sefer Breishit (see 46:3-4 & our shiur on Vayigash).

- The next parshia (1:8-22) describes how the enslavement began, as foreseen in "brit bein ha'ttarim" (15:13-15).
- The first 'parshia' in Chapter two (2:1-22) describes how God prepares His redemption with the story of birth of Moshe Rabeinu until he runs away to Midyan.
- In the final 'parshia' (2:23-25), we told of how the redemption finally begins, as God hears the cries of Bnei Yisrael's oppression.

The stage is now set for God's opening "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu in chapter three, where he will receive his mission to redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

To better appreciate how the progression of topics in that key 'parshia', we now demonstrate another tool - that is also helpful when studying Chumash. We take an individual 'parshia', and divide it into paragraphs, and then make an outline to help follow its progression.

The following outline organizes this entire 'parshia', i.e. from 3:1 to 4:17 - highlighting its progression of topics:

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. 3:1-3 Moshe notices the 'burning bush'
- B. 3:4-6 God identifies Himself to Moshe

II. THE MISSION

- A. 3:7-9 The PURPOSE of Moshe's mission: to fulfill His promise to the Avot
- B. 3:10 The MISSION itself -

III. QUESTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

(re: how to accomplish this mission)

- A. 3:11-12 Who am I to go to Pharaoh
- B. 3:13-22 What precisely do I tell Bnei Yisrael & Pharaoh
- C. 4: 1- 9 Why (and how) should they believe me
- D. 4:10-17 How can I, specifically, be Your spokesman

Let's explain:

First, God identifies Himself to Moshe Rabeinu (I) and then explains to him the mission and its purpose (II).

At the **center** of this outline lies God's charge to Moshe that he take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt (II-B).

Finally, Moshe responds to this assignment by asking several questions regarding how he is to accomplish his mission (III).

GOD'S MESSAGE AT THE SNEH

What was the purpose of the "hitgalut" at the burning bush? As we will discuss in our shiur on Parshat Shmot, it did much more than just supply Moshe Rabeinu with some information. Rather, God will give Moshe a very complex mission, while explaining its goals and purpose.

In our shiurim on Parshat Shmot and Va'eyra, we explain what this mission is all about, noting that Moshe actually receives a DOUBLE mission.

Afterward, we will see how the next set of parshiot (chapters 6->17) will describe how Moshe actually completes this mission.

Till then,

shabbat shalom,
menachem