

Rabbi Elchanan Shoff
PARSHAS SHEMOS

And these are the names... (Ex. 1:1). Baal HaTurim writes that the phrase “And these are the names” (ואלה שמות) serves as an acronym for the statement “And man is obligated to read the Parshah twice in the Scripture and once in the Targum” (וחייב אדם לקרות הפרשה) (שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום). The Chida in *Chomas Anach* (*Shemos* 2) writes the same thing in the name of Rabbeinu Efraim, and it is also cited by Rabbi Chaim Palagi in *Kaf Hachaim* (27). Similarly, Rabbi David Hanagid (a grandson of the Rambam) writes in *Midrash Rabbi David HaNaggid* (*Shemos*, p. 6) that the phrase “And these are the names” (ואלה שמות) serves as an acronym for the statement “And man is obligated to *complete* the Torah twice in the Scripture and once in the Targum” (וחייב אדם להשלים התורה שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום). See *Sefer HaRemazim* by Rabbenu Yoel (*Parshas Shemos*, p. 197) who finds another allusion to this Halacha in the passage at hand by noting that that the *gematria* of the word “And these” (ואלה = 42), plus the eleven words in the opening *passuk* (42 + 11 = 53) equals 53—the exact amount of *Parshiyos* in the Chumash. Rabbi Chaim Palagi explains in the name of the Chida the connection between the Halacha of reading the Parsha twice in Scripture and once in Targum and the beginning of the Book of Shemos. Kabbalists have explained that the purpose of the Jewish exile to Egypt was for the Jewish People to identify and collect sparks of holiness which are found in even the most remote places in the world. The Jews were able to perform this feat by toiling in mortar and bricks. In doing so, they took the most physical aspects of the most spiritually-disconnected society and were able to find traces of holiness.¹ This endeavor mimics the deeper implications of reading the Parsha twice in the Scripture and once in Targum. By fulfilling that Halacha, we are actually taking the non-holy elements of Targum—originally the Aramaic language, but really whatever language is the vernacular—and making it holy, just like the Jews took the physical labor in Egypt and turned it into a spiritual journey. This sort of effort awakens one’s inner spirituality, which is otherwise dormant and asleep. Indeed, the word Targum (תרגום = 649) in *gematria* equals “slumber” (תרדמה = 649), alluding to the spiritual slumber that is the lot of those disconnected from holiness. My friend Joey Schlesinger once offered another meaningful connection of this halacha and the book of Shemos. The expression used by the Talmud (*Brachos* 8b) in relaying this Halacha is “a person is obligated to complete *with the community* twice the Scripture and once the Targum”. Since the requirement is pegged to “the community” we have an allusion to this Halacha in the beginning of the Book of Exodus, in which the sons of Yaakov are first introduced as a nation on their own (instead of a group of individuals). At this point, they have become *Bnei Yisrael* (“The Sons of Israel”). That sense

¹ We will discuss this idea at greater length in next week’s Parasha.

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of community between the Jewish people especially shines through in times of need, such as when they were all enslaved, so there is no more appropriate place to allude to this Halacha than here. I would add to this Rav Saadia Gaon's famous dictum, "Our nation is only a nation through its Torah". This means that all Jews only become one unit because of their shared commitment to the Torah. Studying and observing the Torah is what binds all the individuals together into one community. The Aderes (Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim, father-in-law of Rav Kook) writes in *Atros Adar* (his commentary to the *Baal Haturim*) that the allusion to the Halacha of reading the Parshah twice in Scripture and once in Targum appears specifically in the beginning of Parshas Shemos because the first few verses are just names of people, which cannot be translated, so one would think that they only have to be read twice, but not a third time for Targum, so the allusion was said specifically here to teach that even those verses should be translated in Targum.

