

Thursday, Tevet 19, 5783 (Hakhel Year) / January 12, 2023

This Shabbat we begin the second Book of the Torah, the Book of Shemot (Exodus).

The Book of Shemot consists of eleven Parshiot. The first three are about the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt; the Ten Plagues and the Exodus.

The fourth Parsha is about the splitting of The Sea and the crossings of the Jewish people through it, while the Egyptians, chasing them, drowned.

In the fifth Parsha we read about The Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

The sixth Parsha records many of the laws which were given at Mount Sinai. The balance of the Book of Shemot is about the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle).

This week's Parsha, Shemot, begins, "And these are the names of the children of Israel who were coming to Egypt with Yaakov (Jacob)." The Torah relates the names of Yaakov's children who came with him to Egypt and the total amount of Yaakov's descendants who came to Egypt, which was seventy.

Q. In last week's Parsha we read about the passing of Yaakov and his children. Why does the Torah use the expression, "who are coming," as if they were now coming. It should have said, "who came" in the past tense?

A. Our sages tell us that the Jewish people were freed from Egypt due to several merits. One was that "they didn't change their [Hebrew] names." Instead of assimilating to Egyptian way of life and adopting Egyptian names, Yaakov's descendants kept their Jewish identity, using their "Hebrew names."

The Midrash explains that the names of each of Yaakov's twelve sons allude to the Exodus and liberation of the Jewish people. Retaining their Hebrew names, even while in Egypt, reminded them of their ultimate redemption and played an important role in their liberation.

This is why the Torah uses the expression, "who are coming to Egypt." Although they were in Egypt for 210 years, they always remembered and looked forward to the day when they will be liberated. They never felt like they were permanent residents in Egypt, rather they always thought of themselves as if they were constant immigrants, now coming into the land. Egypt was not their home.

"This is the fate of the Jewish people throughout our thousands of years in the Diaspora," says The Chizkuni. "After living in the same country for an extended period of time, after putting down roots in that country and contributing to its development, economy and social welfare, we have so often been considered strangers, as if we had just arrived." May we too merit the final redemption very soon. Amen.