These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: 2Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; 3Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; 4Dan and Joseph dies, with his generation; the Israelites multiply in Egypt; and a new pharaoh suddenly enslaves them. The barest of details concerning slavery and suffering are offered. The narrative becomes expansive only when it begins to describe the liberation.

AN INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY (vv. 1–7)
The sons of Jacob—the tribes of Israel—are listed in an order based on Gen. 35:23–26. That chapter includes the divine blessing to Jacob: “Be fertile and increase; / A nation, yea an assembly of nations, / Shall descend from you” (35:11). This promise of increase has been fulfilled, as we read in 1:7.

1. These are The initial Hebrew letter of the verse that begins Exodus (nun, usually translated “and”) is a link to Genesis, because the letter suggests continuity with what precedes it. Israel The name here refers to the patriarch Jacob. The name is used to refer to the nation for the first time in verse 9.

We read in the Book of Genesis the story of a family living out its relationship to God in the midst of sibling jealousies and marital strife. Exodus is the story of a people encountering God in the course of their journey from slavery to freedom.

CHAPTER 1
“The historian asks, What political, economic or religious factors inclined Pharaoh to enslave the Israelites? The Midrash asks, Why is Israel persecuted and enslaved more than any other nation of the world?” [N. Leibowitz].

The Sages of the Midrash, writing more than a thousand years after the events and living under the harsh rule of the Romans, tried to interpret the experience of slavery in Egypt as a way of understanding their own experience. Some said that slavery was a punishment for assimilating into the Egyptian way of life and wanting to be like the Egyptians. They interpreted the words “the land was filled with them” (1:7) to mean “the theaters and circuses were filled with them.” The Israelites adopted the Egyptian way of life in all of its crudeness and superficiality. Thus psychological enslavement, the notion that being an Egyptian was better than being an Israelite, preceded physical enslavement, even as psychological liberation will later precede physical liberation. These commentators describe the Israelites as devoid of redeeming qualities, and see the Exodus as resulting from God’s unearned grace and God’s promise to the patriarchs [Tanh. B. Sh’mot 6].

Others saw enslavement in Egypt as part of God’s long-range plan, foreshadowed in Gen. 15:13, to take the descendants of Abraham and teach them, through the experience of being enslaved and redeemed, to be sensitive to the oppressed in every age (Exod. 22:20: “You shall not wrong a stranger . . . for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”) and to be grateful to God for intervening to free them. On the opening words of the book, “These are the names,” the Sages commented [again with later generations in mind] that “the Israelites were worthy of being redeemed precisely because they did not assimilate. Through all the years of slavery, they did not change their names, their language, or their mode of dress” [Mekh. Bo 5].

Striving not only to understand the Torah but to understand the phenomenon of gentile hatred of the Jewish people, the commentators carefully studied Pharaoh’s words in verses 9 and 10. They note that he objects not so much to the behavior of the Israelites as to their very existence. Like many enemies of the Jewish people, he exaggerates their numbers and power [they could not have been more than a small fraction of the Egyptian population]. He uses the same words (“they are much too numerous for us”) that the king of the Philistines used for Isaac’s lone family in Gen. 26:16.

1. the sons of Israel When they were growing up, they were the sons of Jacob, not Israel.
Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of persons that were of Jacob’s issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they

5. Jacob’s issue Literally, “that came out of Jacob’s loin.” In the Bible, the Hebrew for “thigh, loin,” (yerekh) is a euphemism for the male organ of procreation.

seventy The number 70 in the Bible usually is not meant to be taken literally. It evokes the idea of totality, of being all-inclusive, on a large scale. Here, it is a round number.

6. The entire immigrant generation had died out by the time the oppression began.

7. This description of the Israelites’ extraordinary fertility (in language that is also used in the Creation narrative of Gen. 1:20,28) suggests the concept of the community of Israel in Egypt as a miniature universe, self-contained and apart from the larger Egyptian society. It is the nucleus of a new humanity, spiritually speaking.

the land Not the whole of Egypt, but the area of Israelite settlement known as Goshen.

THE OPPRESSION (vv. 8–14)
The Israelites experience sudden cataclysmic change. The most reasonable explanation for the Israelites’ change in fortune lies in the policies adopted by pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1304–1200 B.C.E.), especially by Ramses II (1290–1224 B.C.E.), who shifted Egypt’s administrative and strategic center to the eastern delta of the Nile, where he undertook building projects that required a huge local labor force. “A new king” may also refer to a new dynasty.

8. who did not know Joseph He was ignorant of or indifferent to the extraordinary service that Joseph had rendered to Egypt and the crown.

know This is the first appearance in Exodus of the verb ידַּע, “to know,” a key term in the Exodus narratives, occurring more than 20 times in the first 14 chapters. The usual rendering, “to know,” hardly does justice to the richness of its meanings, which include emotions and relatedness as well as the intellect. The use of the word here to describe Pharaoh may anticipate “that you [Pharaoh] may know” in 9:29.

9–10. The historical situation that prompted his fears may plausibly be reconstructed if it is assumed that the text refers to Ramses II. The eastern delta of the Nile was vulnerable to penetration from Asia. In the middle of the 18th century B.C.E., it had been infiltrated by the Hyksos, an Egyptian term meaning “rulers of foreign lands.” The Hyksos were a conglomeration of ethnic groups among whom Semites predominated. They gradually took over Lower Egypt and ruled it until their expulsion in the second half of the 16th century B.C.E. After that, the delta was neglected by the central government, although many Semites remained in the region. A revival of interest in that part of Egypt began with the reign of Haremheb (ca. 1330–1306 B.C.E.) and accelerated under his successors. It probably heightened sensitivity to the presence of a large body of foreigners in that strategic area.

Israelite people The unique Hebrew phrase אַמּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (the nation of the descendants of Israel) is found only here. It tells us that the family of the patriarch Israel (Jacob) has become the people Israel and hence are a threat to the Egyptians.

deal shrewdly Literally, “wisely.” To control Jacob had to wrestle and change to become Israel; and his children, the children of Jacob, also had to struggle to outgrow their less admirable traits to become the children of Israel.

8. who did not know Joseph Pharaoh knew that Joseph had saved Egypt, but did not care.

He did not let the information change his outlook [MRE 7:137]. Through much of Jewish history, the people’s well-being depended on the goodwill of a ruler. When the leadership changed, the fortunes of the Jewish community often changed as well. Pharaoh begins by

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may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.” 11 So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Rameses. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

13 The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites 14 the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

the growth of the Israelite population. Pharaoh unwittingly challenges the will of God, for the divine promise to Abraham (Gen. 22:17 and elsewhere) had pledged that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands of the seashore.

and rise from the ground The literal meaning of the Hebrew (v’alah min ha-aretz) may come from a forgotten idiom that means “to rise from a lowly state,” or “to gain ascendency over” (see Hos. 2:2). Or it may simply mean “leave the land.”

11. The Israelites are conscripted for compulsory unpaid labor on public works projects for indefinite periods.

they built The Hebrew may refer to founding new cities as well as to rebuilding those that existed.

Pharaoh The title combines two Egyptian words, per-ō (literally, “the great house”). They originally applied to the royal palace and court; later, during the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1304–1200 B.C.E.), it was an honorific title for the reigning monarch. It is analogous to present-day use of “the Palace” or “the White House.”

Pithom and Rameses Both names are well known in Egyptian sources, but their precise location has not been fixed. Pithom is never again mentioned in the Bible. It was identified with a location in the eastern Nile delta (Tell er-Ratabah, in the east of Wadi Tumilat). The name derives from the Egyptian per-atum, which means “the House of (the sun god) Atum,” indicating the presence of a major temple dedicated to the primordial creator god of that name. Raamses can be none other than the famous delta residence built by and named after Pharaoh Ramses II; its beauty and glory are extolled in poems still extant. The city was situated in “the region of Goshen,” a phrase that is synonymous with “the region of Rameses,” where the Israelites lived.

