

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter XIII: Shemot (Ex. 1:1–6:1)

### Essay 14. The relationship of four verses

**בַּמִּסְוָה** "אתם לכו קחו לכם תבן", "אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים", "אתם נצבים", "אתם עדי", ארבעה "אתם" ריש פסוק עכ"ל.

In the Masoretic text, we find: **“You must go and get straw yourselves** wherever you can find it;”<sup>1</sup> **“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians;”**<sup>2</sup> **“You are standing** today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d;”<sup>3</sup> **“You are My witnesses,** declares the L-rd.”<sup>4</sup> There are **four** occurrences of the third-person plural word **“you”**<sup>5</sup> [אתם] [atem] **at the beginning of a verse.** I.e., the word **“atem”** is very common, but the *Zera Shimshon* is going to point out a connection between four verses that start with this word.

והנה לבאר ולקשר מספרה זו נראה לומר, שאם לא היה אומר "אתם לכו קחו לכם תבן", לא היה יכול לומר "אתם ראיתם". אבל עכשיו שאמר "אתם לכו קחו לכם תבן", יכול לומר "אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי" וכו'. ואם לא היה אומר "אתם ראיתם", לא היה יכול לומר "אתם נצבים". וכן בלא זה של "אתם נצבים", לא היה אומר "אתם עדי". הקלל העולה שהראשון מתרץ הקושיא שיש בשני.

**Therefore, to clarify and to connect this Masoretic text, it seems to say, that if it had not said, “You must go and get straw yourselves,” it would not have been able to say, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians.” But now that it said, “You must go and get straw yourselves,” it is able to say, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians.”**

**Also, if it had not said, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” it would not have been able to say, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d.”**

**Also, without this, “You are standing today,” it wouldn’t have said, “You are My witnesses.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 5:11.

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 19:4.

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 29:9.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 43:10.

<sup>5</sup> Southerners in the United States would say, “Y’all.”

**All arise from the fact that the first statement solves the question that we will have on the second.** What are these questions, and how are they solved by the preceding instance of a verse starting with “you”?

וְהִינּוּ דְעַל פְּסוּק "אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם" יֵשׁ לְהַקְשׁוֹת מֵהַשְּׂמֵנוּת מֵהַרְאִשׁוֹנִים עַל גֹּדֶל הַמַּכּוֹת שֶׁנִּתְיַסְרוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבִיל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְהֵלֵא כִּי גִזְרָה חֲכָמָתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ לְהִיּוֹתָם בְּשַׁעֲבֹד "וְעַנּוּ אֹתָם"? וְצָרִיךְ לְתַרְץ שְׂמָה שֶׁהֵכֵם בְּכֹל אֱלֹהֵי הַמַּכּוֹת לֹא הָיָה מִפְּנֵי הַשַּׁעֲבֹד שֶׁשַּׁעֲבָדוּ בָּהֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲלֵא מִפִּי שֶׁהִזִּידוּ וְהִתְרִיסוּ נֶגֶד דְּבָרוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם, שֶׁמִּיד שֶׁבָּא מִשָּׁה לְפָרְעָה בְּשִׁמּוֹ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה שֶׁיִּשְׁלַח אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, אִזּוֹ פְּרַעַה הַתְרִיס נֶגְדּוֹ וְגִזְרָה קָשָׁה עֲלֵיהֶם, "אַתֶּם לְכוּ קַחוּ לָכֶם תְּבֵן מֵאֲשֶׁר תִּמְצְאוּ".

**On the verse, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” one can question what the Rishonim found difficult, regarding the magnitude of the plagues that the Egyptians suffered because of Israel. Didn’t His wisdom, Blessed be He, decree that [Israel] should be in slavery, and didn’t He “oppress them”<sup>6</sup>? If so, it is necessary to justify why He struck [the Egyptians] with all of these plagues, as it wasn’t because of the slavery by which they enslaved Israel.**

**Rather, it was because [the Egyptians] acted arrogantly and defied the word of the Omnipresent. As soon as Moses came to Pharaoh in the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, that he should send Israel to worship Him, then Pharaoh defied Him and passed a harsh decree upon them: “You must go and get straw yourselves wherever you can find it.”**

Thus, we can see how the first occurrence, “You must go and get straw for yourselves” answers the question the Rishonim had on the second occurrence, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians.”

