Summary of Parashat Shemot

This week we start a new book: Shemot, “Names” or Exodus.

THE BIRTH OF MOSHE

The Tora begins by mentioning the names of Jacob’s sons and telling us that his descendants were very prosperous, fruitful, and powerful in Egypt. But when a new dynasty arose, Pharaoh set out to weaken the Jews and impoverish them. First by taxing them and giving them hard jobs. But no matter how much he oppressed them, the Jews continued to multiply and did not lose their power. Pharaoh then orders the midwives to kill all the newborn Hebrew children. These women, however, defied Pharaoh’s order and let the children live. Pharaoh called the midwives to punish them for not following his orders. The midwives replied that Hebrew women were self-sufficient to deliver their babies. God rewards the midwives for their bravery and fear of Heaven. Pharaoh then orders all his people to take part in the elimination of the Jewish children by throwing all the newborn males into the Nile. When Moshe (Moises) is born, his mother feared for his life, and she puts him in a waterproof basket and leaves the basket floating in the Nile. Pharaoh’s daughter, Batya, is going to bathe in the Nile when she sees the child. She takes it and adopts it as her own. Miriam, Moshe’s sister, who is observing what is happening, offers to bring a Hebrew woman to breastfeed the child. Pharaoh’s daughter accepts her suggestion, and thus Yochebed, Moshe’s own mother raises her own son until he grows up.

MOSHE GOES OUT TO MEET HIS BROTHERS

Moshe lives in the Royal Place. Already an adult, Moshe leaves the palace and feels the suffering of his Jewish brothers. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses kills the Egyptian and somehow Pharaoh finds out. Moshe is forced to flee. He escapes to Midian and stays there for a time. There he marries Tsipora, Yitro’s daughter and has two sons, Guershom and Eliezer.

GOD REMEMBERS HIS PROMISE

In Egypt the situation of Jewish slaves is getting worse. The people cry out to God and God takes into account the Covenant that he had made with their ancestors. Moshe is herding Yitro’s flocks in the desert when he sees a burning bush that

was not consumed by fire. When he came closer to understand what was happening, God spoke to him. God tells him that He has seen the suffering of the Israelites and has decided to liberate them from the Egyptians through Moshe. God gives Moshe instructions. He must gather the Jewish elders and inform them that God would rescue them from Egypt and will bring them back to Israel. Then Moshe must speak to Pharaoh and ask him to let the Jews go out to serve God. However, God warns Moshe that Pharaoh will not agree to this request. But redemption eventually will come, after God punishes Egypt. God presents Moshe with three miraculous tests to perform before the Israelites, so they will believe that God has sent him. Moshe says that he is unfit for this difficult mission, due to his inability to speak eloquently. God then assigns his brother Aharon to be his spokesperson.

MOSHE GOES TO EGYPT

Moshe takes his wife and his two sons and heads to Egypt. God specifies to Moshe what he should say to Pharaoh: “Israel is my first-born son. Let my son go to serve Me. And if you refuse to free him, I will take your firstborn son.” Moshe meets Aaron, who had come from Egypt to meet him, and together they arrive in Egypt. They gather all the elders and present the evidences that God had sent them.

MISSION NOT ACCOMPLISHED

Moshe and Aharon go to Pharaoh’s palace and ask him to let the Jews go. Pharaoh mocks them and instructs his taskmasters to increase the workload of the Jewish slaves. The Jews could not meet the new demands of Pharaoh and as a result they are brutally beaten. Moses, afflicted and confused, turns to God: “Why have you caused more suffering to this people? And what have you sent me for? For since I have spoken to Pharaoh in Your name, the people are suffering more…. “. God reassures Moshe and replies that he will soon see what God will do with Pharaoh, and that the Egyptian monarch will be forced to liberate the Jews.