
Shemot – Shemot/Exodus 1:1-6:1

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

2:5-8 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

2:16-17 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock.

2:18-20 When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread."

3:17 "And I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

The Context – The verses in plain English

Shemot begins after Joseph's death, with a new Pharaoh who feels threatened by the Hebrews' growing numbers. He decrees all male Hebrew babies must be killed at birth.

When the Hebrew woman Jocheved gives birth to a boy, she places him in a basket on the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter finds it and rescues the child, whom she names Moses and decides to raise as her own.

As a young adult, Moses flees to Midian, seeking refuge from Pharaoh's persecution. He sees several of Reuel's daughters in distress, and comes to their aid. In gratitude, Reuel invites Moses to join his family for a meal.

Now settled in Midian (and married to one of Reuel's daughters), Moses sees God in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai. God promises to deliver the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Pharaoh's daughter assumes responsibility for the baby Moses, despite his being a complete stranger and, what's more, a Hebrew (and therefore an enemy of her powerful father). Why does she choose to get involved? What does this choice symbolize to us as we consider interceding on behalf of other communities?
- 2) Why is Reuel so insistent on breaking bread with Moses? How does food help build community? What other benefits accrue from sharing resources with people in need?
- 3) God reassures Moses that He will liberate the Hebrews. What is the significance of the "milk and honey" imagery? What, in effect, is God promising the Hebrews? What does that imply? How can we help bring God's promise to struggling communities worldwide?

Va'era – Shemot/Exodus 6:2-9:35

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

7:18 Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord." See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile."

7:19 And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt – its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water – that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone."

The Context – The verses in plain English

In Va'era, God sends Moses to Pharaoh, demanding the release of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. When Pharaoh refuses, God instructs Moses to threaten the king with plagues – among them, transforming the Nile's waters into blood.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) This plague poisons the Egyptians' drinking supply and fouls its ecosystem. How do modern societies deal with degraded environmental conditions? How are the societies' members affected? What are the global implications of local environmental crises?
- 2) Why does God choose blood when transforming the waters of the Nile? What is its symbolic meaning? Why is blood an appropriate image for discussions of the challenges facing impoverished countries and peoples?

Bo – Shemot/Exodus 10:1-13:16**The Text – Key verses in this parasha**

12:3 Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household.

12:5-8 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.

12:48-49 If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of the country. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.

13:6-8 "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the Lord. Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found with you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory. And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'"

The Context – The verses in plain English

God visits the final plagues – including the slaying of all first-born Egyptians – upon the Israelites' captors. Pharaoh finally relents, commanding the Jews to leave his kingdom.

The Israelites receive instruction from God about commemorating their Egyptian exodus and redemption from slavery. They are commanded to offer a lamb in sacrifice, and to eat its meat, sharing it with neighbors if they cannot finish it themselves. The sacrifice may be eaten by anyone who has been circumcised, whether an Israelite, a slave or a stranger.

Finally, God tells the Israelites they must also spend seven days eating unleavened bread, as a reminder of the bread they took with them during their hasty departure from Egypt.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Today, we no longer make ritual sacrifices as part of our religious observance. What are some ways we do sacrifice during holidays and regularly throughout the year? What is the value of these sacrifices? How can sacrifice be an effective tool in our personal, communal and political lives?
- 2) God is explicit in his instruction that the Israelites' offering should not be wasted. Why might the injunction to share have warranted so much emphasis? What are the practical and symbolic advantages of sharing food and other resources? How does sharing impact – or not – our ability to make significant inroads on difficult social problems?
- 3) The Passover sacrifice may be offered by Jews and strangers alike; God decrees that they are not to be treated differently under the law. What type of imperative does this establish for us in regards to our interactions with immigrants here at home and foreign communities abroad?
- 4) How does eating unleavened bread, or matzo, trigger our compassion for poverty-stricken people across the globe? Is eating matzo purely a symbolic gesture, or are there ways we can channel that symbolism into effective and meaningful action?

Beshalach – Shemot/Exodus 13:17-17:16

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

16:2-3 In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,

when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.”

16:4-5 And the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day’s portion – that I may thus test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not. But on the sixth day, when they apportion what they have brought in, it shall prove to be double the amount they gather each day.”

17:5-6 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

The Context – The verses in plain English

Upon their departure from Egypt, the Israelites begin a long sojourn through the desert. They suffer from hunger and thirst, and bitterly complain to Moses.