וְלָכֵן אַחַר שֶׁאָמַר הַכַּתוּב "אַתֶּם לְכוּ קַחוּ לָכֶם תְּבֵן", דִּהְיִינוּ זֶה הַזְדוּן שֶׁל פְּרַעַה, יְכוּל לֹאמַר "אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם", דִּהְיִינוּ כָּל הַמַּכּוֹת שֶׁהִבֵּאתִי עֲלֵיהֶם. אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁגַּם אַתֶּם עֲבַדְתֶּם עֲבוּדָה זָרָה בְּמִצְרַיִם, הוֹאִיל שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה זֶה אֲלֵא מִתּוֹךְ טִירוּף דַּעַת הַגְּלוּת מִחֲלַתִּי לָכֶם, לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה בְּדַעַת לְהַכְעִיסֵנִי, וּבְעַל פְּרָחַד צָרִיךְ לְחַלֵּק בֵּין מִי שֶׁחֹטֵא בְּאוֹנוֹס וּבְשִׁגְגָה.

**Therefore, after the Scripture said, “You must go and get straw yourselves,” which was illustrative of the malice of Pharaoh, it was able to say, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” which is all the plagues that I brought upon them.**

G-d was also thinking about Israel: **“Although you also worshiped idolatry in Egypt, as it was only from the madness of the Exile, I forgive you, as it was not with the intent to anger Me.” Also, it is necessary to distinguish between those who sin out of compulsion or by mistake.**

Now we ask how the second occurrence, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” can answer a question we have on the third occurrence, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d.”

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<sup>6</sup> Gen. 15:13.

ומעתה שאמרנו שיש חילוק בין מזיד לשוגג ובין אונס לרצון, יכול נמי לומר "אתם נצבים היום" וכו', דבלא זה קשה על "אתם נצבים", לפי שפרש רש"י שם כיון ששמעו ישראל מאה קללות וכו' הוריקו פניהם ואמרו מי יוכל לעמוד באלה? לכה אמר להם "אתם נצבים" וכו' הרי כלכם קיימים ולא עשה אתכם כלה עכ"ל.

**Now that we have said that there is a difference between intentional and accidental, and between compulsion and volition, we are also able to say, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d.” Otherwise, without this there is a question on the statement, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d . . .” This question is raised according to what Rashi interpreted there:**

**Because when Israel heard these one hundred curses, less two [curses], besides the forty-nine [curses] that are contained in the law of the priests,<sup>7</sup> their faces turned pale, and they said, “Who can possibly stand against this?” Therefore, [Moses] said [to calm them]: “See, you are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d—you have greatly angered the Omnipresent, and yet you are all standing and He has not put an end to you.”**

- Rashi on Deut. 29:12, based on Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim1

וקשה דמה ראיה היא זו דילמא הם עדיין קיימים לפי שעד היום הנה לא נכנסו בברית "האלה והשבעה", אבל מפאן ואילך שנגנסו בברית האלה לא יוכלו לעמוד. אבל עתה שאמרנו שיש חילוק בין אונס לרצון ובין מזיד לשוגג "אתם ראיתם" וכו', אף ברית האלות לא יהיה העונש זה חמור אלא למי שישטא בזדון ובפשע. ונהו "אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני ה' אלהיכם", פלומר שכלכם רצונכם לעבוד הקב"ה ולא למרוד בו בזדון ובפשע חס ושלום. וכמו שפסיים הפסוקים "פן-יש בקם" וכו' "והתברך" וכו' "למען ספות הרנה את-הצמאה", דמשמע שמדבר על מי שעושה להכעיס דנקא.

