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Parshat Shemot **December 25, 2021 – 21 Tevet 5782**

The second book of the Torah starts this Shabbos. The Hebrew name is Shemot (names). This is the second word of the first chapter which gives the book its name. This simple word, (Shemot) “Names” defines the birth of a nation. One could say it is the birth of B’nei Yisrael as a people, “by name”.

The sages teach us that in all the time that B’nei Yisrael were in Egypt, those who left in the exodus did not change their names and this is one of the reasons they were freed. They were able to maintain their identity as B’nei Yisrael, when it would have been much easier to assimilate.

The change in Egyptian leadership at the outset of the book tells the story that reverberates through Jewish history. The “Pharaoh who knew not Joseph” speaks of the Egyptians as his people. He thinks of B’nei Yisrael as outsiders, even though B’nei Yisrael have been living in Egypt for well over one hundred years and many have assimilated, essentially becoming “Egyptian”.

This is the history of anti-Semitism. For the Jew complete assimilation is difficult, even when conversion to another faith or the practice of “other faith” traditions.

In the 19th century it could be argued that Benjamin D’Israeli, a British Prime Minister was the most powerful or influential man in the world. His father had him converted out of Judaism at twelve years old having him baptized. One of his many famous quotes: “Where knowledge ends religion begins”. As an adult, Jews considered him a Gentile, and non-Jews considered him a Jew. According to Halachah (Jewish law) he would always be seen as a Jew, what kind of Jew is debatable.

D’Israeli was once insulted in the House of Commons because he was “Jewish” by birth, even though his father had him baptized at age 12. He responded with: “While your ancestors were painting themselves blue, my ancestors were worshipping one G-d”. In 1835, Daniel O’Connell, an Irish Roman Catholic leader, attacked him again in the House of Commons in an anti-Semitic tone. D’Israeli replied: “Yes, I am a Jew, and while the ancestors of the right honorable gentlemen were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon”.

We learn that Egypt’s change in leadership was not the only factor to enslavement. The person who is a member of B’nai Yisrael (the Jewish people) and known as a Jew fights the battle of the “outsider” and should be like the stars which are sensitive to the moon. As the stars make the moon feel better and not lonely, so too should we make others feel better.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Nathan W. Langer

