

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : שמות

1. This week's Sidra takes its name from its opening words and, as with the other Chumoshim, also gives its name to this whole Book, the second, of the Five Books of the Torah of which this is the first Sidra.
2. The Sidra begins by listing the names of the heads of the family of Yaakov who came down to Egypt. Originally, they were invited by Par'o, the king of Egypt, to come down from the Land of Kenaan and join Yosef, Yaakov's son, whom Par'o had appointed as the Viceroy of Egypt. When they first came down, they were therefore the honoured guests of the Egyptian people, for the Egyptians were grateful to the family and people of Yosef. It was because of Yosef's foresight and efforts that, firstly, the land and its people were spared from the desolation of the seven years of famine and, secondly, through his plan Egypt had become exceedingly wealthy and powerful. With time, the family of Yaakov increased greatly and their presence became strong, first in the region of Goshen, which had been set aside for them, and then throughout the land of Egypt.
3. But time passes. Yosef and his brothers died. And there rose up in Egypt a king who chose not to recognize the great service that Yosef had done for the country. He then claimed that the Hebrews posed some sort of a threat to the safety of his people. Using this as a pretext, he and his advisers planned to subjugate the Hebrew People and to enslave them. Not suspecting anything so sinister, the Hebrews initially answered the king's appeals to their feelings of patriotism towards their adopted country. They readily volunteered their services in the programme of extensive building work of storage-cities that had been drawn up. But the Hebrews then quickly found themselves entrapped in the imposition of labour that intensified by the day. The demands made upon them increased. All pretence of their work being voluntary faded quickly and they soon found that they were not able to escape from their oppressors, either. The Hebrew people had been duped into becoming slaves in Egypt.
4. Over the months and years, their situation worsened. The years stretched into decades and as time passed, the Hebrews resigned themselves to this state of affairs and that they could not help themselves out of their plight. They had hardly a moment to think of anything else but the heavy workload and physical burdens placed upon them by the Egyptian taskmasters, enforced with cruel beatings and torture.
5. But then, with the Egyptian state thus dependent upon a slave economy, Par'o the king of Egypt was now afraid that his Hebrew slaves might rise up and fight for their freedom, bringing economic ruin to his country. Par'o was informed by his astrologers that they foresaw that a future leader of the Hebrews was about to be born and Par'o was fearful that eventually this person might lead them to freedom. Acting on the advice of his astrologers and Court officials, Par'o then decreed that all Hebrew boys were to be killed at birth by being thrown into the River Nile. As the stars foretold that

this birth was imminent, Par'o and his advisers became more frantic and the decree was rigorously implemented. As the time of his birth came closer still, the stars seemed to indicate ambiguously that this leader was to be both, an Egyptian and a Hebrew. In response, and until this perceived threat to Egypt had passed, the decree was therefore temporarily broadened to included all male children, even those of the Egyptian people themselves.

6. When Mosheh was born, his mother Yocheved managed to conceal him for some time. But the danger was very great and so, in a bid to save him and yet at the same time comply literally with the king's edict (for failure to do so was punished with death) she hid him amongst the bulrushes in the river. His older sister Miriam kept watch at a distance. Whenever the scene would be clear, she hoped, she would bring him to his mother when he needed feeding. After all, she thought, it would be only a short time before this terrible decree came to an end. But then Princess Bityoh, the daughter of Par'o himself, comes down to bathe in the river, and just there where Mosheh is hidden! She discovers the basket of reeds and realizes that the baby boy must be one of the Hebrews. But she has pity on the child, and she takes him as her foster-child, later giving him the name "Mosheh." Thus, Mosheh is brought up in the palace of Par'o, with his mother Yocheved paid from the royal coffers to nurse him.
7. As he grows up, the young Prince Mosheh interests himself in the sufferings of his brother-Hebrews. The very first time that he ventured out to one of the work sites where they are building a storage-city, he saves a Hebrew from a mercilessly cruel beating by an Egyptian slave-driver. Making sure that no-one was there, he kills the Egyptian tormentor and hides the body in the sand. But the next day, when Mosheh tries to stop a quarrel between two Hebrews, one of them rebukes Mosheh for interfering and asks in a loud voice if he would perhaps kill him as he had killed the Egyptian the day before — and so Mosheh's deed becomes known to the Egyptians and he has to escape from Egypt to save his life. He flees to Midyon and is given shelter there by Yisro, the lord of that region.
8. And so the one man in the whole of the land of Egypt who had shown any care for the Hebrew slaves and who might have alleviated their plight, is now a fugitive in a distant country — ironically because of a Hebrew slave that he was trying to help — and he is powerless to help them. Mosheh stays in Midyon with Yisro as the shepherd of his sheep. He marries Tziporah, Yisro's daughter and there is born to them a son, Gershom, meaning, "a stranger there." (Mosheh's heart was with his brothers. As long as he is away from his people, he wanted to keep in mind that "I am a stranger in a strange land.")
9. Meanwhile, back in Egypt the slavery of the Hebrews becomes relentlessly more harsh and more cruel so that the suffering Hebrew slaves cannot even think of redemption. But HaShem has not forgotten His People and He knows how He will fulfil His promise to redeem them.
10. Far away in the land of Midyon, Mosheh is tending the sheep of Yisro his father-in-law. HaShem sees his kindness and care for these helpless creatures and He is determined that Mosheh shall now become the shepherd of His sheep, the Hebrew People. When

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Mosheh takes the sheep to graze a fair distance from the usual pasture, an angel of HaShem appears to Mosheh in the Burning Bush and HaShem commands Mosheh that he is to return to Egypt to deliver the Hebrews from their misery. Mosheh pleads with HaShem that he is not worthy of such a task. He tells HaShem that he is anxious that the people might not listen to him. Furthermore, he is concerned that if he should fail, it will result in their suffering being intensified. But eventually he is ready to go, with the assurance that HaShem will be with him. In response to Mosheh's self-doubt and his worry about his speech impediment (which he had from an early age) HaShem tells him that Aharon, Mosheh's brother, will act as spokesman for him before the mighty king of Egypt.

11. On the way down to Egypt together with his wife and son, Mosheh's life is threatened because he had delayed the Bris Mi'lah of his newborn son Eliezer. But Tziporah quickly performs the Bris Mi'lah and thus saves Mosheh's life. (From this episode we learn that even a person on a mission of supreme importance may not disregard HaShem's commandments).
12. Meanwhile, HaShem commands Aharon in Egypt to come out to meet Mosheh. Together they then assemble the elders of the Hebrews and tell them that HaShem has sent them to deliver them from their slavery. The people place their trust in them and in HaShem Who has sent them, and they offer up thanks to HaShem.
13. But when Mosheh and Aharon come before Par'o, he refuses to acknowledge HaShem and to obey His command to him to let the Hebrew People go. In open rebellion against HaShem, he orders their workload to be increased and their cruel treatment to be intensified.
14. Seeing the slavery made worse, Mosheh returns to HaShem and complains about the worsened situation for the Hebrews. This was exactly what he was afraid of, and Mosheh questions why HaShem chose him of all people for this mission if the result of his failure is only more hardship for his brothers. But HaShem tells him that now he will witness what HaShem will do to Par'o. The Hebrew People will indeed be released from Egypt, with great wonders and miracles, but in such a way that not only Egypt but the whole world will come to know of HaShem and His almighty power — for all time.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra שמות please go to HAFTORAS.