13–14. The Israelites now are subjected to forced labor in construction and agriculture, as opposed to the labor exacted from them earlier refusing to acknowledge Joseph, and later refusing to acknowledge God, saying, “Who is the L ORD that I should heed Him?” (Exod. 5:2).

14. harsh labor One of the Sages reads “harsh labor” (b’farekh) as “with soft words” (b’feh rakh). Instead of confronting the Israelites with threats and demands, the Egyptians hid their evil intent behind soft, innocuous words, assuring the Israelites that this was for their own good. The word “b’farekh” occurs one other time in the Torah. In Lev. 25:46, the Israelites are told never to treat their own slaves b’farekh. Some oppressed people, given the opportunity, would be eager to reverse the roles and oppress others. We are taught that, because we know how it feels, we should never oppress others. Abraham Lincoln reflected the teaching of the Torah in his statement: “As I
The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women together with the other inhabitants of Egypt. In the consciousness of Israel, this experience indelibly stamped Egypt as the “house of bondage.”

THE MIDWIVES (vv. 15–22)
In response to the failure of his scheme, Pharaoh issues a barbarous decree to reduce the Israelite population.

15. Hebrew The Hebrew word *ivri* first appears in Gen. 14:13, as a descriptive term for Abram. It is used in the Bible when non-Israelites refer to Israelites or when the latter identify themselves to others. (A class of wandering people known as *apiru* is found in a variety of Near Eastern texts.) The origin of the term is a puzzle.

16. birthstool Literally, “two stones,” most likely the two bricks on which women in labor squatted opposite the midwife during childbirth.

17. The midwives, fearing God The phrase translated as “the fear of God” (*yir•at Elohim*) is the closest the Torah comes to having a word for religion. The case of the midwives suggests that the essence of religion is not belief in the existence of God or any other theological precept, but belief that certain things are wrong because God has built standards of moral behavior into the universe. ([Gen. 20:11](#gen-20-11), Abraham is afraid that the Philistines will murder him and abduct his wife because “there is no fear of God in this place.”)

19. The midwives respond evasively out of a sense of self-preservation and their desire to continue to save lives.

midwives It is possible that the two names given here are not of individuals but guilds of midwives.

Shiphrah The name appears in a list of slaves attached to an Egyptian estate and is indicated as Asiatic. It comes from a Semitic root meaning “beauty.”

Puah This name, apparently meaning “young girl,” is attested on documents at Ugarit (an ancient Canaanite city whose buried library was discovered in 1929). Midrashic tradition has identified the two women with Jochebed and Miriam.

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would not be a slave, so would I not be a master.” An ancient rabbi taught: What made the work so unbearable? Not only that it was hard but that it seemed pointless. People are capable of working hard, but they burn out from a sense of futility, a sense that nothing will come of what they are doing.

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are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” 20And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. 21And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. 22Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

2 A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him three months. 3And when she could hold him no longer, she took a basket made of reeds and daubed it with slime and pitch; and she put the child in it, and laid it in the river’s edge, where it was found and taken care of. 4And Pharaoh’s daughter came down to wash in the river, and her maidens went down with her to bathe. 5As she was sitting by the river’s edge, the daughter of Pharaoh saw the basket and knew that it was a Hebrew child; and she opened it, and saw the child was healthy. 6And she asked the midwife who it was, and she said, “It is the Hebrew’s daughter.” 7Then Pharaoh’s daughter said to the midwife, “Put the child to the nurse of Pharaoh’s daughters, and bring her your wages.” 8So the midwife took the child and brought it to Pharaoh’s daughter; and she took the child and brought up the child as her own. 9And the child grew, and she brought up the child as her own son. 10And she said, “I gave birth to this child.” 11And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “What is your name?” And she said, “My name is Miriam.” 12And Pharaoh’s daughter said, “I will give you your name, and you shall be called Miriam.” 13And the child grew up, and he went out and became a man. 14And when he saw his own people, and knew that they were in slavery, he had compassion on his people, and heard their groans, and was very much stirred in heart. 15And he learned the works and the words of his people. 16And he came to Pharaoh and said, “I am the son of Hebrews, and I was brought up among your people.” 17And Pharaoh said, “Go to the sons of the Hebrews, and bring forth all the men of the house of Israel.” 18And Pharaoh said, “Why have you made such a request?” 19And Moses said, “I have learned the words and works of my people.” 20And Pharaoh said, “Who has told you these words?” 21And Moses said, “I have learned the words and works of my people.” 22And Pharaoh said, “I will not listen to you.” 23And Moses said, “I have learned the words and works of my people.” 24And Pharaoh said, “I will not listen to you.” 25And Moses said, “I have learned the words and works of my people.” 26And Pharaoh said, “I will not listen to you.” 27And Moses said, “I have learned the words and works of my people.” 28And Pharaoh said, “I will not listen to you.”


THE ABANDONMENT AND SALVATION OF MOSES (vv. 1–10)

1. man . . . woman This refers to Amram and Jochebed. Note the lack of personal names in this part of the story, except for Moses at the end.

2. she saw how beautiful he was The word ḥey (literally, “good”) usually means “good.” Here it might also convey the sense of “robust, healthy.”

Egyptian women Why does Pharaoh choose to believe this improbable excuse? The Hebrew word here translated “vigorous” literally means “like animals.” Pharaoh is ready to believe that the Israelites are virtually a different species, less human and less deserving of life than are the Egyptians, so that he can proceed with his program of persecution and slaughter.

22. all his people Why did Pharaoh involve all the people rather than leave it to the authorities or the army? Persecution cannot be successful without the complicity of the community.

CHAPTER 2

The story of Moses’ birth and early years contains many elements common to hero legends: The special child, endangered at birth but rescued, undergoes a period of separation and then returns as a changed person with a mission. But there is one notable difference. The typical hero, of noble birth, is raised by peasants and ultimately returns to his lofty origins. Moses, an Israelite raised in Pharaoh’s palace, returns to his people, as if to suggest that it was nobler to be a common Israelite than an Egyptian prince.

1. A certain man of the house of Levi The text implied that Moses was born shortly after his parents married. But we know that they had two older children, Miriam and Aaron. The Midrash resolves the problem in this way: Moses’ parents already had two children when Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite males would be killed. His father and mother divorced, his father declaring, “What is the point of having another child only to see him killed?” But Miriam reproached her father, saying, “You are worse than Pharaoh. Pharaoh only threatens the males; you eliminate the possibility of any child. Pharaoh’s decree may not be carried out, but your decision not to have children cer-
3. The desperate mother, because of the decree, takes every possible precaution to ensure the baby’s safety.

A wicker basket The receptacle is called tevah. The word appears elsewhere in the Bible only as the ark in which Noah and his family were saved from the waters of the Flood (Gen. 6:14). The use of the word here heightens our awareness of the infant’s vulnerability and of divine protection. The reminder of the Flood tells us once again that the birth of Moses signals a new era in history.

Wicker The Hebrew word gome is the “papyrus plant,” once abundant in the marshlands of the Nile delta. Its huge stems, often more than 10 feet high, were used by the Egyptians for a variety of purposes, especially for the construction of light boats. Both gome and tevah are Egyptian words, giving local color to the story.

Reeds The Hebrew word suf, also borrowed from Egyptian, is a “reed thicker.” By placing the basket among the reeds, the mother prevented it from being carried downstream.

His sister Miriam.

At a distance Thus she was inconspicuous and would not arouse suspicions that the child was not really abandoned.

5. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile An Egyptian princess would not have bathed publicly in the mighty, crocodile-infested river itself. This bathing place was no doubt one of the Nile’s many rivulets, where privacy and safety could be ensured. The mother of Moses probably selected that spot after observing the princess’s character and habits.

5. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile Would not the daughter of Pharaoh have servants to bring water for her bath? Bar Yohai suggests that she (perhaps an idealistic adolescent) opposed her father’s policy of murdering the Israelite children; she went to bathe in the Nile as a way of simultaneously identifying with Israel at the place of its suffering and cleansing herself of her father’s defiling policies [BT Sot. 12b]. Another commentator sees Pharaoh’s daughter as going along with her father’s policies until she saw the endangered Hebrew child. Until that moment, the Israelites had been an abstraction, and she was prepared to believe the worst about them. Once she encountered an innocent, vul-
be a Hebrew child.” 7Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” 8And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. 9And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

11Some time after that, when Moses had

MOSES IS RETURNED TO HIS MOTHER  
(vv. 7–10)

Ironically, the evil intentions of Pharaoh are unknowingly thwarted by his own daughter. The arrangements she makes follow a pattern found in Mesopotamian legal documents relating to the adoption of foundlings. These “wet nurse contracts” specify payment for the services of nursing and rearing the infant; they stipulate that, after weaning, the right of possession belongs to the one who paid for the child’s upbringing. That the princess can personally execute such a contract accords with the relatively high social and legal position of women in ancient Egypt. She possessed rights of inheritance and disposal of property and enjoyed a fair measure of economic independence. 10. The high infant mortality rate in the ancient world dictated that formal adoption and naming by the adoptive parent be postponed until after weaning, which took place at a much later age than in modern societies. Moses The Hebrew Moshe is of Egyptian origin. Its verbal stem ms’ means “to be born,” and the noun ms means “a child, son.” It is a frequent part of ancient Egyptian personal names, usually with the addition of the name of a god, as illustrated by Ahmose, Ptahmose, Ramose, and Thotmose. Two papyri from the time of Ramses II mention officials named Mosae.

nerable Israelite, however, she had to recognize her common humanity with them. “Only one who can hear the cry of Moses the infant will be able to properly understand the words of Moses the lawgiver” (Isaac Luria). A rabbinic tradition has it that Pharaoh’s daughter later joined the Israelite people at the time of the Exodus and that she stood at Sinai with them.
grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. 12 He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, “Why do you strike your fellow?” 14 He retorted, “Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! 15 When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

11. his kinsfolk  Literally, “his brethren.” In the Hebrew of this verse, the word for “his brethren” (ehav) is repeated, perhaps to emphasize that the years Moses spent in court circles did not alienate him from his people.ewitnessed their labors  Not as a detached observer but as one who identifies wholeheartedly with their suffering.

12. Outraged, Moses goes to the aid of the victim. He hesitates for a moment because he is aware that, by Egyptian law, he is about to commit an act that will forever cut his ties to the aristocratic society in which he was raised. Note that he takes action before God does (see 2:25). His looking “this way and that” indicates that he is calculating the cost and proceeding with deliberation.

be struck down  The same verb, “makkeh,” is used in v. 11 for the action of the Egyptian assailant. It can be a technical term for killing, as here.

15. Now an outcast, Moses flees for his life to the “land of Midian,” where he takes refuge. (The Midianites are described as the nomadic descendants of Abraham and Keturah in Gen. 25:2). “The land of Midian” was under the control of one or more of the five seminomadic tribes that, according to biblical sources, made up the Midianite confederation. There was an early history of close and friendly relations between Israel and the Midianites. The two peoples became enemies, however, in the period that followed the conquest of Canaan (see Num. 31).

a well  In the ancient Near East, wells were meeting places for shepherds, wayfarers, and townsfolk. It was most natural for newcomers to head for them.

responsibility, going out to join his kinsmen and take responsibility for righting the wrongs of society. It is not uncommon for a leader of an oppressed people to come from a privileged background: One thinks of Theodore Herzl, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. Such a person may be psychologically freer to act, and will be taken more seriously both by his followers and by his opponents.

“Witnessing an injustice and degradation of another, Moses feels the blow dealt to the other as though it were directed against himself. Breaking through the selfishness of his own ego, he discovers his neighbor. It is this discovery that, in the last resort, brings about the Exodus. The estrangement between men has disappeared. Before, all men were strangers, bearing not even the slightest resemblance to himself. Now all men are neighbors” [André Neher].

12. seeing no one about  Not because Moses wanted to act furtively but to indicate that because there was no one to administer justice, he had to take the law into his own hands.

14. Moses was frightened  When Moses learned that there were bullies and talebearers among the Israelites, he was afraid that they were unworthy of being saved (Mekh.). Suffering and persecution can bring forth nobility of spirit in some victims, and meanness of spirit in others. Moses shows his maturity as a leader by devoting his efforts to helping his people even though they are less than perfect.
16Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. 17When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” 18They answered, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” He said to his daughters, “Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread.” 19Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. 20She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land.”

23A long time after that, the king of Egypt

MOSES IN MIDIAN (vv. 16–22)

Once again, Moses reveals his intolerance of injustice. Although himself a fugitive, and alone in a strange land, he comes to the aid of others.

16. to draw water A common occupation of young women in that part of the world.

18. their father Reuel The name may mean “friend of God.” The title “priest of Midian” is attached only to Jethro (Hebrew Yitro) who, in other texts, is also referred to as Moses’ father-in-law. This raises the possibility that Yitro (yetir) is not a proper name but an honorific meaning “His Excellency.” Thus His Excellency (yitro) Reuel would be the father of the shepherdesses and the father-in-law of Moses. Tradition also refers to him as Hobab (Num. 10:29).

How is it Apparently, the girls experienced constant mistreatment at the hands of male shepherds, causing them to arrive home late regularly.

17. “Three times Moses intervenes on behalf of a weak person oppressed by a stronger one: first an Israelite beaten by an Egyptian, then an Israelite beaten by another Israelite, and finally the Midianite women harassed by shepherds. Had we been told only of the first clash, we might have doubted the unselfishness of his motives. Perhaps he had been motivated by the sense of solidarity with his own people . . . Had we been faced with the second example, we might still have had our doubts. Perhaps he was revolted by the disgrace of witnessing internal strife among his own folk. Came the third clash, where both parties were outsiders . . . his sense of justice and fair play was exclusively involved” (N. Leibowitz).

19. an Egyptian Identified by his garb.

21. be gave A father had the power to make such decisions.

22. Gershom The name is explained as a composite of the Hebrew words ger sham, “a stranger there,” signifying “a stranger in a foreign land.” This echoes God’s covenant with Abraham: “Your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs.” The “land” is Egypt, not Midian. The prediction of slavery that was made to Abraham had been fulfilled; the liberation is now at hand. The birth of the child is symbolic of the regeneration of Israel.

A TRANSITIONAL POSTSCRIPT (vv. 23–25)

These verses return us to the plight of the Israelites in Egypt and serve as a transition to the next development. God breaks His silence and directly
died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. 24 God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. 25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

3 Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove

THE COMMISSIONING OF MOSES (3:1–4:17)

The appointment of a leader to rally the demoralized people and represent them before the Egyptian authorities is the first stage in the process of liberation.

REVELATION AT THE BURNING BUSH (3:1–6)

1. into the wilderness He traveled westward, in the direction of Egypt from Midian. The term “wilderness” (midbar) indicates a region of uninhabited and unirrigated pastureland.

Horeb Some traditions seem to identify this location with Sinai, but they may not be identical. Horeb may have been the name of a wider region in which Mount Sinai, a specific peak, was located; perhaps that peak eventually lent its name out to God. They were groaning in their misery, with no certainty that anyone would hear them. (The Hebrew for “cry for help” is used in Job 24:12 in reference to the last groan of a dying person.) God responds to the Israelites, not because they besought divine help but because God sees their suffering. Heschel defined Jewish religion as “the awareness of God’s interest in Man.”

