



THE FOUNDATION OF JEWISH NATIONHOOD - PARSHAS SHEMOS – ALAN COHEN

This Shabbat we begin the reading of the book of Exodus. We concluded the book of Genesis with the account of how Jacob and his entire family left their home in the land of Canaan, because of the famine there, and settled in Egypt. They were welcomed by Pharaoh because they were the honoured guests of his Chief Minister, Joseph. Is the book of Exodus just a continuation of the story, or does it have a particular theme of its own? There is no doubt that the book of Exodus is a **close continuation** of the biblical story; yet it does have a theme of its own.

The opening words --- ואלה שמות בני ישראל --- *And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt* indicate the **link** that unites the events of Genesis with those of Exodus. Towards the end of Genesis we had been given the full enumeration of all the seventy souls who came with Jacob into Egypt. Exodus begins by repeating in outline the same enumeration, but this time counting only the heads of the families who constituted those seventy souls.

The literary style of beginning the book with the expression *And --- ואלה שמות --- And these are the names*, emphasises the **continuity of Jewish history**. After reading of the **individual lives** of the Patriarchs, we now move on to the formation of a distinct cohesive people. The **children** of Jacob become the **people of Israel**. Genesis portrays the **promise** of Jewish Nationhood. In the book of Exodus we find the foundations of this Jewish Nationhood.

The land of Canaan was to be the Land of Israel. There, G-d promised Abraham; "I will make of thee a great nation" --- ואעשך לגוי גדול [Gen. 12:2]. This promise is understood by our Rabbis to mean, not that G-d undertook by unilateral action, himself to transform the Tribes of Israel into a great nation; but rather, that "I will **fashion you** into a great nation". This is the interpretation of the Midrash Tanhuma : I will show you how to evolve so as to **become** a great nation. This greatness will be achieved by Israel's adherence to the unique character of Jewish nationhood as it is unfolded in the book of Exodus.

The first requisite is best described by the Hebrew name of the book of Exodus itself --- שמות --- "the names" of the Children of Israel. The name, in Jewish tradition, always represents the character of the individual. Because the Children of Israel maintained the high moral qualities imbued in them by the Patriarchs --- or as our Rabbis put it in the Midrash Yalkut --- שלא שינו את שמם --- because they did not change their names, meaning they did not forsake the moral teachings of their upbringing, they merited redemption from slavery, and their birth as a great nation. [ילקוט פ' בשלה --- פרק יג סי' רכ"ה]

The children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob followed the faith of their fathers in their absolute belief in G-d, and their respect for the sanctity of human life. They were not angels, nor even perfect human beings. They were normal men with their own human weaknesses; but they were good men. They practised kindness towards their fellow men; they upheld the law of justice; they kept faith with the purity of moral conduct; and they preserved the honour and dignity of their people.

Their personal experience of **slavery** added a **further** dimension to their national outlook. They hated tyranny, injustice and cruelty; and they **knew** that G-d intervened in their history to protect them from their enemies, and to ensure the fulfilment of the mission to which they had been called.

The book of Exodus teaches us that **any** formulation of Jewish identity **must** take into account **all these basic principles**, which are the **foundations** of Jewish Nationhood.

Based on draft of talk by Rabbi Dr. Isaac Cohen זצ"ל on Kol Yisroel 23/12/83

Rabbi Dr. Isaac Cohen was born in Llanelli, S. Wales in 1914. In his teens he went to Portsmouth to study at Aria College and from there proceeded to Jews' College. In 1939 he married his wife Fanny (nee Weisfogel) and received his Semichah in 1948. During his ministerial career he served the communities of Harrow (1935-9), Leeds (1939-45), Edinburgh (1947-59) and was Chief Rabbi of Ireland from 1959-79. He spent his remaining years in Yerushalayim and was niftar in 2007. His book Acts of the Mind in Jewish Ritual Law - An insight into Rabbinic Psychology, the culmination of over 20 years of research, was published posthumously in 2008.