

# Parashat Bo, Exodus 10:1-13:

## Overview

- God sends the plagues of locusts and darkness upon Egypt and forewarns Moses about the final plague, the death of every Egyptian firstborn. Pharaoh still does not let the Israelites leave Egypt. (10:1-11:10)
- God commands Moses and Aaron regarding the Passover festival. (12:1-27)
- God enacts the final plague, striking down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt except those of the House of Israel. Pharaoh now allows the Israelites to leave. (12:29-42)
- Speaking to Moses and Aaron, God repeats the commandments about Passover. (12:43-13:16)

Moses is told to go to Pharaoh to tell him that God hardened his heart so that He could display His signs among them and make a mockery of the Egyptians. And again Moses and Aaron went before Pharaoh demanding to their people go, for if you refuse God will bring locusts in your territory. They will devour whatever was left from the hail. Pharaoh's wise men advised him to let the men only go to worship in the desert, before all Egypt is lost. But Moses insisted that all of us will go. Pharaoh then accused them of mischief and maintained that only the menfolk go. The Lord then caused locusts to come upon the land and eat all the vegetation that remained after the hail. There were so many that they hid the land from sight and brought darkness, and ate everything so that nothing green remained in the land of Egypt.

As usual, Pharaoh summoned Moses and declared his guilt and pleaded for forgiveness. God caused a strong west wind to lift the locusts and hurled them into the sea, but He stiffened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let the people go. God commanded Moses to hold his arm to the sky and darkness descended upon Egypt, so dark that no one could see one another and no one could go anywhere. This time Pharaoh said the people can leave, young and old alike, but the flocks and herds must remain. Moses claimed that it's impossible to leave the flocks for how will we know what to sacrifice until we arrive there. But God stiffened Pharaoh's heart and he angrily dismissed Moses and told him that if he appears before me again he will die.

God tells Moses that He will bring one more plague upon Egypt; after that Pharaoh will let you go. Tell the people to borrow objects of gold and silver. God disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people. Moses reports to Pharaoh that God shall go forth among the Egyptians at midnight and every first born shall die. There will be a loud cry in the land of Egypt, but no one will harm the Israelites. Then all of Pharaoh's wise men will bow to Me and recommend the redemption of the Israelites. And Moses left Pharaoh furiously angry.

God said to Moses that each family should select a perfect lamb from the flock and watch over it until the fourteenth day of the month and the entire Israelite community shall slaughter their sacrifice together at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and paint it on the door posts of their houses; it is a Passover offering to be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. On that night God will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first born, man and beast. And on the houses where the blood is painted, God will pass-over so that no one will be harmed in those households. God then spells out the statutes governing the festival of Passover.

Moses summoned the elders of Israel and instructed them to carry out all the steps that God had commanded them regarding the Passover sacrifice and the festival. In the middle of the night God struck down the Egyptian first born, and Pharaoh arose in the night together with all his statesmen because there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was no house where there was not someone dead. And Pharaoh summoned Moses one last time and ordered him and his people to depart at once from Egypt. For fear of the Lord, the Egyptians hastened the Israelites to leave the country, so the people took their unrisen dough and left with the Egyptian's gold and silver objects, which they had borrowed. They baked their unrisen bread, which they had no time to leaven since they were rushed out of Egypt so quickly. Then the Lord refined the law of the Passover offering and the Israelites did as God commanded.

The Lord presented Moses with a set of laws to be handed down. Included in this list are consecration of the first born, man and animal; a repetition of laws of Passover, and a further injunction that these teachings shall be worn as a sign upon our hands and a symbol on our forehead that the Lord freed us from Egypt.