**A difficulty is what proof is this that Rashi brings? Perhaps they were still standing because until this day they hadn't entered into the covenant of the “curse and the oath,”<sup>8</sup> but from that time onward, after they have entered into the covenant of the curse, they are not able to stand.**

**But now that we have said that there is a difference between compulsion and willfulness and between intentional and accidental, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” even [with] the covenant of the curses, this punishment will only be heavy for one who sinned willfully and with rebelliousness. This is the meaning of, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d,” as if to say that all of you have the desire to serve the Holy One, Blessed be He, and not to rebel against Him with malice and rebelliousness.**

**This is as the conclusion of the verses, “Perchance there is among you some man or woman, or some clan or tribe, whose heart is even now turning away from our L-rd the G-d to go**

<sup>7</sup> Lev. 26:14 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Dan. 9:11.

and worship the gods of those nations—perchance there is among you a stock sprouting poison weed and wormwood. When hearing the words of these curses, **they may congratulate themselves**, thinking, ‘I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart’—**to the utter ruin of moist and dry alike** [i.e., everything].”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, we can see how the second occurrence, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” answers the question that Rashi had on the third occurrence, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d.” “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians” includes the understanding that G-d forgave the idolatry in Egypt that was due to compulsion or accident, so that Moses could tell those Israelites, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d.”

Now we ask how the third occurrence, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d,” can answer a question we have on the fourth occurrence, “You are My witnesses.”

וְעַכְשָׁיו שְׁאַמְרֵנוּ "אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים" וְכוּ' יָכוֹל נִמְי לֹמֵר "אַתֶּם עֲדִי", דְּבָלָא זֶה קִשְׁיָה אִיךְ יְכוּלִים יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַעֲיֵד בְּהַקְב"ה, וְמָה יוֹעִיל לְהַקְב"ה עֲדוּת זוֹ אִם הֵם נִקְרְאִים בְּנִים וְהוּא נִקְרָא אָב, וְאִין עֲדוּתָם כְּלוּם. אָמְנָם לְאַחֵר שְׁאַמֵּר "אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים" וְכוּ' "לְעִבְרָךְ בְּבְרִית" וְכוּ', שֶׁהוּצָרְךְ מִשֶּׁהָ לְהַכְרִיחֵם בְּאֵלֶה וּבְשִׁבּוּעָה שְׂקִימוּ הַמְצֻוֹת, שְׁמַע מִינָה שְׂאֵם לֹא הִיָּתָה הַשְּׁבוּעָה לֹא הִיָּה לָהֶם שׁוּם חַיִּיב, וְאִם הָיוּ בְּנִים בְּלֹא הָכִי חַיִּיבִים לְשִׁמּוֹר מִצְוֹת הָאָב, אֲלֵא וְדַאי צָרִיךְ לֹמֵר שְׁמָה שְׁקִרוּיִים בְּנִים אִינּוּ מַחֲמַת קוֹרְבָה, אֲלֵא לְשׁוֹן חֲבָה כְּמוֹ שְׁכָתוּב כְּמָה פְּעָמִים "בְּנִי" בְּמִשְׁלֵי "עֲשֵׂה זֹאת אִפּוֹא בְּנִי", "בְּנִי אִם-עֲרַבְתָּ לְרַעְךָ", וְכְדוּמָה, וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר "בְּנִי בְּכָרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל", אִף עַל פִּי שְׁלֹא הִיָּה לָהֶם דִּין בְּכוֹר לְעִבּוֹד עֲבוּדָה כְּמוֹ שְׁהָיוּ עוֹשִׂים הַבְּכוֹרוֹת מִמֶּשׁ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַזְּמַן, וְלָכֵן אַחֵר שְׁאַמֵּר "אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים" יָכוֹל לֹמֵר "אַתֶּם עֲדִי", וְזֶהוּ קִשְׁרֵי הַמְסוּרָה שֶׁל אַרְבָּעָה "אַתֶּם".

**And now that we have said, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d,” we are also able to say, “You are My witnesses,” for without this it would be difficult how Israel would be able to bear witness to the Holy One, Blessed be He.** I.e., if they were unforgiven idolators, how could they serve as witnesses?

**Also, how does this testimony benefit the Holy One, Blessed be He, if they are called “children” and he is called “Father,” for their testimony is worthless.** That is, halacha does not allow someone to testify as a witness for or against a close relative.<sup>10</sup>

**However, [Moses] said, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d,” “to enter into the covenant of the L-rd, with sanctions,”<sup>11</sup> i.e., the curses that will come with violations of the covenant. Moses was required to compel them with the curse and the oath that they would uphold the commandments. We hear from this that if not for the oath, there would be no obligation for them.**

It’s true that **if they were children without this, they would be obligated to obey the commandment of the Father, but certainly it’s necessary to say that they are not called children because of the relationship, rather it’s affectionate language, as is written a few**

<sup>9</sup> Deut. 29:17–18.

