

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" – i.e. how & why God chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of a nation that will bring the Name of God to mankind. In those shiurim, we demonstrated 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.

Therefore, we begin our study with 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 "shechina" 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 progression 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 theme, and thus explain its flow of topic.

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 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.

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 Bnei Yisrael became that great nation (Shmot 1:1-6).

Recall as well that in His covenant with Avraham Avinu ("brit bein ha'tarim" /see 15:13-18), God forecasted a period of 'slavery and oppression in a foreign land'; hence the first chapter of Sefer Shmot continues with the story of how that enslavement began (see 1:7-20). In the ensuing story of the Exodus (Shmot chapters 2 thru 15), God fulfills that next stage of that covenant by punishing their oppressor and redeeming His nation from Egypt.

The next major topic of Sefer Shmot is "Ma'amad Har Sinai" - which flows directly from the story of Yetziat Mitzraim - for in order for God's master plan to be fulfilled, Bnei Yisrael must receive a set of laws that will make them that special nation. To prepare them for that transformative moment, various events take place on their journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai (see Shmot chapters 14 thru 17). Upon their arrival at Sinai, the covenant is finalized and the first set of Laws are given, as described in Shmot chapters 18 thru 24. [In our of detailed study, we will also explore the thematic connection between "brit Sinai and "brit mila" ("I'hiyot lcha l'Elokim -see Breishit 17:7-11).

From this point on, 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, while other commandments given at Har Sinai are recorded elsewhere in Chumash – i.e. in Vayikra, Bamidbar, and Devarim.

In our study of Sefer Shmot, we will need to explain why only one unit of those mitzvot (i.e. the laws in Parshat Mishpatim) are recorded in Sefer Shmot ;and then consider why its focus shifts exclusively to the laws of the Mishkan.

For example, in his commentary to Shmot 25:1, Ramban explains why specifically the Mishkan (chapters 25 thru 31) emerges as the next major topic – for Bnei Yisrael now require a symbol of their special relationship with God. The Mishkan will remind Am Yisrael of their covenantal responsibilities; allow the nation to approach God, and demonstrate (to themselves and the other nations) how God dwells in their midst.

Our shiurim will also discuss Rashi's approach, highlighting the intricate thematic connections between Mishkan, Maamad Har Sinai **and** the sin of the Golden calf ["chet ha'egel"].

In light of the events of "chet ha'egel", a serious doubt arises concerning the very possibility of this special relationship. Sefer Shmot describes how that first covenant is broken, and how and why a new covenant is be forged that must include God's attributes of Mercy (see Shmot chapters 32 thru 34). In its aftermath, the Mishkan is finally built and God's presence dwells with His Nation (chapters 35 thru 40), a sign that the relationship has been fixed.

When Sefer Shmot reaches its conclusion, everything is ready for what should be the next stage of God's master plan – i.e. Bnei Yisrael should travel from Har Sinai to Canaan and inherit the Land. Why that does not happen, will emerge as a primary topic in our study of Sefer Bamidbar.

Based on this thematic setting, 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

=====

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 multiply, becoming a nation in Egypt. (linking Sefer Breishit to Sefer Shmot)
1:8-22	The enslavement and its hardships begin
2:1-22	The birth and early life of Moshe Rabeinu [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; Pharaoh doubles their workload.

[Chapters 6 thru 14 describe how his 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).

As this "hitgalut" is not described until chapter three, the first two chapters of Sefer Shmot serve 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'tarim" (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. 3:7-8 God heard their cry, therefore He is coming:
To redeem them, and bring them to Israel:
- B. 3:9-10 Moshe is charged to go to Pharaoh
And take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt-

III. QUESTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

(re: how to accomplish this mission)

- A. 3:11-12 How can I to go to Pharaoh, & take them out
- 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