And these are the names... (Ex. 1:1). As we mentioned above, this passage alludes in different ways to the Halacha of reading the Parshah twice in Scripture and once in Targum. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 285) writes that one who fears Heaven should also read the Parshah with Rashi. Rabbi Chaim Palagi cites this and laments the fact that in his times even the Torah scholars flouted this element of the Mitzvah, and unjustifiably refrained from studying Chumash with Rashi over the weekend. He writes that it is highly recommended to study Rashi on the Parsha, and even if one cannot finish all the Rashi over Shabbos, he can finish it up during the coming week. Rabbi Chaim Palagi noted that anybody who wants to come up with novel ideas related to the Chumash should begin by studying Rashi's commentary; Rashi's commentary is so pure, for Rashi fasted 613 fasts before writing his commentary,² and in his commentary are contained lofty secrets and deep hidden ideas. A fascinating tradition is cited in the book, *Leket Shichicha Peab* (Berditchev, 1905) that the great Kabbalist, R. Shimshon of Ostropolia wrote an elaborate kabalistic commentary to the Chumash, but upon competition he was informed from the Heavens that his commentary was wonderful, but that it needed to be condensed. So he did so, and again he was informed from the Heavens that his commentary was wonderful, but that it needed to be condensed yet again! This went on until finally, he completed a satisfactorily condensed version, far

² The Chida in *Kikar La-Aden* (cited by *Likkutum Zeir Sham* to *Shem HaGedolim*) writes that Rashi fasted 613 fasts before he penned his commentary to the Pentateuch. His grandson Rabbeinu Tam was reputed to have said that he himself could have written Rashi's commentary to the Talmud, but he could not have written Rashi's commentary to the Pentateuch.

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smaller than his initial manuscript. When he reread it, he was astonished to discover that this text he has produced was actually the exact text of Rashi's commentary to the Torah. Whether or not this story is historically accurate, it tells us of the great significance that Jews have found in the words of Rashi, containing unending levels of depth and significance.

And all the souls of the offspring of Yaakov were seventy souls (Ex. 1:5). When telling of Hashem dividing up the nations of the world, Moshe says, "He established the borders of the nations according to the number of the sons of Israel" (Deut. 32:8). Rabbi Ephraim Lunshitz (*Kli Yakar* there) explains that the seventy nations correspond to the seventy souls of the sons of Yaakov who descended to Egypt. This teaches us that each Jewish person is equal to an entire nation! He compares this to what Rabbi Yitzchak Arama wrote (*Akedas Yitzchak, Behaaloscha* Shaar 62) that when Hashem says at Sinai "And you shall be for me a treasure more than the other nations, and you shall be for me a Kingdom of Priests...", this means that and every Jewish person is as precious to Hashem in his own individual, unique way. Each person is like a king and like a priest in that he stands out in comparison to everybody else. We are nation of kings and priests, because each person in his own right is like a king and a priest. Rabbi Yitzchak Eliyah Landau of Vilna, (1781–1877) writes in *Pas'sbeigen HaDas (Chiflayim le-susbiab* to Ex. 1:5) that the Chizkuni (to Deut 6:4 on the passuk of Shema) explains that everything in this world is divided into factors of seventy. The Jewish People are 1/70 of the nations, the nations are 1/70 of the animals, the animals are 1/70 of the birds, the birds are 1/70 of the fish, the fish are 1/70 of the demons, and the demons are 1/70 of the angels. The existence of all these elements is powered by the seventy names of Hashem, through the seventy ways of interpreting Torah, as the Torah was His tool in creating the world. The earthly users of Hashem's tools are the Torah Scholars who are epitomized by the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, who are derived from the seventy sons of Yaakov. Just as the soul gives energy to the rest of the body and allows it to continue to exist, so do the souls of each of Yaakov's seventy sons power the energy of one of the seventy nations. For this reason it says "And all the souls of the offspring of Yaakov were seventy souls", they were not simply seventy people, but seventy "souls" each of whom functioned as the lifeline for one of the seventy nations.³

³ Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano explains (*Asara Maamaros, Maamar Chikur Din* 3:4) that the seventy members of Yaakov's family correspond to the seventy nations. He notes that of all seventy members of Yaakov's family, there were only two females: Yocheved and Dinah. Dinah also was actually like a man in certain ways (because she left her house instead of staying instead, and because she was originally supposed to be a boy but Leah prayed for her to be a

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And all the souls of the offspring of Yaakov were seventy souls (Ex. 1:5). The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 4:6) relates in the name of Rabbi Elasa: *There was once an idolater who approached Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha and asked him “it says in your Torah ‘you shall follow the majority.’ We idolaters are more numerous than you Jews, why do you not join together with us, and worship as we do?” He replied, “Do you have children?” “There you go reminding me of my troubles,” responded the idolater, “I have many children. When they come to eat in my home, this one offers blessings to his god, and the other to his god, and the next thing you know, they have crushed each others’ skulls.” So Rabbi Yehoshua said to him “do you succeed in getting them to join together in worship?” The man responded “no!” So the Rabbi said to him, “before you attempt to get us to join together with you, perhaps you ought to work on your own family first.” The idolater hurried away⁴. Once the idolater left, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha’s students said to him “Rabbi, you pushed him away with a broken stick⁵, but tell us the real answer [to why we don’t follow the rest of the worlds views, since they are the majority, after all.]” He said to them, “when the Torah speaks of Esav⁶ he was only with six people and yet they are called ‘nefashos – souls’ in the plural, but when it speaks of Yaakov and all seventy members of his family, it refers to them as a “soul” in the singular. Since Esav served many gods, his family is referred to as many souls. Yaakov serves one God, and thus all who were with him were one soul⁸.” Regarding Esav the souls are in plural form because each individual of Esav’s entourage worshipped a different god, but regarding Yaakov, it says ‘souls’ in the singular because they all worshipped one God”. Rav Kook*

girl), so the only wholly female in the list of Yaakov’s seventy descendants is Yocheved, who was born just as the Yaakov’s family entered Egypt. He explains that Yocheved corresponded to the angelic force which powers the Nation of Egypt, and her birth precisely at the moment that the Jews entered Egypt portended the downfall of that angelic force in the hands of her son Moshe. See also *Tiferes HaGershuni (Parshas Vayigash)* who writes that Chushim, son of Dan, corresponded to the nation of Edom.

⁴ See Metzudas Tzion to *Divrei Hayamim 2 21:20* s.v. nidchaf

⁵ see Yeshaya 42:3

⁶ Bereshis 36:6

⁷ Shemos 1:5

⁸ See also the comments of *Maharam Sofer* here, where he explains that the Jews were united as one soul, and the verse after speaking of the seventy people in the singular, as one soul, concludes “and Yosef was in Egypt,” for he was the glue that bound them together. R. Yonason Shteiff cites this (*Mahari Shteiff al Hatorah*, Parshas Shemos p. 65, *amaros* 11) and then explains that we are united because we all serve the very same God. Yosef, who through poverty and wealth, from the lowest lows of prison to the highest heights of nobility, taught us how to properly serve Hashem as the one constant in life. He then cites this Midrash that we deal with in this essay, to cement this idea.

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(*Midbar Shur*, pp. 14–15) explains that human nature of individuals are so different from each other, that different people when compared to each other seem to be like completely different species. However, if people act for one shared purpose and focus their efforts on those goals, then they will become more and more connected to one another, until they are like one person. If all the Jewish People focus and commit to the same shared system of values and expectations—i.e. the Torah—then and only then can they be aptly described as one “person” (as an example - when the Jews encamped at Sinai, the Torah records this using the singular form, instead of the plural to demonstrate their unity of purpose). Accordingly, because all the Jews worship only One God, they have only one goal in mind, and can thus be described as though they are of one “soul”, but the gentiles who each worship a different set of values and live for all sorts of varied causes at odds with one another, cannot be described as one “soul” rather they are a conglomeration of many “souls” with many different values.