25. God looked upon the Israelites An ancient rabbi taught: What God saw was that despite their misery, the Israelites tried to help each other. For example, instead of each man looking out for himself, when one would finish making his quota of bricks, he would help out a weaker neighbor. Similar testimony from the Nazi death camps tells of how some prisoners would share their meager rations of food and clothing with the sick and needy.

and God took notice of them Unlike Pharaoh, who “did not know [i.e., care about] Joseph,” God is not only informed about Israel’s plight but is moved to sympathy. God feels the tension between compassion for the suffering of innocent people and the commitment to a long-range plan calling for their continuing to suffer until the time of redemption arrives, until the people are psychologically ready to claim their freedom.

CHAPTER 3

1. drove the flock into the wilderness Why
the flock into the wilderness, and came to Ho-reb, the mountain of God. 2 An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. 3 Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” 4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” 5 And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. This is the place on which the presence of God was called to Moses before God speaks.

in a blazing fire Fire, being nonmaterial, formless, mysterious, and luminous, is often used to describe the external manifestation of God.

a bush Hebrew s'neh occurs only here and in Deut. 33:16, where God is named “the Presence in the Bush.” S'neh is most likely a wordplay on S'neh (at Sinai) and an intimation of the Sinaiic revelation alluded to in verse 12. The bush has been identified as the thorny desert plant Rubus sanctus that grows near wadis and in moist soil.

“into the wilderness”? Rashi suggests that this was necessary to prevent the flocks from grazing on someone else’s land, for that would be theft. Sforno says that it was to be free of distractions, so that Moses could meditate. The Midrash tells a story of a lamb running away and Moses chasing it into the wilderness. God, taking notice, decides that this is a man of compassion, fit to be the leader of the people. The first interpretation emphasizes Moses’ commitment to justice and ethical behavior. The second sees him as a mystic, a man in search of God’s presence. The third describes his compassion.

2. An angel of the Lord appeared to him
Why did God appear to Moses in a thornbush? [a] The bush that burns but is not consumed symbolizes the Jewish people, perpetually attacked and endangered but perpetually surviving [Philo]. [b] The thornbush is the humblest, least impressive of trees and plants. God, who will take note of a tiny, oppressed people, chooses to appear in this lowly bush. “No place is devoid of God’s presence, not even a thornbush” [Exod. R. 2:5]. [c] For the Midrash, the thornbush symbolizes Israel’s experience in Egypt [and many other situations in life]. It is easier to put one’s hand into a thornbush than to extricate it; so Israel’s arrival in Egypt was comfortable compared to the difficulties and pain of their departure [Mekh. of bar Yohai]. How long must one watch a burning bush before realizing that it is not being consumed by the flames? How many miracles might be happening around us but we, in our haste, never stop to notice them?

5. Remove your sandals from your feet
Shoes not only carry the dirt and defilement of the world into the presence of God. They symbolize the effort of the well-to-do to shield themselves from the pain felt by the poor. “Remove your shoes” may be a way of saying to
holy ground. "I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

And the Lord continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hit-
tites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.”

11But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?” 12And He said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.”

13Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

**EXODUS 3:9**

Milk in the Bible is generally from the goat, “the little man’s cow.” A plentiful supply presupposes an abundance of goats, which in turn points to ample pasturage and the prospect of plentiful meat, hide, and wool. Honey in the Bible is predominantly the thick, sweet syrup produced from dates. The combination of milk and honey provides a highly nutritious diet. Some Arab tribes are known to subsist for months at a time solely on milk products and honey.

**region of the Canaanites** There are numerous biblical lists of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. The most comprehensive is that of Gen. 15:19–21, which names 10 peoples. Other lists register 7, 6, 5, or 3 ethnic groups. The origin of these rosters is unknown, as is the reason for the variations in number, order, and content.

10. **Come** This is the pivotal moment of God’s manifestation at the bush. God chooses Moses to be the emissary of the divine will, the human instrument by which the redemption of Israel is to be carried through. The biblical institution of the messenger prophet is established here.

**MOSES’ DIALOGUE WITH GOD** *(3:11–4:17)*

11. **Who am I** His immediate reaction is a deep sense of personal unworthiness. The prophet resisting his call is a universal theme in world prophecy (see Jer. 1:6). Moses carries it to an extreme, demonstrating his humility. This fits in with the biblical theme that God often chooses a weak vessel to exhibit His own power.

12. **I will be with you** God’s “being with” someone, an assurance of His protection, usually coincides with critical moments of human fear and indecision.

13. **that shall be your sign** The Hebrew for “sign” *(ot)* functions to corroborate either a promise or an appointment to office. But to what does the Hebrew for “that” *(zeh)* refer? Is it the spectacle at the bush? This would mean that the Burning Bush itself is the sign that affirms the divinely appointed nature of Moses’ mission. Or is it Moses’ unique ability to negotiate freely and safely with the all-powerful Pharaoh that will authenticate his calling?

14. **you shall worship** This phrase is a subtle hint to Moses on how to handle negotiations with the Egyptians. The motif of the worship of God as an objective of the Exodus is uttered time and again before Pharaoh.

**13. and they ask me, ‘What is His name!’** Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not need to know God’s name because God was a living presence in their lives. For the Israelites in Egypt, however, it was harder to believe in the reality of God. Therefore, they needed to have God introduced to them [MRE]. Jews have involved themselves in theology, speculating on...
And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’”

15And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak. By asking for God’s name, Moses denies knowledge of it, as Rashbam notes.

14. Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh

This phrase has been translated, “I Am That I Am,” “I Am Who I Am,” and “I Will Be What I Will Be.” It evokes YHVH, the specific proper name of Israel’s God, known also as the Tetragrammaton, “the four consonants.” The phrase also indicates that the earliest recorded understanding of the divine name was as a verb derived from a stem meaning “to be” (אָבַרי). Because it is the sound of wind and breath, the way in which we sense the invisible, it could express the quality of absolute Being, the eternal, unchanging, dynamic Presence. Or it could mean “He causes to be.” “YHVH” is the third-person masculine singular; “ehyeh” is the corresponding first-person singular. The latter is used here because name giving in the ancient world implied the yielding of power over the one named; hence, the divine name can proceed only from God. God reveals to Moses a name symbolizing the help needed for his task, without offering a “real” name, which would put God under human control.

During the Second Temple period the Tetragrammaton (Shem ha-M’forash) came to be regarded as charged with sanctity and magical potency. Therefore, its pronunciation ceased. It was replaced in speech by adonai, “Lord.” Often the vowels of “adonai” would accompany the letters of “YHVH” in written texts, which gave rise to the mistaken form “Jehovah” found in some Christian translations. The original pronunciation of “YHVH” was lost; modern attempts at recovery, such as “Yahweh,” are conjectural and have no support from tradition.

Taken together with the statement in 6:3, it would appear that the name YHVH came into prominence only as the characteristic personal name of the God of Israel in the time of Moses. Whether it was known before that time or not is questionable. It is of interest, though, that the various divine names found in Genesis are not used in the later biblical books, except occasionally in poetic texts. A new stage in the history of Israelite monotheism begins with the revelation of the divine name YHVH to Moses.

15. My name . . . My appellation

How I am addressed and referred to.

forever . . . for all eternity

God’s unvarying dependability ensures that His promises will be fulfilled.

declared as a God who will be with you. You cannot understand My nature, but you will know Me by My presence, and you will walk with Me when you follow My commands.” Buber understands it to mean, “I cannot be summoned or manipulated, as the magicians of Egypt invoke and manipulate their gods. In accordance with My character, again and again I stand by those whom I befriend.”

