Shemot: Redemption from the Unexpected

There is a quiet habit in many Jewish communities–rarely stated out loud, but often felt. We sometimes look down on the so-called "assimilated Jew." The Jew who doesn't show up. The Jew who doesn't know. The Jew who doesn't observe. The Jew that is not institutionalized. We assume, sometimes unconsciously, that Jewish renewal can only come from within our institutions, from those who stayed close, from those who never left. We imagine that continuity depends exclusively on insiders, guardians, and gatekeepers.

But Jewish history–and the Torah itself–tell a very different story. Again and again, redemption comes not only from those who guarded the walls, but from those who were raised outside them. Not because assimilation is ideal, but because redemption often arrives through unexpected vessels. If the Jewish story depended only on the insiders, we might not have survived.

Parashat Shemot introduces us to the greatest redeemer of our people: Moshe. And Moshe, from the very beginning, is an unlikely candidate. He is born a Hebrew slave, but raised in Pharaoh's palace, educated as Egyptian royalty, trained in leadership, governance, and power (Exodus 2:1-10). He grows up speaking the language of the empire, immersed in its culture, benefiting from its privilege. And yet, the Torah tells us that his transformation begins not with ritual or study, but with a moral awakening: *"He went out to his brothers and saw their suffering"* (Exodus 2:11).

That moment of seeing is decisive. When Moshe witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and refuses to look away, something shifts. He intervenes. He acts. Redemption begins not with perfect Jewish credentials, but with the refusal to remain neutral in the face of injustice. Moshe's education came from Egypt–but his conscience came from a deeper place.

This pattern appears earlier in the Torah with Yosef. Sold into slavery, Yosef survives by entering Egyptian society fully. He learns the language, adopts the dress, and rises to political power. Pharaoh gives him an Egyptian name–*Tzafnat Paneach*–and places him at the center of the empire (Genesis 41:41-45). From the outside, Yosef looks completely assimilated. And yet, it is precisely from that position–inside the system–that he saves Egypt, reunites his family, and preserves the future of Israel (Genesis 45-47). He looks Egyptian, but he carries the destiny of Israel.

The same pattern reappears in the Persian period. Esther lives a concealed life. Her Jewish identity is hidden as she navigates the palace of King Ahasuerus (Esther 2:10). She survives by silence–until silence becomes impossible. Mordechai's challenge cuts to the core: *"Who knows whether you have come to royal power for such a time as this?"* (Esther 4:14). In that moment, Esther realizes that her hiddenness was not an accident. The concealed Jew becomes the revealed savior.

And in a later biblical story still, in an imaginary Babylon, Daniel is educated in imperial culture, trained in the language and wisdom of the empire, and given a Babylonian name–*Belteshazzar* (Daniel 1:3-7). Everything about his life suggests accommodation. Yet

Daniel refuses to surrender his soul. He becomes a moral and spiritual voice within exile, demonstrating that even a Jew shaped by foreign culture can become a force of integrity and faith (Daniel 6). Even in Babylon, Daniel refuses to lose himself.

This dynamic does not end with the Bible. It continues into modern Jewish history through powerful moments of return and reawakening.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), born into an assimilated Jewish family in Germany, stood on the verge of converting to Christianity. Judaism, to him, seemed intellectually and spiritually exhausted. On the eve of his conversion, he decided to attend one final Yom Kippur service–almost as a formality. That night changed his life. Rosenzweig returned to Judaism and went on to become one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, reshaping modern Jewish philosophy and education. Sometimes, the door back to Judaism opens in a single night.

A generation later, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (1937-2020) grew up as a secular jew, immersed in science and modern thought. His return to Torah did not reject modernity; it integrated it. Steinsaltz went on to translate and comment on the Talmud, opening the Beit Midrash to millions of Jews who had never had access to it before. The tools of the modern mind became tools of Torah. The scientist became a bridge.

And then there is Natan Sharansky (born 1948), a secular Soviet Jew with little formal Jewish education. Under a regime that sought to erase Jewish identity, his very Jewishness became an act of resistance. Imprisoned, isolated, and persecuted, Sharansky rediscovered Jewish dignity not through comfort, but through struggle. He emerged as a global symbol of freedom and human rights, reminding the world that identity can awaken under pressure.

And of course, we cannot speak about redemption arriving through unexpected vessels without mentioning Theodor Herzl (1860-1904). Herzl was, by his own background and lifestyle, deeply assimilated into European modernity. He was a Viennese journalist, culturally at home in the world of theaters, newspapers, and politics–not in synagogues. And yet history placed him in the path of a shock that awakened something larger than personal identity: the Dreyfus Affair in France (1894), when Captain Alfred Dreyfus–a thoroughly assimilated Jewish officer–was publicly humiliated and falsely convicted amid a wave of antisemitic frenzy. Herzl did not become a traditional Jew overnight, but he did become something just as consequential: a Jew who saw the future with frightening clarity. He realized that even the most integrated Jew in Europe could be cast as an outsider in a single moment, and he turned that realization into vision, organizing energy, language, and political imagination into what became modern Zionism. Once again, redemption did not come from the expected corners of religious life; it came from a man formed by the modern world, jolted by history, and compelled to act.

Even in our own days, especially after October 7, we have witnessed something deeply moving. Jews who once felt distant suddenly remembered who they are. Some returned to synagogue, to learning, to Israel, to community–not always through theology, but through solidarity and dignity. History creates turning points. Identity awakens. A soul can be asleep for years–and awaken overnight.

This is not a celebration of assimilation. It is a warning against arrogance. It is a reminder that we do not know what story is unfolding inside another person, or what turning point awaits them. If we had judged Moshe by his upbringing, we might have rejected our own redeemer.

Our responsibility, then, is not to label Jews as "inside" or "outside." Our responsibility is to make Judaism wide enough to welcome return. To create spaces where curiosity is honored, not mocked. Where questions are welcomed, not feared. We do not strengthen Judaism by policing people. We strengthen Judaism by making room for their return.

The Torah's message is ultimately simple–and profoundly challenging: Do not despise any person. Do not dismiss any Jew. Because redemption often comes from the unexpected.

As Pirkei Avot teaches: "Do not despise any person, and do not dismiss anything, for there is no person who does not have his moment, and there is no thing that does not have its place." (4:3)

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Uri