Shifra (Gen. 1:15). *Baal HaTurim* explains that this midwife was called Shifra because when a baby was born and was not breathing, she would insert a tube (שפופרת, shefoferes) into the child's body and blow into the child to resuscitate him or her.

A man from the House of Levi went, and he took [married] the daughter of Levi (Ex. 2:1). Rabbi Yonasan Eyebschutz (*Yaaros Dvash* vol. 2, *Drush* 9) cites the Gemara (*Bava Basra* 120a) which says that Yocheved was 130 years old at this time, and she is called a “daughter” (which implies that she was young) because she returned to youthfulness. He explains that the purpose of this miracle was for the sake of Moshe Rabbeinu’s holiness. It says about firstborns that the first to burst forth from the womb are holy to Hashem, yet Moshe Rabbeinu would have lost out on this level of holiness because his mother was already older and had already given birth to Aaron and Miriam. To get around this, Hashem had Yocheved revert to a youthful state, and even her virginity returned to her, such that when Moshe Rabbeinu was born, he could be considered the first to “burst forth” from the womb, and thus attain the holiness associated with firstborns.

...that he was good... (Ex. 2:2). Chizkuni explains that “he was good” means that Moshe Rabbenu was born already “good” (טוב), as he was born already-circumcised. For this reason, he explains, there is a custom for those attending a circumcision to recite the verse “Give thanks to Hashem, for [He is] good (טוב)”, because “good” is associated with circumcisions.

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And she sent forth her hand, and she took it (Ex. 2:5). The Talmud (*Sotah* 12b) records a dispute over whether she send her hand (אמתה) or her maidservant (אמתה). According to the former opinion, her hand miraculously stretched 60 handbreadths to reach the baby Moshe. Rabbeinu Bechaya writes that this figure of 60 handbreadths is alluded to in the text of the Bible, because when the daughter of Pharaoh names Moshe, she says, “For from the waters, I have drawn him” (כי מן המים משיתיהו). In that phrase, there is an extra letter ך and two extra letters ה, whose total *gematria* equals 60 (50 + 5 + 5 = 60).

And he hit the Egyptian and he buried him in sand (Ex. 2:12). Rabbi Meir Goldberg (*Margolios shel Torah*) writes that “And he hit” (וידך = 36) in *gematria* equals the number of prohibitions for which one is liable to get punished with *kares* (*Kerisos* 1:1). *Kares* literally means cutting and its appearance here alludes to Moshe “cutting away” the ungodly Egyptian influences of his upbringing and burying them. He notes that “the Egyptian” in this verse refers to Moshe himself, as “the Egyptian” (המצרי = 345) equals Moshe (משה = 345) in *gematria*.

And Moshe arose, and he saved them (Ex. 2:17). Rabbi Yitzchak Eliyahu Landau writes in *Pas'shegen HaDas* (*Divrei Chachmim* here) that the other shepherds wanted to do something immoral with Yisro's seven daughters, and Moshe Rabbeinu got up and saved them. For this reason it says, “and he saved them” (ויושיען) and it says regarding the rape of a betrothed maiden “the betrothed lass cried out, but there was no savior (מושיע) for her”. It uses the same wording here as it does regarding a potential savior who could save a victim from abuse. Moreover, the Gemara (*Sukkah* 29a) says that one of the things which can cause the sun to weaken, is when a betrothed maiden cries out for help and nobody saves her. Moshe Rabbenu felt the responsibility to save these girls because Moshe's face is compared to that of the sun, which is affected by the unheeded plea of a girl about to be raped.