<sup>10</sup> Bava Basra 128a; Sanhedrin 27b–29a; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 33.

<sup>11</sup> Deut. 29:11.

times “my son” in Proverbs: “Do this then, my son,”<sup>12</sup> [and] “My son, if you have put up security for a friend,” and the like. Similarly, He said, “Israel is my firstborn son,”<sup>13</sup> even though they did not have the legal status of firstborn to officiate [religious services] as actual firstborn [children] could do at that time.

Therefore, after [Moses] said, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd,” [G-d] was able to say, “You are My witnesses,” and this is the connection in the Masoretic text of the four instances cited of verses that begin with the word “you” [אתם] [*atem*].

ובְּהִיוֹתֶם בְּרִישׁ פְּסוּק יִרְמוֹז שֶׁכָּל זֶה הוּא לְפִי הַסְּבָרָא הָרְאשׁוֹנָה, אֲמַנָּם לְפִי הָאֱמֶת יֵשׁ לְתַרְזֵן קוּשִׁיּוֹת "אתם עדי" כְּפִי הַדָּרָךְ שֶׁנִּפְרָשׁ לְקַמֵּן בְּפִרְשַׁת שׁוֹפְטִים עַל פְּסוּק זֶה. וְהַקּוּשִׁיא שֶׁהַקּוּשִׁינוּ עַל "אתם ראיתם" וְכוּ' דִּהְיִינוּ הַמְּפֹת שֶׁל מִצְרַיִם, גַּם בְּזֶה תִּירְצוּ הַמְּפָרְשִׁים שֶׁ"נִעְבְּדוּם וְעַנּוּ אֹתָם" הוּא עֲבָדוֹת קָל, וְהֵם הַכְּבִידוּ עוֹלָם עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאִף קוּשִׁיּוֹת "אתם נִצְבִּים" שֶׁעֲדִינִי לֹא נִכְנְסוּ לְבְרִית הָאֱלֹה כְּכֹר תִּירְצוּ בְּזֶה הַמְּפָרְשִׁים, וְגַם אֲנִי נִתְרַזֵּן בְּזֶה בְּעֶזְרַת הַשֵּׁם לְקַמֵּן בְּמַקּוּמוֹ.

The presence [of the four occurrences of “*atem*”] in the beginning of the verse will hint that all this is according to the first interpretation, i.e., as above, that the circumstances of each of the first three occurrences explain the difficulties of the following occurrences.

However, the truth is that we can explain the difficulties of the fourth occurrence, “You are My witnesses” differently, according to the way explained later in parashat Shoftim (essay 4) on this verse, and see there.

The question that we have questioned on the second occurrence, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” which is the magnitude of the plagues of Egypt, has also been solved differently by the commentators. They felt that “they shall enslave them and oppress them”<sup>14</sup> was meant as a light oppression, but instead the Egyptians burdened Israel forever.<sup>15</sup>

Even the question associated with the third occurrence, of “You are standing,” that they still hadn’t entered into the covenant of the curse, was already solved by the commentators, and we will also solve this, G-d willing, later in its place, in parashat Nitzavim, essay 1.

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<sup>12</sup> Prov. 6:3.

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 4:22.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. 15:13.

<sup>15</sup> Abraham ben David (“the Ra’avad”) (c. 1125–1198), Provençal rabbi and commentator on the Talmud. Gloss on Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, chapter 6, halacha 5: “As for the subject of the Egyptians, it is no question at all for two reasons: First, it is a known doctrine that G-d inflicts no punishment against a wicked man unless it be through a more wicked man than he, whereafter that wicked man will have retribution visited upon him. . . . The Egyptians, too, were wicked and it was proper that they receive the plagues. If they had listened to Moses at first and let the children of Israel go forth, they would neither have been plagued nor drowned in the Red Sea. But the spitefulness of Pharaoh, and his insulting words against the Creator in the presence of His messenger, caused the punishment to be visited upon him. Second, because the Creator [only] said: “And they shall oppress them.” but they afflicted them with rigor, put some of them to death, and killed others by drowning, as the subject is spoken of saying: “I was but a little angry, but they helped for evil” (Zech. 1:15); they were, therefore, found guilty.”