It is significant that this name of God is not a noun but a verb. The essence of Jewish theology is not the nature of God (“what God is”) but the actions of God (“what God does,” the difference that God makes in our lives). What, then, does God’s name mean? It may mean any or all of the following: God exists. God is more than we can comprehend. God, or our understanding of God, is constantly growing. God is present in our lives. God is with us in our efforts to do what is right but difficult.
EXODUS 3:16

This shall be My name forever, and I will be known to the Egyptians: I am YHVH.

Speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever.

16 "Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to us.

17 Yet I know that the king of Egypt will not listen to you; then you shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. We came to say to you, 'The LORD has taken note of your misery, the miseries of your hand, and is coming to rescue you with mighty acts and your hand, and with the hand of Pharaoh.'

18 They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. We have come to say to you, "The LORD has taken note of your misery, your hand, and the hand of Pharaoh.'

19 Yet I know that the king of Egypt will not listen to you; then you shall say to Pharaoh, "This shall be My name forever, when Pharaoh addresses and always with a demand for permission to worship in the wilderness. The denial of these reasonable demands of the Israelites reveals the brutal nature of Pharaoh’s tyrannical rule.

18. The LORD, the God of the Hebrews This name of God appears only in Exodus, invariably when Pharaoh is addressed and always with a demand for permission to worship in the wilderness. Although Pharaoh does not know YHVH, he never claims to be ignorant of "the God of the Hebrews." Perhaps this name, like "the God of the father," belongs to the pre-Mosaic history of Israelite religion and was widely used among the pastoral nomads of the region. That might be the reason Moses carefully identifies it with YHVH each time he uses it.

19. a greater might Literally "a strong hand," meaning the "hand" of God, mentioned again in verse 20, as opposed to the oppressive "hand of Egypt" of verse 8. It may simply mean...
So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go. 21 And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. 22 Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians.”

But Moses spoke up and said, “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?” 2 The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” “[by] force,” a prediction that God knows all attempts to leave will be unsuccessful until the Egyptians are forced to let them go.

20. wonders Hebrew: *ni'fla'ot*, almost always used of God’s timely, direct intervention in human affairs—not necessarily expressed through the suspension of the laws of nature.

21.  This fulfills the promise in Gen. 15:14.

22. borrow Hebrew: *sha'alah*, which here means “ask for.” Early Jewish interpretations looked upon these spoils as well-deserved compensation to the Israelites for their centuries of unpaid forced labor (see Deut. 15:13).

4:1. Moses presents his third objection: He might be rejected by the Israelite masses. God had mentioned only the elders, not the people. Knowledge of the divine name might not be sufficient confirmation of a claim to be divinely commissioned.

THE SIGNS (4:2–9)

This time Moses’ argument is not refuted. In-
And he replied, “A rod.” He said, “Cast it on the ground.” He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it.

4Then the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail”—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand—“that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.”

6The Lord said to him further, “Put your hand into your bosom.” He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! 7And He said, “Put your hand back into your bosom.”—He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body.—8And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second. 9And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed

stead, he is instructed how to dispel popular skepticism should it materialize. It is not surprising that the signs Moses will produce in Egypt possess a distinctly Egyptian coloration, for magic was part of everyday life in Egypt. The signs taught to Moses are intended to validate his claim to be the divinely chosen instrument for the redemption of the Israelites. They also function to establish the superiority of Moses over the Egyptian magicians and to affirm the greater might of Israel’s God over the gods of the Egyptians.

The First Sign (vv. 2–5)

2. What is that in your hand? The query serves to verify that the object is an ordinary shepherd’s crook, not invest with magical powers.

3. Moses recoils before the transformed rod, thereby expressing his astonishment at the marvel, and intimating that God, not he, is in command of the situation.

a snake The rod in ancient Egypt was a symbol of royal authority and power; and the snake represented the patron cobra-goddess of Lower Egypt in the north. Worn over the forehead on the headdress of the pharaohs, the snake symbolized divinely protected sovereignty and served as a menacing emblem of death dealt to enemies of the crown.

4. by the tail Normally a foolhardy act, because snakes are picked up by their necks, it manifests Moses’ faith in God.

The Second Sign (vv. 6–7)

6. encrusted The Hebrew word tzara•at is usually translated “leprosy.” But it has none of the major symptoms of that malady, and the descriptions of it in Lev. 13–14 are incompatible with Hansen’s disease. The comparison to snow is not in regard to its whiteness but to its flakiness. The appearance and disappearance of the encrustation is sudden and, therefore, quite startling. The Bible regards the affliction as an ominous sign of divine retribution for human wrongdoing.

The Third Sign (vv. 8–9)

8. pay heed to Literally, “listen to the voice of.” The sign “speaks”; it testifies to the divine commission.

9. The third sign will become the first plague. The Nile—the life-blood of Egypt—was deified. Thus this sign, like the first, signifies God’s sovereign rule over nature and the subordination of Egypt and its gods to YHVH.
you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it—the water that you take from the Nile—will turn to blood on the dry ground.”

10. But Moses said to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” 11. And the Lord said to him, “Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12. Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.” 13. But he said, “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.” 14. The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, “There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do— and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, and take with

10. Moses puts forth his final objection: he is inadequate to the task of being God’s spokesman before the Egyptian court. The precise nature of the deficiency is unclear, but it should be noted that other prophets, such as Jeremiah, made similar claims. Traditional commentators understood it as a speech defect. Prophetic eloquence is not an inborn talent but a divine gift granted for a special purpose.

14. Aaron  Mentioned here for the first time, he is three years older than Moses. the Levite A strange designation, because Moses too was from the tribe of Levi. The Hebrew can be translated as “your brother Levite.”

16. your spokesman Hebrew: peh, literally “mouth,” i.e., mouthpiece. Moses will be to Aaron as God is to Moses. It is the role of the prophet to speak the word of God (see Exod. 7:1).
you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs."

18Moses went back to his father-in-law Jether and said to him, “Let me go back to my kinsmen in Egypt and see how they are faring.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.”

19The Lord said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead.” So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God with him.

20And the Lord said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go. 22Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord:"

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This section covers the events between the two great divine manifestations of 3:1–4:17 and 6:2–8.

**LEAVE-TAKING AND DEPARTURE (4:18–23)**

18. Moses returns to Midian with the sheep. He needs to obtain his father-in-law’s formal permission to leave his household (see 2:21). He does not reveal the true reason for returning to Egypt, probably because Jethro might think the mission to be impossible and withhold his consent.

- **my kinsmen** The phrase links the return with the original flight, which was a consequence of his having gone out “to his kinsfolk” (2:11).
- **how they are faring** Literally, “whether they are still alive.”

19. Apparently still fearing for his personal safety, Moses delays; hence the divine directive and reassurance.

20. **his wife and sons** According to 18:2–5, Jethro brought Zipporah and the two sons from Midian to Sinai after the Exodus. This shows that they were not in Egypt all the while.

- **sons** Only Gershom has so far been mentioned (2:22, but see 18:3–6). The ancient translations read “son” here.

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**rod of God** The shepherd’s crook mentioned in verses 2–4. In the ancient Near East, gods were depicted carrying rods as symbols of authority and as emblems of supernatural power.

**21. stiffen his heart** The motif of the stiffening, or hardening, of Pharaoh’s heart appears exactly 20 times in Exodus. Half of the references are descriptions of Pharaoh’s character (i.e., he hardens his own heart). Half of them are attributed to divine causality, a form of “measure for measure” (see *D’rash* to 7:3). In the biblical conception, psychological faculties are considered to be concentrated in the heart. Human behavior is determined in the heart, which is regarded as the seat of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual life of the individual. “Hardening of the heart” thus expresses a state of arrogant moral degeneracy, unresponsive to reason and incapable of compassion. Pharaoh’s personal guilt is beyond question. Pharaoh’s character is now his destiny. Deprived of any chance of relenting, he is irresistibly drawn to a doom of his own making. Note that repentance is not even considered a possibility here. It is a religious notion that evidently developed after the time of the Exodus story.