And the king of Egypt died, and the Sons of Israel sighed because of the labor (Ex. 2:23). Rashi explains that the Egyptian king really became a leper and he would slaughter Jewish children and bathe in their blood (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:34). Similarly, when Isaiah (6) refers to the year of King Uzziah's death, this refers to the year he became a leper. Why do we not just say that the Egyptian King actually died, and that Uzziah actually died? Why do we have to reinterpret it to mean that he became a leper? Many commentators (like Rabbi Heschel of Krakow in *Chanukas HaTorah*, Rabbi Yehonasan Eyebchutz in *Midrash Yehonasan*, the Malbim, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Meklenburg in *HaKsav VeHaKabbalah* and the Vilna Gaon) explain that whenever a king dies in the scriptures, he is stripped of his title

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“king” and is simply mentioned by his name. Yet, when mentioning Pharaoh’s death and Uzziah’s death, the word “king” appears in the text. This indicates that they did not *actually* die here, but only became lepers which is tantamount to dying.

And their crying out rose up to God from the labor (Ex. 2:23). Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Riminov (*Menachem Tzzyion*) writes that he heard in the name of Rabbi Shmelka of Nikolsburg that this verse demonstrates the praise of the Jewish People who were going through some trying time, and even so the main catalyst for their crying was the exile of the Holy Presence, not their own exile. He renders the passage: “And their crying out for God rose up more than [their crying because of] the labor”.

And he came to the Mountain of God—to Horeb (Ex. 3:1). The *Yalkut Shimoni* (169) cites the ancient *Midrash Abkir* which says that the Mountain of God is called Horeb (חורב), because it is a place that brought about a reality that those responsible for destruction (חרבות), will be held responsible (because the Torah was given there and the Torah holds them accountable)—such as murderers, and adulterers. Alternatively, the Midrash says that it is called Horeb because from there will come a sword (חרב) upon the nations of the world who refused to accept the Torah.

...the sheep of Yisro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian (Ex. 3:2). *Pas’shegen HaDas* (*Chiflayim le-sushiah* here) notes that according to the rules of syntax, the sentence should say “...Yisro the priest of Midian, his father-in-law”. When then does it instead say, “...Yisro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian”? He answers that this serves an allusion to the fact that Yisro’s **main source of importance comes from the fact that he was Moshe’s father-in-law**, and that gave him more prominence than his role as the priest of Midian.

And an angel of Hashem appeared to him in the flame of the fire (Ex. 3:2). The Chida (*Nachal Kedumim*) cites Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropolia as explaining that Moshe was a reincarnation of Adam’s sons Shais and Hevel. Thus, the name Moshe (משה) serves as an acronym for the line of reincarnation Moshe, Shes, Hevel (משה שת הבל). He notes that this alluded to in the word “in the flame” (בלבת) which is comprised of all the letters of the names Moshe, Shes, Hevel, minus the letters in the name Moshe (משה שת הבל).

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...from the bush... (Ex. 3:2). *Mechilta de-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* (cited by *Torah Shleimah*) explains that Hashem specifically appeared in a bush because the bush is one element in nature which idol worshipers did not deify.

And—behold!—the bush is burning in the fire... (Ex. 3:2). Rabbeinu Bechaya writes that the bush (*sneh*) is the same thing as Mount Sinai, because at the giving of the Torah, the Torah describes Mount Sinai as burning in a fire. Or, as *Likutei Torah* (cited by *Torah Shleimah*) explains, because Sinai is the future site upon which He would give the Torah to the Jews. In *Pirush HaNarbonne* (to Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:66) he writes that others have reported that the rocks at the site of Mount Sinai when split, have patterns on them with the image of a bush, and this resembles the bush within which Hashem revealed himself to Moshe. He notes that a dignitary from Barcelona (one of the sons of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas) once brought him one of those stones and he saw that indeed it has an image of bush on it, and every time one would break the stone, the resulting rocks would also have an image of a bush, and the same thing is also quoted by Rabbi Yaakov Sapir (*Even Sapir*, vol. 1, p. 39).