God tells Moses He will provide enough food for the entire community. The Israelites will even receive extra rations on the sixth day of the week.

God also instructs Moses on extracting drinking water from a stone.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Their severe hunger and thirst drive the Israelites to despair. In what ways do we see extreme physical needs affecting attitudes and actions among poor communities today?
- 2) In the desert, God assumes responsibility for meeting the Israelites’ needs. How can we work in collaboration to bring divinely-inspired justice, in the form of medicine, housing, food and other urgent items, to suffering people around the world?

Mishpatim – Shemot/Exodus 21:1-24:18

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

23:10-11 Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.

23:19 The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

The Context – The verses in plain English

Following His revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God decrees a code of laws for the people of Israel. These include the establishment of an agricultural cycle that leaves the land fallow every seven years, permitting poor people to take what they wish.

God also mandates the donation of the best yield of our annual harvest to His service, and instructs the Israelites that they are not to cook a calf in its mother's milk.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) God's laws demonstrate compassion for the plight of poor people, as well as concern for the protection of the environment. What is the connection between poverty and sustainable development?
- 2) Why does God demand our first and choicest fruits? How does relinquishing a portion of what we hold to be most valuable affect both our outlook and our commitment to communal needs?
- 3) In this parasha, we find the origins of one of Judaism's dietary restrictions, rooted in respect for our fellow living beings. How does this respect translate to our treatment of other men, women and children? How does our respect help shape the ways in which we seek global justice for the world's poorest citizens?

Tetzaveh – Shemot/Exodus 27:20-30:10

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

29:1-2 This is what you shall do to them in consecrating them to serve Me as priests: Take a young bull of the herd and two rams without blemish; also unleavened bread, unleavened cakes with oil mixed in and unleavened wafers spread with oil – make these of choice wheat flour.

29:31-33 You shall take the ram of ordination and boil its flesh in the sacred precinct; and Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram, and the bread that is in the basket, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. These things shall be eaten only by those for whom expiation was made with them when they were ordained and consecrated; they may not be eaten by a layman, for they are holy.

The Context – The verses in plain English

In Tetzaveh, God gives instructions for the initiation of Aaron and his four sons into the priesthood. These guidelines include the ways in which sacrifices are to be prepared and partaken of.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) These passages create an explicit link between food and holiness. In what ways do we continue to emphasize this sacred relationship today? How do we help ensure that blessings of abundance reach all people?
- 2) God makes clear His expectation that sacrifices must be perfect and pure. What is the connection between human labor (breeding animals, tilling the soil) and divine favor? What actions can we take to assist downtrodden communities as they seek to transform hard work into valuable (and sustainable) assets? Why is it important to an impoverished society's long-term success that we empower its members to become self-sufficient?
- 3) Why must Aaron and his fellow priests partake of the sacrificial offerings? What is the value in allowing people to enjoy at least a portion of the fruits of their labor? What are the implications of this for needy people across the globe as they struggle to shrug off generations of poverty?

Ki Tisa – Shemot/Exodus 30:11-34:35

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

32:4-6 This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: "Tomorrow shall be a festival of the Lord!" Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

34:18 You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread – eating unleavened bread for seven days, as I have commanded you – at the time set of the month of Abib, for in the month of Abib you went forth from Egypt.

34:26 The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

34:28 And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread and drank no water; and he wrote down on the tablets the terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

The Context – The verses in plain English

With Moses’ long delay in returning from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites lose their faith in God and convince Aaron to build a golden calf for them to worship. Soon after, Moses descends from Sinai and, in frustration and rage, shatters the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments.

Moses then returns to Sinai, asking God to forgive the Israelites’ transgression. God agrees, inscribing His commandments on a new set of tablets and laying out the terms of His ongoing covenant with the Jewish people.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) The Israelites celebrate the creation of their false idol by feasting. This is contrasted with the actions of Moses on Sinai – When God reveals His commandments, Moses refrains from food and drink. How can food be used in ways that are both sacred and profane? How can fasting link us to God and also serve as a powerful tool for our social justice advocacy?
- 2) In Ki Tisa, God repeats his instruction regarding the observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as well as the food-related mandates (sacrificing first fruits of the soil, not boiling a kid in its mother’s milk) we come across earlier. What does this repetition tell us about the importance of these provisions? Why is food so inextricably linked with themes of celebration, memory, respect and empowerment? What do they teach us about the role we have to play in the world?