## Spiritual insights into Parashat Bo

Parashat Bo specifies the last three plagues concluding with the death of the Egyptian first born that forced Pharaoh to relent, permitting the Israelites to leave Egypt and worship God in the wilderness. Illness is often the result of a kind of bondage to thoughts and emotions that are retained in the body. Pharaoh's stubbornness is symbolic of the way we become

resistant to change. Look what it took for Pharaoh to change his mind about releasing the Israelites; consider what it would take for you to look deeply into your own illness to discover its meaning in order to change your unhealthy ways of living. What's more is the bargaining upon which Pharaoh offered to let the Israelites go. For example, Pharaoh said, "Go, Worship the Lord! Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind" (Ex. 10:24) Does this sound vaguely familiar? Have you ever though or said something like, "I'll start an exercise program once the weather gets warmer". Mental excuses only serve to put off what is necessary for healing and health.

Bo continues with the Passover story. God explains how He will go forth among the Egyptians and every first born of the Egyptians will die, but the Israelites shall paint the door posts of their homes with the blood of the sacrificial lamb so that God will pass over and spare the lives of the Israelites. The Parashah concludes with all the laws related to the remembrance of this momentous experience of the Exodus from Egypt. This event is considered so important for our spiritual development that we are required to recall this story in our daily prayers and to remember this occasion each and every Shabbat.

### **ALL LIFE IS SACRED *Cliff Kulwin***

Parashat Bo chronicles the departure of the Israelites from Egypt and the events that led up to the former, which began in last week's portion, Va'era. Indeed, exactly half of the portion--53 of 106 verses by my count--relates the continuing story of the plagues and the negotiations that Moses and Aaron conducted with Pharaoh.

What could be more horrible than the tenth plague that God visits upon the Egyptians, the slaying of the firstborn? Is there anything more tragic than the death of a child, anything an adult fears more than the possibility that a son or daughter who has ventured out into the world may not return?

And not only the firstborn of the leaders or the soldiers were slain. As the text relates, "...every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the firstborn of the cattle." (Exodus, 11:5) How could God do this?

The traditional response, of course, is that only an extreme measure would force Pharaoh to relent. The fault was not God's; the fault was Pharaoh's for being so stupidly, arrogantly hard-hearted. God had no choice. While this answer possesses a certain logic, it does not feel entirely right.

After the tenth plague, the Israelites flee and, in Parashat Beshalach, they celebrate the death of the soldiers and their beasts of burden after the mass drowning that ensues when the waters of the Red Sea come back together. But God, as tradition teaches, rebukes them for celebrating the death of "My creations."

How are we to resolve this contradiction? The text is relatively silent on the presumably greater tragedy of the death of the firstborn, while it is stridently critical of the Israelites for celebrating the deaths of those who sought to do them, to say the least, considerable and violent harm.

The difference, it would appear, is not in the act but in the reaction to it. In other words, using the hermeneutic device of *kal vechomer* (from minor to major), we may infer that if the Israelites had celebrated the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians, they would have received an extremely strong rebuke from God because the deaths in that instance were surely more classically tragic than those that occurred at the Red Sea and did provoke a rebuke.

The lesson, it would seem, is to remind us that all life is equally sacred. Some deaths may surely touch us more than others and may seem and even be more tragic, but ultimately every life is of equal value. In an age in which managed care has resulted in a radical reassessment of how medical resources are allocated, conflict is growing between advocates of victims' rights and prisoners' rights, and the gulf between the haves and have-nots keeps increasing in the majority of nations, this lesson is surely a valuable--if not always comforting--one to remember.

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### **THE TENTH PLAGUE--A TEST OF WHOSE FAITH *Roberta Louis Goodman***

Parshat Bo completes the narrative of the plagues that begun in Va'era. The story of the plagues is an ongoing escalating story about the power struggle between God and Pharaoh. Each plague tests Pharaoh's will.

Certainly the horror of the tenth plague, the slaying of the firstborn, stands out as a severe punishment even for the unrelenting Pharaoh. The tenth plague is different for another reason. With regard to the first nine plagues, the Israelites are treated differently from the Egyptians. For example, the text tells us that while the Egyptians experienced darkness, "the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings." (Exodus 10:23) The Israelites enjoy preferential treatment from God by

virtue of their collective identity. When it comes to the tenth plague, however, both the Egyptians and the Israelites are tested by God.

