

"And these are the names" - The Essence of Sefer Shemot

This Sabbath we begin reading a new chumash, the Book of Shemot, the second of five Chumashim. The Torah begins with a list of Yaakov's descendants who came to Egypt.

This list is a repetition of the more detailed list of descendants mentioned in the end of Genesis. The repetition can be explained that the Torah wants to briefly repeat the list because it wants to tell the complete story of the descent to and redemption from Egypt, and in order to understand the state of bondage in Egypt we must be reminded of the descent itself into Egypt (what contemporary commentators call "linking back").

Nachmonides also felt the need to explain why the Torah repeats the list of names. He starts by defining the essence of the entire chumash - the book of exile and salvation. This is the subject of the book, which is also why the Torah repeats the list of descendants, because the beginning of exile is in the descent of Jacob and his sons into Egypt. However, this definition creates some difficulty; the salvation from Egypt occurs in the middle of the book - and if so, why is the second half of the chumash relevant to this book? Because leaving Egypt alone is not enough to be considered "redemption." Redemption, the Ramban explains, is a situation in which the people of Israel return to their original greatness, a state in which God dwells within us. Therefore, the book of Exodus does not end after leaving Egypt, but only after God dwells within the people of Israel via The Mishkan. In this regard, it is ironic that the famous call by Moshe "Let my people go so that they may serve me" became well known only as "Let my people go"

Another commentator, the Netziv of Volozhin, defines Sefer Shemot differently. He brings the opinion The Baal Halachot Gedolot, Rabbi Shimon Kayra, that the correct title for the book is 'The Second Book'.

Of all the books of the Torah, the Book of Shemot is the only one that does not warrant its own name.

The Netziv explains this principle later in his remarks - the Book of Exodus is, in fact the continuation, Volume II, of Genesis. The process of creation is not complete until it is capable of fulfilling its purpose. That will only happen after the Exodus (or perhaps Matan Torah), when there will be chosen nation that will serve as 'a light unto the nations'.

Years ago, while I was learning Sefer Shemot with students as a Torah MiTzion shaliach in Memphis, we noticed that Shemot is the only chumash that starts with a connecting letter Vav, which is the equivalent of opening a book with the word 'and'. Based on the wonderful words of the Netziv, we now understand why - the Book of Exodus is truly the second part of the Book of Genesis, the direct continuation of the story of creation.