

Parshat Va'era

Look at the Context

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In narrative style and theme, Sefer Shemot diverges from Sefer Bereishit. Sefer Bereishit contained a collection of interrelated stories about the ancestry of human society and Avraham's family. The stories could be fragmented with little loss to their individual story arcs. One could even remove the first two Parshiot entirely without any loss in background information to the theme that dominates the remainder of the Sefer. Sefer Shemot, by contrast, relentlessly follows the story of Moshe's emergence as a leader and guidance of the newborn Jewish nation. The removal of any Parsha in this sefer would confuse the entire story arc.

Of greater significance is the difference in thematic focus between the two Sefarim. Bereishit's theme is the individual's search for identity and meaning in a relationship with G-d. The narrative follows our forefathers' choices and their consequences in the pursuit of this relationship. Shemot, however, introduces the nation as a character. With a personified collective consciousness, the nation displays as much decision making capability as any other character in the Torah. From Sefer Shemot onward, the Torah is primarily the narrative of this character – the Jewish nation – and its relationship with individual leaders and G-d. The most obvious manifestation of this distinction is the increasing focus on commands from G-d to the Jewish nation.

These differences between the first and latter four Sefarim of the Torah raise a question. If the Torah is, as the majority of its focus indicates, the presentation of the Jewish national identity in context of a relationship with G-d, why is Bereishit included in the Torah entirely? Although Bereishit contains valuable and timeless messages, there appears no reason why it is included with the Torah rather than presented as a stand alone volume containing Jewish historical background information.

The Ramban appeared to consider the same question. In his first commentary on Sefer Shemot, the Ramban asks why the first word of the Sefer is "*ve'eileh* – and these [are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt]." Why did Sefer begin with the conjunctive letter "*vuv* (and)?" The Ramban explains that the letter indicates that the events of this Parsha are a continuation of the events of Bereishit. The Ramban describes Bereishit as the "Sefer Yetzirah – book of creation." *Yetzira* literally means formation. Bereishit contained the story of the events and choices that determined the potential and national psyche of the Jewish people who would take the stage in the beginning of Shemot. The events of Shemot derive their basis from the choices made in Bereishit. The actions of our forefathers determined the psyche of the Jewish nation. The *vuv* of *ve'eileh* corresponds to the *vuv* in "*ve'chol zar'oh heivi ito mitzraim* - He brought all of his descendents to Egypt (Bereishit 46:7)." The Torah connects the decent in Bereishit – The climax of a complex multifaceted narrative that began in Lech Lecha – to the situation in Egypt at the beginning of Shemot. The "*vuv*" teaches that one cannot separate the simple statement of G-d's commands to the nation – Mitzvot – from the development of the national psyche that determined the exact form our relationship with G-d would assume.

The extra *vuv*, then, stresses the importance of the so called "fifth chelek of Shulchan Aruch." We must view our relationship with G-d and man in terms of the context of our environment and history. Our everyday relationship with G-d must be viewed in context of our personal histories and potentials. G-d does not demand of a Ba'al Teshuva that he produce *ha'arot* (comments) on R' Akiva Eiger three months after he decides to become religious. Similarly, one cannot view the people he interacts with as quantifiable objects, but rather as complex individuals with as rich experiences as oneself. Any valuable relationship should take into account the histories and emergent emotions of all parties. With this understanding it is clear why Bereishit is included in the Torah. It is the foundation of the commandments given to our nation.