

Shabbat Shalom, everyone.

Honor to stand at the bimmah and give a drash on Shabbat. But even more of an honor to give the drash at the inauguration of the new board

This is a fabulous parashah to get to discuss—the beginning of *Sh'mot*, which Nahum Sarna explains is a shortened name from the *Seifer Y'tzi'at Mitzrayim* : the book of the departure from Egypt. The name *Exodus* comes from the Greek translation of the Septuagint, which translated *Seifer Y'tzi'at Mitzrayim* as *Exodus Aigyptous* and this was shortened in the Latin to *Exodus*.

Sarna also writes, “Exodus is the great seminal text of biblical literature.”

Why? Why is the exodus story so central to Judaism? Sarna explains a few lines down: [Because] It profoundly influenced ethical and social consciousness so significantly that it is frequently invoked as the motivation for protecting and providing the interests and rights of the stranger and the disadvantaged of society.” This I want to suggest this morning is the heart of the message of *Sh'mot*: and in fact it may be the core message of Judaism. This morning, I am going to share with you the insights of a pair of French Jewish thinkers to reinforce this suggestion of Sarna’s.

Now in general, the issues that are raised by *Sh'mot* form the core of the great existential issues that the Bible raises; these are, of course, also the themes of the Passover seder:

(1) **enslavement** (what is slavery? What are you enslaved to? What sorts of monuments do you build in your life that are like Pithom and Rameses),

(2) **exile** (which begs the question, where is home/comfort/order/regularity) and what alienates you?; are you living in galut, in exile or have you found a home)?; what causes your life to tilt from being at home to being in exile, in galut, alienated?

(3) There is in Sh'mot also the theme of **oppression** (what makes Pharaoh the model of the dictator and why was Egypt such a wicked system; what are the systems that oppress today in ways that are like Egypt?). These are questions that this text begs us to ask ourselves.

This is the way that André Neher, one of the great Biblical scholars and philosophers of his generation explains about the paradigm of oppression in *Sh'mot* in his magnificent little book, *Moses and the Vocation of the Jewish People*: “Let us recall the physical side of the misery of the Hebrews: exhausting forced labour, the murder of their children at birth, searches, efforts of concealment and abductions...officially sanctioned sadism, pitting a man against his brother in a psychosis of mutual distrust and hatred...all this in a country where the exploitation of the proletariat, of the foreigners and the slaves was strictly planned. The misery of the Hebrews can only be described as a circle in the inferno of the concentration camp” (91).

We are also introduced in Sh'mot to the greatest prophet of the Jewish people: **Moses**—who Neher explains is unlike the founding figures of the other great faiths, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, [and here I am continuing a theme from the drash by Unowsky a few weeks ago and from Scott Newstok and from Rabbi Rubinstein quite often] for unlike the Buddha or Jesus or even Muhammad who ascends to heaven in a chariot from

Jerusalem, Moses lives and dies as a man, like other men. Moses is buried at the end of his days.

Moses, it turns out begins his drift toward leadership of the people of Israel by murdering an Egyptian taskmaster out of anger at the injustice of the slave driver.

Again, let me call on Neher to explicate the meaning of this moment in the Biblical text: “Here [Moses] anticipates in one single act of wrath all that the Exodus will later realize prudently and patiently. Witnessing an injustice and a degradation of man, he feels the blow dealt at the other as though it were directed against himself. Breaking through the selfishness of his own ego, he discovers his neighbor.”

In Deuteronomy, when Moses goes back through the whole story that unfolds to the Jewish people, all of which is foretold and foreshadowed in this very parashah, he sums up the vocation of the Jewish people in Deuteronomy 10: 17-20, where Moses says, “Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

André Neher had a contemporary named Emmanuel Levinas. If you don't know his name, you should, since scholars recognize him as perhaps the most important Jewish philosopher or philosopher of Judaism in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In the most luminous piece of writing I have read in some time, an essay called “A Religion for Adults” in his book of essays on Judaism called *Difficile Liberté (Difficult Freedom)*, Levinas explains that in Judaism (and here I am stringing together a group of quotation that sum up Levinas's argument), In Judaism, we experience “the presence of God

through one's relation to man...The consciousness of any natural injustice, of the harm caused to the Other, by my ego structure, is contemporaneous with my consciousness as a man...To be oneself is already to know the fault I have committed with regard to the Other...according to Maimonides, since God is merciful, be merciful like him...To know God is to know what must be done...[And here comes the crescendo]...The fact that the relationship with the Divine crosses the relationship with men and coincides with social justice is therefore what epitomizes the entire spirit of the Jewish Bible. Moses and the prophets preoccupied themselves not with the immorality of the soul [hear Christianity here] but with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger.” (quotes pg. 16-20). Levinas also explains that the rites and rituals of Judaism are all preparation to be able to respond to the Other when the time comes. And Levinas brings a story about Rabbi Akiva that will be my end note: ‘Why does your God, who is the God of the poor, not feed the poor?’ a Roman asks Rabbi Akiba. ‘So we can escape damnation’, replies Rabbi Akiba.”

My hope is that with this Board, and in this congregation, together we can prepare ourselves to work out what is to be done so that we may escape damnation.

Shabbat Shalom.