



Mental Health Shabbat

Parshat Shemot (Exodus 1:1-6:1)

Parshat Shemot switches the lens in which the story of the Children of Israel has been told from a zoomed-in, personal story to a macroscopic view of a nation. This is the transition in which we switch our focus from personal struggles and personal resiliency to the struggles and resiliency of our nation. It is said that, following Yosef's death and the death of his generation, "Yet the Children of Israel bore fruit, they swarmed, they became many, they grew mighty—exceedingly" (Exodus 1:7). The word choice here is interesting—"yet", showing that despite of and in spite of the suffering the collective Jewish nation was facing, they showed remarkable physical resiliency in regaining the numbers they had lost. In this parsha, however, there is a paradox of resiliency—as we see the number of Israelites regrowing, their mental fortitude wanes as the Egyptians continue to "embitter their lives" (Exodus 1:14) with soul-crushing physical and psychological torment. In this parsha, the idea of the community crying out to G-d is mentioned four separate times and in five different ways; they groaned (*vaye'enachu*), they cried out (*vayiz'aku*), their outcry ascended (*shav'atam*), they groaned a cry (*na'akatam*), and they cried (*tza'akatam*). This is something we've all felt, varying levels of emotions, some big and complex and some small and nagging, and some we struggle to name. By showing this five-fold complexity of the pain of the Israelites, we are reminded that there is no struggle too small or too complex for G-d to hear. This was the big turning point—a moment when their healing began. Their cries were not for nothing, as it says, "G-d hearkened to their moaning, [...] G-d saw the Children of Israel, G-d knew" (Exodus 2:24-25).

One of the hardest parts of suffering is the feeling that we are suffering alone. The feeling that no matter how many times we cry out, no one is there with us. Parshat Shemot, however, teaches us that while this feeling is so natural it has occurred since biblical times, the moment suffering is noticed, healing begins. Rashi posits that G-d "knowing" the Children of Israel isn't simply that He knew how they felt, it is that He felt their pain Himself. Without words, just the simple act of presence is shown to be the most sacred way to show up for those who are crying out, validating the acts of those who feel they may not have the right words to support others. Before the Exodus of Mitzrayim could occur, before the plagues, the miracles, the parting of the sea, there was overwhelming pain and suffering that became all the more bearable with simple recognition.

Parshat Shemot teaches us that there is no pain that is undeserving of being named, recognized, and seen in ourselves, in G-d, and in others. Even when we struggle to name our cries, they are heard, and by simply being heard, our healing has already begun.