22. **Thus says the Lord** Hebrew: *koh amar YHVH*. This is the first use of what was to become...
Israel is My first-born son. 23I have said to you, “Let My son go, that he may worship Me,” yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.”

24At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. 25So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin.

the formula for introducing a prophetic address. It is the regular messenger formula (Gen. 32:5, 45:9), similar to the opening words of ancient Near Eastern royal heralds. It secures the attention of an audience while emphasizing the unimpeachable authority behind the ensuing proclamation. Moses is to approach the Egyptian king as the emissary of the sovereign Lord of the universe.

My first-born son The relationship of Israel to God is expressed poetically. All peoples are recognized as children under the universal fatherhood of God, but Israel has the singular status of the first to acknowledge YHVH and thus to enter into a special relationship with Him. As such, Israel enjoys God’s devoted care and protection. It is this that lies behind the demand of verse 23 that the Israelites be allowed to worship in the wilderness. Denial of this right by Pharaoh will incur punishment.

23. your first-born son Pharaoh here stands for all Egyptians, parallel to the collective “Israel.” The threat alludes to the 10th plague, the one that finally breaks the tyrant’s obstinacy.

NIGHT ENCOUNTER AND CIRCUMCISION (vv. 24–26)
This strange story is not easily understood. It must echo an ancient myth whose background has been lost to us. The account of Moses’ return to Egypt is interrupted by a three-verse story that seems disconnected from the previous narrative and makes no mention of Moses. Like Jacob’s wrestling with the angel at the Jabbok River, the confrontation with God is so terrifying that it makes the confrontation with Pharaoh minor.

This sketchy tale of the mysterious night incident is not entirely dissociated from the larger context. The introductory phrase, “At a night encampment on the way,” establishes a chronologic linkage with verse 20. It is connected with the passages that immediately precede and follow it by several verbal tie-ins. Thus the phrase “sought to kill” in verse 24 echoes “who sought to kill you” in verse 19; “her son’s” in verse 25 recalls “sons,” “My . . . son,” “your . . . son” in verses 20, 22, and 23; and the Hebrew for “encountered him” (va-yifg’sheihu) in verse 24 is identical with that for “met him” in verse 27. There is also a correspondence between the blood of circumcision and the visible sign of blood on the paschal sacrifice. In both instances, God comes as a destroyer, and blood averts evil (4:26, 12:7,13,22–23). This brief narrative underscores the vital significance of the institution of circumcision and the serious consequences of its neglect.

24. kill him The sequence of verses suggests that it was Moses’ firstborn, Gershom, whose life was imperiled. If it was Moses who was attacked, the purpose was to temper him, making him more prepared for the dangers that await him.

25. Zipporah As the daughter of a Midianite priest, she may have been familiar with the rite of circumcision, a practice found among the an-

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH
4:25. cut off her son’s foreskin According to Jewish law, the father bears primary responsibility to have his sons circumcised, but community authorities or, as here, the mother can arrange for the circumcision if the father fails to do so. Ultimately, if a Jewish man has not been circumcised, he bears the responsibility to have himself circumcised (BT Kid. 29a).

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foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, “You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!”

26 And when He let him alone, she added, “A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.”

27 The Lord said to Aaron, “Go to meet Moses in the wilderness.” He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. 28 Moses told Aaron about all the things that the Lord had committed to him and all the signs about which He had instructed him. 29 Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. 30 Aaron repeated all the words

of a Midianite priest, joined herself to the people of Israel and to the God of Israel, she would be an early example of the convert to Judaism who takes its demands more seriously than the native-born Jew. Buber sees this strange incident as an “event of the night,” which typically happens to religious leaders as a psychological reaction to their newly won certainty, an intuition that the task they have undertaken on God’s behalf will be harder than they thought.
that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and he performed the signs in the sight of the people, 31 and the people were convinced. When they heard that the Lord had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go.” They answered, “The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days." 

31. As predicted (vv. 8–9), the signs are accepted as testimony to the reliability of Moses and the truth of his message. 

bowed low Here, this is a gesture of thanksgiving.

FIRST AUDIENCE WITH PHARAOH (5:1–6:1)

The diplomatic approach attempted by Moses and Aaron ends in failure, leading to another new phase in the history of Israel in Egypt. The struggle for freedom begins in earnest. This chapter is also the introduction to the narrative of the plagues.

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION WITH THE COURT (vv. 1–5)

1. Afterward Upon meeting with popular acceptance.

God of Israel This title more precisely defines the name YHVH.

celebrate a festival The Hebrew for “festival” (ḥag) is a sacrificial feast associated with a pilgrimage to a sanctuary.

2. Who is the Lord? A contemptuous retort. It contrasts starkly with the humble response of Moses to the divine call: “Who am I?” In Egyptian doctrine, Pharaoh was the incarnation of a god, with unlimited power. Part of God’s purpose is to make the divine name known.

I do not know I do not acknowledge His authority.

3. The reaction of Moses and Aaron is restrained. They seem surprised and cowed by the king’s aggressive arrogance.

God of the Hebrews They use the language prescribed in 3:18, but they omit “the Lord” because the monarch already has denied any knowledge of Him.

lest He strike us For disregarding our obligation. Pharaoh should be concerned about this, because he will lose our labor. “Us” may be an intimation that the Egyptians too will be stricken.

CHAPTER 5

1. Moses and Aaron went What happened to the elders and leaders who were to go with them? A midrash tells us that the whole group set out to confront Pharaoh, but one by one, the others dropped out for reasons of timidity. Only Moses and Aaron remained, two old men standing against the power of the Egyptian empire (Exod. R. 5:14).

2. Pharaoh refuses to free the slaves, not because it is in his economic interest to keep them, but because he “does not know God,” i.e., he does not recognize that certain kinds of behavior, such as abusing other people, are wrong. “Divine sovereignty is precisely what Pharaoh mocks at the outset of his power struggle with Moses. It is not a matter of oversized egos in battle but of the limits of human authority” (Schorsch).
into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He strike us with pestilence or sword.”

4But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? Get to your labors!” 5And Pharaoh continued, “The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors!”

6That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, 7“You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God!’ 9Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises.”

10So the taskmasters and foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to Moses and Aaron, 4But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? Get to your labors!” 5And Pharaoh continued, “The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors!”

6That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, 7“You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God!’ 9Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises.”

10So the taskmasters and foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says

**pestilence or sword**  These are conventional symbols of divine judgment that will make their appearance later in Egypt.

4. **Pharaoh treats the request for time to worship as a scheme to avoid work.**

5. **This statement may explain the economic reasons for refusing the request:** The Israelites are so numerous that any interruption of their labors would entail an enormous loss of productivity. It might also take up the original theme of Exod.1:7,9–10 that the huge population would constitute a power to be reckoned with were they to quit working. Either way, the second half of the verse is an exclamation.

**people of the land**  Meaning the common laborers, perhaps a derisive term.

**A PEREMPTORY REFUSAL (vv. 6–9)**

Moses and Aaron are silent. The audience with the king is terminated abruptly. The tyrant loses no time in issuing orders designed to drive home to the Israelites the futility of entertaining any hope of easing their labors.

**6. taskmasters and foremen**  In the Egyptian slave-labor system the workers were organized into manageable gangs, each headed by a foreman from among their own. He, in turn, was directly responsible to his superior, the “taskmaster.” The foremen were Israelites; the taskmasters, Egyptian.