And He said, “Do not come close to there; remove your shoes from upon your feet” (Ex. 3:5). Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:5 and *Ruach Chaim* 1:1) explains that “remove your shoes from upon your feet” means “remove” (or “transcend”) your physical being from upon yourself. See also *Meshech Chochmah* (to Ex. 20:18), who also writes this. Rabbi Chaim Palagi (*Nefesh Chaim*, Mem 170) explains that “shoes” in this context is a euphemism for “woman” (because a man fits into a woman like a foot fits into a shoe). In this passage, Hashem revealed to Moshe that if he would immediately separate from his wife (i.e. remove his “shoes”), then he would be able to connect directly to Hashem’s Holy Presence that is the Tree of Life and he would achieve immortality and never die. Rabbi Menachem Kasher (*Torah Shleimah* here 91) cites a Midrash that says that in the merit of Avraham refusing any remuneration from the King of Sodom by saying “If from a thread to shoe-string...”, Hashem said that He too will mention “shoes” when saving the Jewish People.

And He said, “Do not come close to there; remove your shoes from upon your feet” (Ex. 3:5). *Pas’shegen HaDas* (*Chiflayim le-sushiah* here) explains that sometimes a person can become holy through being in a holy place (like the Land of Israel, or the Holy Temple which can sanctify those who tread on its ground), and sometimes a place becomes holy because a holy person has walked there. In the former case, the holiness is derived from the

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resting of Hashem's Holy Presence, while in the latter case the holiness emanates from the holy person who came there. Therefore, when Moshe Rabbenu realized that he was in a holy place because he saw the burning bush, he thought that he would approach the spectacle and by virtue of being in a holy place, he could make himself holy. However, Hashem told him, "Do not come close to there..." meaning, you do not need to come close to that place in order to become holy, because you are already holy, and in fact are holier than that place. Rather, that place could become holy because of your presence, if you take off your shoes and thereby remove the barrier between yourself and the ground of this site.

I am the God of your father (Ex. 3:6). Rabbeinu Bechaya explains that when she heard a voice calling him, "Moshe Moshe" he heard it as though it was his father's voice. As the Midrash Tanchuma says, when Moshe heard this voice, he became happy and he said that his father Amram must still be alive, but then the speaker said, "I am the God of your Father. I came in an appeasing voice [sounding like your father's] so that you will not be scared." This teaches us that prophets would otherwise be scared by the voice they heard in their prophecy, unless Hashem would specifically do something appeasing to them in order for them to be able to handle the prophecy. The same is found with the prophet Samuel to whom Hashem's voice sounded like that of his teacher Eli the Kohen. From here we see that children hear the voice of Hashem as though it was their father speaking. This is because whatever heritage a father bequeaths his child is what allows that child to connect to Hashem. See also *Pas'sbegen HaDas (Divrei Chachamim* to Ex. 1:2)

And Moshe said to God, "who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Will I take the Sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11). Rabbi Moshe Sofer writes in *Shaalos Uteshuvos Chasam Sofer* (vol. 6, 98) that the election of the Messiah will resemble that of Moshe. Just as Moshe—the first redeemer—was already at the age of eighty, yet he never knew or even suspected that he was going to be the redeemer, so will it be with the Messiah. When Hashem said that He wants to send Moshe to Pharaoh (Ex. 3:10), Moshe initially refused and did not want to accept this mission upon himself; the same will be the Messiah.⁹

And God said to Moshe, "I will be that which I will be", and He said, "so shall you said to the Sons of Israel: 'I will be' sent me to you" (Ex. 3:14). Rashi's grandson Rashbam writes that the true meaning of this verse should only be revealed to those who can keep a secret, and he proceeds to encode his commentary in a form of encryption called

⁹ See also *Chasam Sofer al HaTorah* (to Ex 4:26).

