

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter XIII: Shemot (Ex. 1:1–6:1)

Essay 3. A single verse hints at several miracles that supported Israel's population growth in Egypt

פָּרוּ "ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ונעצמו במאד במאד ותמלא הארץ אתם". כָּפַל כָּל אֱלוֹהֵי הַלְשׁוֹנוֹת לְרִמּוּז לְכָל הַגִּיטִים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם, דְּאִיתָא בְּמִדְרָשׁ שֶׁהַמְצָרִיִּים הָיוּ מִתְחַכְּמִין בְּדֵי שִׂישְׁרָאֵל וְתַמְעֵטוּ מִפְרִיָה וּרְבִיָה וְלֹא הָיוּ מְגִיחִים אוֹתָם לִילָד אֶצֶל נְשׁוֹתֵיהֶם בְּלִילָה וְהָיוּ יִשְׁנִים עַל הָאָרֶץ וְכוּ'. וְהַנְּשִׂים צִדְקָנִיּוֹת מְזַדְקָקוֹת לָהֶם בֵּין שְׁפֹתֵיהֶם, וְכַנְגֵד זֶה אָמַר "פָּרוּ" שֶׁהָיוּ מְקַיְמִין פְּרִיָה וּרְבִיָה אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ בְּלִילָה בְּבֵיתָם עַל הַמִּיטָה שֶׁנִּקְרָאת "פּוֹרְיָא" — שֶׁפָּרִין וְרַבִּין עָלֶיהָ.

There is a verse: **“But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and became mighty,¹ to a great extent, and the land was filled with them”** (Ex. 1:7). **The multiplication of all these terms**, fertile, prolific, multiplied, became mighty, and the doubled term *bi'me'od me'od* (בְּמֵאֹד מְאֹד) (“to a great extent”) **is to hint at all the miracles that were performed for them.** This essay will explain the significance of each of these terms.

The following verses read: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us *deal shrewdly* with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.” (Ex. 1:8–10).

As is brought in Ex. Midrash Rabbah (1:12), the Egyptians would deal shrewdly so that Israel would be deprived of fertility and reproduction. They wouldn't allow them to go to their wives at night and they would instead have to sleep on the ground. But the Jewish women were righteous and went outside to their husbands, where they had relations with them between the mounds in the field.² Because of this, [the verse] said the first term, “*paru*” (פָּרוּ) ([they] were fertile), that they would fulfill the command of being *pirya* (פְּרִיָה) (fruitful) and multiplying, even though at night they were not on the bed, which is called: “‘*purya*’ in Aramaic, an allusion to the fact that people *parin veravin*, which means procreate, upon it.”³

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¹ The root, *atzam* (אָצַם), could denote being vast, being numerous, or being mighty.

² In addition to being brought in the Midrash, this appears in Sotah 11b, though it doesn't make a connection to Ex. 1:7, but instead to Ps. 68:14, “When you lie *between the mounds in the field*, the wings of the dove are covered with silver, and her pinions with the shimmer of gold.”

³ Shabbat 77b.

וכינון שמגיע זמן לדתם הולכות ויולדות בשדה פחת המפות, ועל זה אמר "וישרצו" שהיו נולדים בשדה כשרצים, ואף על פי ששם היה שולט בהם אויר העולם והיה להם למות עם כל זה "וירבו".

When the time arrives for [the wives] to give birth, they go and give birth in the field under the apple tree.⁴ About this, [the verse] said the second term, “*va’yishretzu*” ([they were] prolific), that the [children] were born in the fields like *sheretzim* (שרצים) (insects). Even though the atmosphere of the earth ruled over them and they were liable to die because of the unsanitary conditions, despite this they “multiplied,” as given by the third term.

ועוד היו באים מלאכים ומנקים אותם ומשפרים אותם כחיה זו שמשפרת את הנולד כדי שיהיו בריאים ונחזקים. וכמו שאמר רבי חנינא במסכת [חולין] שמן שסכתני אמי בילדותי היא עמדה לי בעת זקנותי, וזהו "ניעצמו".

Angels would come and clean and prepare the newborn, just as a midwife prepares the newborn,⁵ so that they would be healthy and strong. As Rabbi Chanina said in Tractate Chullin (24b)⁶, when asked how he was able at the age of eighty to balance on one leg while removing a shoe or putting on a shoe, “The hot water and oil that my mother smeared on me in my youth benefited me in my old age,” and this is the meaning of the fourth term, “and they became mighty,” as the care given to the newborns by the midwives gave them strength that would serve them well into old age.

ואחר זה "במאד מאד" לרמז על שני עיגולין אחד של שמן ואחד של דבש וכו'. וכינון שהיו מפירים בהם המצרים רצו להרגם, ונעשה להם גם והיו נבלעים בקרקע, וזהו "ותמלא הארץ אתם" שהיו נבלעים בתוכה.

After that, the verse says, “to a great extent,” to hint at two round stones which the angels gathered from the fields, and from which the infants suckled what came out of the stones, one of the stones flowed with oil and one of the stones flowed with honey.⁷ Since they were recognized by the Egyptians they wanted to kill them, and a miracle was done for them and [the infants] were swallowed up in the ground,⁸ and this is the meaning of the end of the verse, “and the land was filled with them,” that [the infants] were swallowed within [the earth]. Sotah 11b explains that, “After [the Egyptians] would leave, [the babies] would emerge and exit

⁴ This also appears in Sotah 11b, though it doesn't make a connection to Ex. 1:7, but instead to Song of Songs 8:5, “Under the *apple tree* I awakened you; there your mother was in travail with you; there was she in travail and brought you forth.”

⁵ This also appears in Sotah 11b, though it doesn't make a connection to Ex. 1:7, but instead to Ezek. 16:4, “And as for your birth, on the day you were born, your navel was not cut nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not salted at all, nor swaddled at all.”

⁶ The first edition incorrectly cites tractate Shabbat.

⁷ This also appears in Sotah 11b, though it doesn't make a connection to Ex. 1:7, but instead to Deut. 32:13, “And He would suckle them with *honey from a craggy rock* and *oil from a flinty rock*.”

⁸ This also appears in Sotah 11b, though it doesn't make a connection to Ex. 1:7, but instead to Ps. 129:3, “The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.”

[the ground] like grass of the field, as it is stated: ‘I caused you to increase even as the growth of the field’ (Ezek. 16:7).”

As indicated in the footnotes, Sotah 11b discusses a number of elements brought here: that Jewish couples had relations in the field, that women gave birth under the apple tree, that angels cleaned and prepared the newborns, that angels suckled them with stones, and that the earth temporarily swallowed the newborns to protect them. However, Sotah 11b ties other texts to these elements. The novelty of Zera Shimshon is showing that a single verse, Exodus 1:7, can provide evidence for each of these several elements.

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