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Parshat Shemot: On Anxiety

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The beginning of parshat Shemot (1:1) opens:

And these are the names of the sons of Israel (Jacob's sons) who came to Egypt with Jacob; every man came with his household.

וְאֵלֶּה, שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַבָּאִים,
מִצְרָיִם: אֵת יַעֲקֹב, אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ.

This sentence represents a transition from Bereishit; the conjunctive *vav* in the word *v'aleh* indicates a connection between the previous chapter and this one. Bereishit ends with Yaakov's individual sons gathering together with their brother, Yosef. A potential rift between the brothers has been averted and they have reached a point of reconciliation, of togetherness and brotherhood. It is as one family, united, that *Sefer Shemot* begins.

The Torah goes on to describe the proliferation of the Jewish people as they grow from 70 souls to a nation. It is at this moment, when *Bnei Yisrael* is at its most abundant and most united that Pharaoh looks out at the nation of Israel, and panics.

Pharaoh understood that the Jewish community would inevitably defeat the *Mitzrim* (Egyptians) because these previously disparate individuals were turning into a united force. In a magnificent interpretation, the Alshich, a 16th century Biblical commentator, says that when nations contend with one another, those that possess one or more of four qualities will decide the outcome: **national unity, superior intelligence, physical superiority, and support by a supernatural force.**

And when Pharaoh looked out at the nation of Israel, Pharaoh's undeniable anxiety emerges, as he realizes that the Jewish people had all four of the Alshich's suggested qualities, ultimately rendering them undefeatable. He subtly references each in the following verse (1:9):

And he said unto his people: 'Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us.'

וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-עַמּוֹ: הִנֵּה, עַם בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל--רַב וְעָצוּם, מִמֶּנּוּ.

1. **National unity:** “הִנֵּה- behold,” says Pharaoh, “עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל” we are dealing with a united force—with an *am* (nation).
2. **Superior intelligence:** They are a people who are רַב. Although “rav” is often translated as great or many, a midrash in *Eicha Raba* (1:4) suggests that the word *rav* implies greater intelligence. After all, it was a people who produced Yosef, who used his intelligence to prevent a famine in Egypt.
3. **Physical superiority:** וְעָצוּם—Pharaoh calls the Jewish people “mighty,” acknowledging that they are stronger and more powerful than the Egyptians
4. **Support by a Supernatural force:** Pharaoh understood that the Jewish people had clear support from the Divine. They were “*Bnei Yisrael*,” a people who were formed and protected by God, so much so that the proliferation of Jewish people was indeed miraculous. Pharaoh's decrees did not diminish their numbers, instead, with God's help, *Bnei Yisrael* continued to increase.

Right before his eyes, a previously diverse and disparate people were developing into a united, intelligent, strong people, protected by God.

This was a nation whose growth must be negated through affliction and enslavement. Therefore, each of Pharaoh's cruel enactments was meant to eliminate one of the four attributes that the people were blessed with.

He tried to destroy their sense of nationhood by disrupting family life, as the Talmud (Sotah 11b) describes how men and women were kept apart by taskmasters. Pharaoh tried to limit their work to hard labor, thereby stunting any intellectual growth. He tried to limit their numbers by asking the midwives to kill all male born children, and he tried to destroy their faith by enslaving and embittering their lives.

For a time, Pharaoh was successful. But the story ends with the nation coming together to call out to God in prayer. And with an outstretched arm, God takes *Am Yisrael* out of Egypt, and the nation is brought to stand at Mount Sinai.

Pharaoh's anxiety was indeed well founded. Just as he predicted, *Am Yisrael*, the nation of Israel, proved to be indestructible. And, it was the very qualities that he envisaged-- unity, growth in numbers, intellectual rigor, and connection to the Divine -- that helped *Am Yisrael* withstand adversity, and ultimately flourish.

Rabba Sara's Overarching Theme:

Feeling God's presence, shouldn't be that difficult. "You shall walk after the Lord your God," (Devarim 12:5) we are told; seek out God's presence. And yet, astonished, R. Hama son of R. Hanina (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a) asks, how is it possible to walk with the Shechina? Rav Hama quotes an early pasuk from Devarim that describes "... the Lord your God as a devouring Fire." (Devarim 4:24). How is it possible to get close to God without being scorched? R. Hama answers his own question: We must walk after the *midot*, after the attributes of God, not his immediate presence.

In Hebrew, good attributes, *midot*, are translated as "good measures." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, suggests that a quality is determined by its proportion. In other words our *midot* are the balance of our varied characteristic traits. To act Godly is to put our best spiritual essence forward, while trying to keep in check the inevitability of negative attributes. We are at once both good and bad, compassionate and injurious.

At Yeshivat Maharat, our students are ordained with the ability to lead, pasken, and teach. But, they must also be finely attuned to the nuances of the human condition. Spiritual leaders are most effective when they have confronted and understand their own *midot*, their own balance of human traits. Our Torah narratives bring to bare the multi-layers of the characteristic traits that individuals must learn to balance within themselves.

And so, I offer this weekly parsha column as a model of Yeshivat Maharat's Pastoral Torah curriculum, where we will explore the rich and varied layers of the human condition.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.