7–8. **The new directive did not demand “bricks without straw,” as the English saying goes. Rather, it ordered the brickmakers to collect their own straw; until then it had been supplied by the state. Chopped straw or stubble was a crucial ingredient in the manufacture of bricks. It was added to the mud from the Nile, then shaped in a mold and left to dry in the sun. The straw acted as a binder, and the acid released by the decay of the vegetable matter greatly enhanced the plastic and cohesive properties of the brick, thus preventing shrinking, cracking, and loss of shape.**

**to our God**  Pharaoh does not recognize the Lord and so refrains from using the divine name.

9. **deceitful promises**  This refers back to 4:29–31. Egyptian intelligence must have reported about the promises of redemption.

**THE OPPRESSION INTENSIFIES (vv. 10–14)**

10. **Thus says Pharaoh**  As opposed to “Thus
Pharaoh: I will not give you any straw. You must go and get the straw yourselves wherever you can find it; but there shall be no decrease whatever in your work.” Then the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. And the taskmasters pressed them, saying, “You must complete the same work assignment each day as when you had straw.” And the foremen of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. “Why,” they were asked, “did you not complete the prescribed amount of bricks, either yesterday or today, as you did before?”

Then the foremen of the Israelites came to Pharaoh and cried: “Why do you deal thus with your servants? No straw is issued to your servants, yet they demand of us: Make bricks! Thus your servants are being beaten, when the fault is with your own people.” He replied, “You are shirkers, shirkers! That is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lorp.’ Be off now to your work! No straw shall be issued to you, but you must produce your quota of bricks!”

Now the foremen of the Israelites found themselves in trouble because of the order, “You must not reduce your daily quantity of bricks.” As they left Pharaoh’s presence, they came upon Moses and Aaron standing in their path, and they said to them, “May the Lorp look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us.” Then Moses returned to the Lorp and said, “O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this

says the Lorp” (4:22; 5:1). Pharaoh is now on a collision course with the God of Israel.

13–14. According to the chain of command, the pressure would have fallen on the Israelite foremen.

THE FOREMEN PROTEST (vv. 15–18)

16. the fault is with your own people We are being treated unfairly.
people? Why did You send me? 23Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.”

6 Then the Lord said to Moses, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.”

returned to the Lord He retreated into seclusion to commune with God.
6:1. a greater might Literally, “a strong hand.” Note the irony. Pharaoh not only will let you go; he will force you to go. See Comment to Exod. 3:19.
This haftarah alternates between promises of hope for the people Israel and threats of destruction. It opens with a vision of national renewal and it concludes the two sections of threats against Israel (27:7–11, 28:1–13) with passages promising redemption and renewal (27:12–13, 29:22–23). The prophet predicts fulfillment of the central hope for an ingathering of the people Israel from the distant reaches of Assyria and Egypt (Isa. 27:13). This will be a new exodus, a counterpoint to the original Exodus anticipated in the parashah.

The tension between hope and doom, between promises and threats, is expressed through the imagery of botany. The opening verse depicts Israel striking roots in the land, to sprout (yatzitz) and to blossom with a prodigious growth (27:6). By contrast, the faithless receiving punishment are depicted as broken boughs stripped of all growth, with no future (27:10–11). The people gathered from their exile are imagined as collected grain (27:12). The destruction of Ephraim—which symbolizes the northern kingdom—is imagined in terms of “an early fig / Before the fruit harvest” devoured by all comers (28:4). The “proud crowns” (ateret gei•ut) of “glorious beauty” (tz’vi tif•arto) on the head of Ephraim are likened to “wilted flowers” (tzitzat novel) “trampled underfoot” (28:1,4). This image is counterpoised to the splendor of God, who “shall become a crown of beauty (ateret tz’vi) and a diadem of glory (tz’frat tif•arah) for the remnant of His people” (28:5). The contrast provides a unifying figure for the overall proclamation and marks the difference between doom and divinity.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The Book of Exodus begins with a reference to “the sons of Israel who came (ha-ba•im) to Egypt with Jacob,” where they settled and “increased very greatly, so that the land was filled (va•timmalei) with them” (Exod. 1:1,7). Similarly, the prophetic lesson opens with reference to the people of Jacob/Israel who “[in days] to come [ha-ba-im]” shall “strike root” in their homeland, and “the world shall be covered [u-va•u] with fruit” (Isa. 27:6). Through such verbal echos, the Sages linked the promise of the haftarah to the descent of ancient Israelites to Egypt. Just as Moses had beseeched Pharaoh to permit the Israelites to worship God in the wilderness (Exod. 5:1), Isaiah foresees service of the Lord as part of a new exodus: “in that day, a great ram’s horn shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come (u-va•u) and worship the L ORD on the holy mount (har ha•kodesh), in Jerusalem” (Isa. 27:13). The physical restoration of the nation to its homeland will have a spiritual component as well. The final words of the prophecy add a more inward dimension, betokening a transformation of the spirit, with the promise that a future generation will perceive the presence of the Lord in its midst and “hallow (yakdishu) My name” (29:23).

The parashah states that God put His awesome signs “upon” or (literally) “in the midst” (b’kirbo) of the Egyptians, so that they might recognize His greatness and release the people Israel from bondage (Exod. 3:20). The haftarah (Isa. 29:23) complements that image, stating that the renewal of the people Israel will be realized through an awakening to God’s mysterious work “in his midst” (b’kirbo). This will be a transformation of mind and heart, a release from mere earthliness to godly sensibility. This too will be a new exodus, that is, a re-rooting of the self in days to come (Isa. 27:6).
27 [In days] to come Jacob shall strike root,  
Israel shall sprout and blossom,  
And the face of the world  
Shall be covered with fruit.

Was he beaten as his beater has been?  
Did he suffer such slaughter as his slayers?  
Assailing them with fury unchained,  
His pitiless blast bore them off  
On a day of gale.

Assuredly, by this alone  
Shall Jacob’s sin be purged away;  
This is the only price  
For removing his guilt:  
That he make all the altar-stones  
Like shattered blocks of chalk—  
With no sacred post left standing,  
Nor any incense altar.

Thus fortified cities lie desolate,
Homesteads deserted, forsaken like a wilderness;
There calves graze, there they lie down
And consume its boughs.

When its crown is withered, they break;
Women come and make fires with them.
For they are a people without understanding;
That is why
Their Maker will show them no mercy,
Their Creator will deny them grace.

And in that day, the Lord will beat out [the peoples like grain] from the channel of the Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt; and you shall be picked up one by one, O children of Israel!

And in that day, a great ram’s horn shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come and worship the Lord on the holy mount, in Jerusalem.

Ah, the proud crowns of the drunkards of Ephraim,
Whose glorious beauty is but wilted flowers
On the heads of men bloated with rich food,
Who are overcome by wine!

Lo, my Lord has something strong and mighty,
Like a storm of hail,
A shower of pestilence.

Isaiah 28. The prophet condemns Ephraim (the northern kingdom) for its besotted ways. The focus is on the nation at large; the reference to “these are also” (v. 7) extends the condemnation to priests and prophets. Some commentators have taken this reference to mark the inclusion of Judeans in the rebuke (Ibn Ezra). The projection of doom suggests that this unit precedes the destruction of Samaria in 722–721 B.C.E.

13. the strayed . . . and the expelled These terms, translations of ov’dim and niddahim, respectively, reflect a sense of loss and abandonment (see also Jer. 27:10 and Ezek. 34:11–16). The promise gives comfort to the scattered exiles that their restoration is near.
Something like a storm of massive, torrential rain
Shall be hurled with force to the ground.
Trampled underfoot shall be
The proud crowns of the drunkards of Ephraim,
The wilted flowers—
On the heads of men bloated with rich food—
That are his glorious beauty.
They shall be like an early fig
Before the fruit harvest;
Whoever sees it devours it
While it is still in his hand.