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צפ"ת דפג"ת זה"י"ף תצמ"ץ פתט"ף דפגמ"י תפא"ף by explaining that this verse means: מעמ"ץ פמ"ף שידפ"י ל"ם י"ץ צפ"ץ כתק"י הוא קורא עצמו אה-ה ואנו קורים אותו יה-ו-ה ו-ו במקום כמו כי יה-ה הוא לאדם. This means that Hashem calls Himself "I will be" (אה-ה), and we call Him YHVH (-י ה-ו-ה) and YV(-ו) instead, because YH (-י-ה) [and its derivatives are His name as revealed] to man.

ת	ש	ר	ק	צ	פ	ע	ס	נ	מ	ל	כ	י	ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת

And Moshe fled from before it (Ex. 4:3). *Shemos Rabbah* (3:12) relates that a certain Roman matron said to Rabbi Yossi, "my god is greater than your God". He asked, "why so?" She explained, "Because at the time that your God revealed Himself to Moshe at the burning bush, Moshe hid his face from Him, but when he saw the snake—which is my god—he immediately fled from before it." Rabbi Yossi responded, "May your bones become bloated! When our God revealed Himself at the burning bush, there was no place for Moshe to run away to, because wherever he would run—be it the heavens, the sea, or the dry land—is all within Hashem's domain, so instead he hid his face. However, your god the snake a person can easily run away from its domain by taking two or three steps, so Moshe run away from the snake in order to escape it."

My son, My firstborn, Israel (Ex. 4:22). R. Yosef Bechor Shor explains that the expression firstborn here means that even though all of creation are like My sons, says Hashem, the Israelites are especially dear to Me because they are like My firstborn.

And it was when [they were travelling] on the road, in a lodge, and Hashem encountered him, and He [Hashem] sought to kill him [Moshe] (Ex. 4:24). Why did Hashem only *seek* to kill Moshe and not actually kill him? Rabbi Chaim ibn Atar (*Ohr HaChaim*) explains that the Talmud (*Pesachim* 8b) asserts that those who have been dispatched for the purposes of a *mitzvah* have a special Divine protection, and are not damaged. This is because when a person is busy with a *mitzvah*, he has created a special guardian angel which watches over him and protects him from any malevolent forces. For this reason, Hashem only "sought" to kill Moshe, but did not kill him. This story happened specifically when Moshe and his family stopped to lodge because at that moment he could not be said to have been in middle of carrying out a mission for the purposes of a *mitzvah*. At that moment, the accusatory angels began to argue that Moshe should be killed, while the

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other angels tried to defend him. In the meantime, Moshe's wife Tziporah caught wind of what was happening, so she took a rock and circumcised her son, thereby mitigating any harm. This implies that at the time that Moshe was lodging, he still maintained the status of an agent sent on a mission for *mitzvah*, and therefore still had the special protection from the *mitzvah*.

And Tziporah took a sharp rock (Ex. 4:25). The Rambam (*Hilchos Milah* 2:1) writes that what can carry out a circumcision with any instrument, even a sharp rock or a shard of glass, or anything else that cuts (except for a sharp reed), but it is preferable to perform the circumcision with an iron implement—whether it is a knife or scissors—and the prevailing custom is to use a knife. This Halacha is also cited by the *Tur* (*Yoreh Deah* 264). The *Prishah* writes that he heard the reason for using specifically an iron tool is that the Midrash says that from the day that the iron of Goliath's helmet miraculously burst open, iron had been promised as the material to be used for performing the commandment of circumcision. This can be explained through a passage in Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen of Tzfas' work *Sifsei Kohen*. He writes that originally iron was a material excluded from holy uses, as the Torah stresses that iron tools should not be used in preparing an altar (Deut. 27:5). However, later when the iron/bronze of Goliath's helmet allowed itself to become malleable to let King David's rock penetrate the armor, Hashem rewarded iron by giving it a role in holy uses, such that iron became the material from which knives for circumcisions and for *shechita* would be made.