

Date: 17 Tevet 5786 (January 6, 2026)

Torah Portion: Shemot

Topic: When Blessing Becomes a Threat

This week's Torah portion describes Yisrael's growth in Mitzrayim with unusual intensity. The Torah piles up verbs—Yisrael becomes fruitful, multiplies, increases, and grows very strong (Exod. 1:7). Rashi explains that this excess language signals visible divine blessing. Yisrael is not merely surviving; it is flourishing in a way that cannot be explained naturally. This visibility is precisely what alarms Pharaoh. His fear is not caused by rebellion or violence, but by life that cannot be controlled.

Ramban observes that Mitzrayim policy changes only when Yisrael is perceived as a people with destiny rather than usefulness. Once Israel is no longer just labor, fear becomes law. Sforno adds that hostility arises when holiness cannot be assimilated. Pharaoh's famous question—"Who is YHWH that I should obey His voice?" (Exod. 5:2)—is therefore not ignorance but refusal. Kli Yakar reads it as ideological self-deification: the state recognizes no authority higher than itself. For this reason Moses demands worship, not freedom. The conflict is about allegiance before it is about labor.

Yishayahu later exposes the same pattern among Yisrael's own leaders. Yisrael is promised future fruitfulness (Isa. 27:6), yet leaders respond by mocking instruction as childish repetition—"precept upon precept, line upon line" (Isa. 28:10). Ibn Ezra explains that this phrase expresses ridicule, not teaching. Malbim shows how mockery turns Torah into background noise, leaving society unable to correct itself. Yishayahu calls such a system a "covenant with death" (Isa. 28:15): a structure designed to avoid responsibility.

Midrash Rabbah explains that Pharaoh's decree against Hebrew infants comes from fear of a future redeemer. Children represent continuity and tomorrow. Tyranny therefore attacks the future before it can mature. Sotah 11a preserves this logic, showing that Pharaoh's advisors were driven by anxiety over destiny, not present conditions.

The chapter 2 in Mattiyahu mirrors this structure in narrative form. A king reacts with fear to the birth of a child who represents an alternative authority. From a biblical interpretive perspective, this does not add a new theology but confirms a familiar biblical pattern: when blessing becomes visible, unjust power responds with violence.

Across Torah, Prophets, and the Gospels increasing oppression is not a sign of failure but a warning signal. As Sfat Emet teaches, holiness often grows stronger under pressure. Rav Hirsch adds that tyranny depends on exhaustion and despair, but these tools also expose its weakness. Therefore, the chapter of Exodus marks not retreat but approach. Redemption begins when power reveals its fear.

Shalom.