In that day, the Lord of Hosts shall become
a crown of beauty and a diadem of glory for the remnant of His people, and a spirit of judgment for him who sits in judgment and of valor for those who repel attacks at the gate.

But these are also muddled by wine
And dazed by liquor:
Priest and prophet
Are muddled by liquor;
They are confused by wine,
They are dazed by liquor;
They are muddled in their visions,
They stumble in judgment.
Yea, all tables are covered
With vomit and filth,
So that no space is left.

To whom would he give instruction?
To whom expound a message?
To those newly weaned from milk,
Just taken away from the breast?
That same mutter upon mutter,

The prophet despairs of making sense to the nation. He speaks to the people in a kind of prattle, ironically alluding to divine law and
Murmur upon murmur,
Now here, now there!”

Truly, as one who speaks to that people in a stammering jargon and an alien tongue is he who declares to them, “This is the resting place, let the weary rest; this is the place of repose.” They refuse to listen. To them the word of the Lord is:

“Mutter upon mutter,
Murmur upon murmur,
Now here, now there.”
And so they will march,
But they shall fall backward,
And be injured and snared and captured.

Assuredly, thus said the Lord to the House of Jacob, Who redeemed Abraham:

No more shall Jacob be shamed,
No longer his face grow pale.

For when he—that is, his children—behold what My hands have wrought in his midst, they will hallow My name.

Men will hallow the Holy One of Jacob
And stand in awe of the God of Israel.

punishment (cf. v. 11), apparently mocking the way God’s words sound to the people. Thus the words “mutter and murmur” (tzav l’tzav kav l’kav) are playing with the notions of commandment (tzav) and measure (kav), both of which were ignored by the people. Alternatively, the prophet mockingly suggests that what the people hear as mere blather (tzav/kav) is in truth God’s own command (tzav) and measure of judgment (kav) against them.

Isaiah 29:22–23. The prophecy concludes on a positive note. God, who redeemed Abraham, will redeem his descendants, and all will hallow the Lord for His mighty acts.
In this haftarah, Jeremiah is commissioned as a messenger to deliver God’s word. Jeremiah’s inauguration is reinforced by two visionary signs (1:11–12, 13–15), which introduce the themes of divine providence and approaching doom.

The call to prophecy (1:4–10) is presented as an autobiographical fragment. God’s word strikes terror in Jeremiah’s heart, but his fear is countered by a promise of divine protection and verbal inspiration, a promise repeated at the end of the chapter in the image of an inviolable city (vv. 18–19). The prophet’s cry of woe (ahah) and the divine exhortation not to fear capture the mood of anxiety.

A highly stylized literary pattern captures this private moment in Jeremiah’s life, presenting him as a true prophet in the standard mode. The same pattern is also preserved in the prophetic call of Moses (see Exod. 3:10–12, 4:15; cf. Isa. 6:5–7; Ezek. 2:3–3:11). Like Moses before him, Jeremiah is sent forth to prophesy against his personal inclination but with divine assurances. The haftarah closes as usual with a hopeful assertion (2:1–3).

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The parashah and the haftarah are linked through the prophetic commissions of Moses and Jeremiah, dramatizing the continuity of divine guidance throughout the generations and repeating a pattern of divine address, human resistance, and divine assurance. Moses and Jeremiah function as intermediaries between the divine spirit and the people. Through them it is taught that Israel’s life is determined not by earthly political powers but by divine care and judgment. They thus challenge the peoples’ perceptions of the everyday (the Israelites’ weariness of spirit in the time of Moses and Israel’s political vision in Jeremiah’s day). The prophets, who sense the enormity of their task and their personal inadequacy, are strengthened by divine reassurances as they set out to confront the resistance of others.

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the Lord came to him in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign, and through-
out the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month.

4The word of the Lord came to me:

5Before I created you in the womb, I selected you;
Before you were born, I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations.

6I replied:
Ah, Lord God!
I don’t know how to speak,
For I am still a boy.
7And the Lord said to me:
Do not say, “I am still a boy,”
But go wherever I send you
And speak whatever I command you.
8Have no fear of them,
For I am with you to deliver you
—declares the Lord.

9The Lord put out His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me: Herewith I put My words into your mouth.

10See, I appoint you this day
Over nations and kingdoms:
To uproot and to pull down,
3. until the end of the eleventh year . . . in the fifth month  Jerusalem actually fell on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah’s 11th year (Jer. 39:2, 52:5–6).

5. Before I created you This translation follows the version of the Hebrew text as read (k’rei). This yields the word “etzorkha,” which is derived from the root ʿetz (create). The motif of creation in the womb occurs in ancient Near Eastern royal annals (Assyrian and Egyptian), where it indicates the divine appointment of a king. The version of

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a prophet concerning the nations This phrase has long puzzled commentators, because Jeremiah often speaks to the Israelites—not only to the nations. Rashi and Radak refer to verse 7 to maintain that both Israel and the gentiles were referred to in this verse, because the commission re-
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant.

11The word of the L ORD came to me: What do you see, Jeremiah? I replied: I see a branch of an almond tree.
12The L ORD said to me:
You have seen right,
For I am watchful to bring My word to pass.

13And the word of the L ORD came to me a second time: What do you see? I replied:
I see a steaming pot,
Tipped away from the north.
14And the L ORD said to me:
From the north shall disaster break loose
Upon all the inhabitants of the land!
15For I am summoning all the peoples
Of the kingdoms of the north
—declares the L ORD.

They shall come, and shall each set up a throne
Before the gates of Jerusalem,
Against its walls roundabout,
And against all the towns of Judah.
16And I will argue My case against them
For all their wickedness:
They have forsaken Me
And sacrificed to other gods
And worshiped the works of their hands.

17So you, gird up your loins,
Arise and speak to them
All that I command you.
Do not break down before them,
Lest I break you before them.

fors to the nations who will exact judgment on Israel (vv. 5,10), a theme that dominates the vision of the pot (vv. 13–15).

13–14. steaming pot The translation states that the “steaming” (nafu•ah) pot is “tipped away from the north” (v. 13), thereby symbolizing the
18 I make you this day
A fortified city,
And an iron pillar,
And bronze walls
Against the whole land—
Against Judah's kings and officers,
And against its priests and citizens.
19 They will attack you,
But they shall not overcome you;
For I am with you—declares the Lord—to save you.

2 The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 2 Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the Lord:

I accounted to your favor
The devotion of your youth,
Your love as a bride—
How you followed Me in the wilderness,
In a land not sown.

Israel is holy to the Lord,
The first fruits of His harvest.
All who eat of it shall be held guilty;
Disaster shall befall them
—declares the Lord.

outbreak (sippatah) of the destruction from that region (v. 14). But the Hebrew formulation is unclear, and commentators have suggested, with good reason, that the pot was actually facing north to receive the evil (Radak, Kara, Luzzatto).

Jeremiah 2:2. The positive portrayal of Israel's youthful past and the marital symbolism of the Covenant contradict the repeated episodes of Israel's faithlessness found in the Torah. The various depictions of Israel's relationship with God reflect different streams of tradition.

3. Jeremiah's depiction of the nation as a holy people articulates the theology of Deuteronomy (see Deut. 7:6), which revises the conditional nature of the people's holy status found in Exod. 19:4–6. In that context of Exodus, Israel may become holy if it observes God's teachings. The revision in Deuteronomy deems Israel holy per se and, therefore, obligated to fulfill its covenantal obligations.

In its original context, this verse described past events (see 2:4–8). But as the climax to this haftarah, its meaning shifts; it becomes a prophecy of hope.