

PARASHAT SHEMOT

Exodus 1:1–6:1

Parashat Shemot begins by mentioning the *shemot*, or “names,” of Jacob’s sons and telling us that after they died a new pharaoh, who did not know Joseph, comes to power. Fearing the Jewish people, the new ruler orders taskmasters to enslave them and drown their male children in the Nile River. Defying that order, one mother places her son in a basket and casts the basket into the river. Pharaoh’s daughter who was bathing nearby rescues the child and adopts him as her own. She names him Moses. Some time after Moses has grown up, he sees an Egyptian beating a Jew. Defending the Jew, Moses strikes the Egyptian and kills him. When Pharaoh hears what has happened, he orders Moses put to death. So Moses flees from Egypt. When he arrives in Midian, he is welcomed by Jethro, a local priest, whose daughter, Zipporah, he later marries. While Moses is shepherding Jethro’s flock, God speaks to him out of a burning bush, promising that Aaron, his brother, will help him liberate the Israelites from oppression. Moses then returns to Egypt where he and Aaron go to Pharaoh to demand freedom for their people. Pharaoh refuses and imposes hard labor upon the people, who blame Moses for making their situation worse. When Moses complains to God, he is told, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might.”
