Book Review: Shemot in Context: A Scientific and Kabbalistic Commentary of Exodus by Rabbi Elia Benamozegh

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel

BOOK REVIEW

Shemot in Context: A Scientific and Kabbalistic Commentary of Exodus by Rabbi Elia Benamozegh

By Sina Kahen and Ben Rothstein (Da'at Press, 2026), 302 pages

Since its founding in 2020, The Habura and its affiliated Da'at Press have distinguished themselves by producing original scholarship and translations that reflect the classical Geonic and Andalusian worldview. Committed to the highest values of Jewish tradition and scholarship, they make many previously obscure and inaccessible works available to the wider English-reading public.

Rabbi Elia Benamozegh (1823–1900, Leghorn, Italy) was a remarkable and wide-ranging thinker. He was deeply steeped in classical Jewish texts and mysticism, while simultaneously being up to date with the best of archaeological and linguistic scholarship which expanded dramatically in his time. In his *Em LaMikra* commentary on the Torah, he approached Torah interpretation by bringing every tool he knew to bear, engaging in pagan myths and culture to demonstrate similarities and profound differences with the Torah in its context.

Rambam demonstrated the value of situating Torah within the intellectual world of antiquity. Rabbi Benamozegh advanced this methodology with the plethora of findings Rambam wished he could have accessed (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:48). Of course, Rabbi Benamozegh was limited to nineteenth-century scholarship, just as Rambam was limited to that of the twelfth century. However, while many of his theses have become obsolete with updates in scholarly knowledge over the past two centuries, his pursuit of truth using the best available learning tools remains as relevant and as illuminating as ever.

Rabbi Benamozegh is an independent scholar who critically evaluates the opinions of his predecessors and peers, and who sees an overarching unity from the many available sources of tradition and scientific knowledge. Kahen and Rothstein ably summarize and paraphrase many of Rabbi Benamozegh's analyses of the Book of Exodus.

To cite one particularly striking example of this unusual methodology, Rabbi Benamozegh explores the meaning of the unusual name of God, *Shaddai*. Exodus 6:3 reads, "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name GOD" (the four-letter personal name of God). Rabbi Benamozegh's extended discussion (see pp. 118-138) exemplifies many of the methodological tools evidenced throughout his comments in *Em LaMikra*.

Rabbi Benamozegh places singular importance on understanding the meaning of God's various names in the Torah. Such analysis enables us to comprehend the Torah better, but also helps us ascertain layers of pure monotheistic faith which spread throughout humanity from the most ancient times. Rabbi Benamozegh considers ancient languages and mythology as repositories of traces of true faith in God.

He begins his analysis of *Shaddai* by surveying and evaluating the views of the classical *peshat* commentators. Rashi understands the name as compound, *she-dai* , *she-yesh dai*. God is sufficient for all creatures, and supplies their needs. Many other medieval commentators—including Rambam, Ralbag, and Sforno—similarly understand *Shaddai* as compound, even as they offer different nuances to its precise meaning.

In contrast, Ibn Ezra and Ramban interpret *Shaddai* as deriving from *shadad*, victorious, mighty. Rabbi Benamozegh, however, rejects their interpretation, insisting that ancient Jewish tradition unanimously understands *Shaddai* as compound. To bolster his claim, he cites numerous Midrashim that indeed understand *Shaddai* as referring to God's sufficiency. He observes that nearly all the ancient translations—including Symmachus, Theodotion, and the Septuagint—similarly interpret *Shaddai* as compound. Similarly, the *Zohar* understands *Shaddai* as compound. To "prove" his thesis, Rabbi Benamozegh observes that even the heretic Benedict Spinoza adopted this view, even though he had no allegiance to rabbinic tradition!

Rabbi Benamozegh offers a philological analysis of related words and phrases in Tanakh, which he claims also supports the dominant rabbinic reading against that of Ibn Ezra and Ramban. Thus far, he develops a traditional framework of interpretation to support his understanding that *Shaddai* is a compound name that derives from *she-dai*, sufficiency. His citation of biblical verses, Midrashim, and classical commentary is nothing out of the ordinary. His knowledge of ancient translations, the *Zohar*, and even Spinoza, makes him considerably more unusual among traditional commentators.

Yet none of the above compares with the next layer of Rabbi Benamozegh's analysis. He turns to ancient India and China, where the word *Tao* or *Dao* is a seminal theological concept (the authors note that Taoism is indigenous to China, and perhaps Rabbi Benamozegh links this philosophy to India based on a legend that Laozi—the founder of Taoism—traveled to India). Rabbi Benamozegh links this *Tao* or *Dao* to Egypt (*Teos*), Greek (*Theos*), Latin (*Deus*), and French (*Dieu*), among other cultures.

Rabbi Benamozegh maintains that the *dai* in *Shaddai* is related to *Dao*. The etymological link might appear strained, since the Hebrew *dai* refers to sufficiency and *Tao* refers to "the way," and represents the underlying unity within the created universe. However, Rabbi Benamozegh cites Kabbalah, which links *Shaddai* with the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, which kabbalists call *derekh*, the way.

The book's authors conclude, "Rabbi Benamozegh shows how philology, Rabbinic tradition, comparative religion, and Kabbalah all converge in the name *Shaddai*, revealing it as a profound symbol of divine sufficiency, providence, and the sustaining power of creation. It is a name rooted in Israel's ancient tradition yet echoed in the languages, myths, and symbols of other nations."

It is difficult to accept all of Rabbi Benamozegh's analysis, but it may be viewed as creative theology rather than rigorous historical philology. It also reflects the sweeping comparative enthusiasm characteristic of the 19th century. Yet such sweeping convergence invites scrutiny.

Rabbi Benamozegh's enduring value lies not in the precision of every historical or philological claim, but in his expansive theological imagination and his confidence that all genuine wisdom ultimately converges in divine truth. His work reflects the sweeping comparative enthusiasm of the nineteenth century, and modern scholarship may question many of his linguistic connections. Yet his intellectual audacity remains deeply instructive. He models a Torah scholarship unafraid of engagement, willing to test its claims against the widest available horizons of knowledge. Reading him today is also a salutary reminder that our own scholarly certainties may one day prove provisional or obsolete. Sina Kahen and Ben Rothstein have rendered a significant service in making this daring and erudite interpreter accessible to the English-speaking world.