Moses himself announces to Pharaoh God's intention to slay the firstborn of all creatures, including Pharaoh's own child. But before God takes action, the narrative relates God's instructions for the "sacred convocation" that will prepare the Israelites for their journey from slavery to freedom. Moses and Aaron inform the Israelites that if they mark the lintel and two doorposts of their houses with blood, God will "pass over [upasad] the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite" the firstborn in the Israelites' homes. Only the homes of those who actively commit themselves to God, showing their trust in God and attesting to God's might, are spared the horrible tenth plague, the slaying of the firstborn. It is the Israelites' minding of the tenth plague that is forever connected to this festival through its name. God responds to the Israelites' signs by "passing over," upasad, their homes.

It is only after the tenth plague has been meted out that Pharaoh is convinced of God's might and relents, at least temporarily, to Moses' demand that he let the Israelites go. More significantly, the tenth plague affirms the Israelites' trust in God and helps them overcome their fear of leaving slavery and Egypt to follow God into the wilderness. The Israelites' reaction to the tenth plague shows their preparedness to begin their journey as a free people, able and willing to worship God.

To pass the test of faith, the Israelites had to assert their commitment to God and God's ways. In so doing, they discover that God works in partnership with those who actively seek God and follow God's ways.

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### **WHAT TO REMEMBER AND WHAT TO FORGET by Harold Kudan**

Our Jewish tradition speaks frequently about the gift of memory. One of the most devastating illnesses of our times is Alzheimer's, a disease that destroys memory. Families are overcome by anguish when parents no longer recall who their children are. Their past has been blotted out. In fact, "to blot out the memory" is one of the strongest curses in the Jewish tradition.

The festival of Passover is the prime example of the importance that Judaism places on memory. Every holiday and Sabbath are to be observed as "a memorial of the Exodus from Egypt." It is in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo*, that we read the words that "this day shall be to you one of remembrance." (Exodus 12:14)

What is it that we are supposed to remember? Someone once remarked that too frequently we suffer from "spiritual amnesia." We perform certain rituals, but we don't know why we do them. A good example is the commandment of putting up a mezuzah. I recall being implored by a lady to come to her house that afternoon to put up her mezuzah because she was afraid to move into her new home without having a mezuzah affixed to her doorpost. The reason for the mezuzah is that it serves as a memory aid, causing us to recall the commandments of Judaism as we enter and leave our home. It should not be regarded as a Jewish lightning rod!

One of the purposes of ritual is the expression of an array of ideas and ideals through an act. The Passover seder encompasses so much and is one of the most universally observed rituals in Judaism. For some, it is merely a reason for the gathering of the family. For others, it is an opportunity to review the miracle of Jewish history, remembering all the catastrophes and triumphs that have checkered our journey as a people. Passover is also a call to our concern for all peoples to sound the cry for freedom for all those in bondage-spiritual bondage, the bondage of poverty, and the bondage of ignorance.

We might also reflect on what we remember as we celebrate the Jewish holidays and why they are connected to the Exodus from Egypt. Why is that event so central to our faith? And what does the Sabbath have to do with Passover? In the Kiddush for the Shabbat, we reiterate that, "the Sabbath is a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt." Perhaps the connection lies in the fact that the Sabbath is the true day of freedom from the obligations that we must fulfill during the workday week. The freedom of the Sabbath, like that of the Jewish Holy Days, can be awesome! We have to be able to observe them in a special way that recognizes who and what we are.

One of the interesting aspects of the word *exodus* is that it indicates a continuing process: We are always "going out" of Egypt. We haven't fully left, and we haven't fully arrived. In a beautiful poem, Rabbi Alvin Fine says, "Life is a journey, a sacred journey...." We as Jews have been on such a collective journey, ever seeking to leave Egypt and arrive at some special place. The prophet Jeremiah exhorted the Jews who were in exile in Babylonia to build houses, etc., and to pray for the welfare of the community. We, too, while on our journey, should seek to accomplish the most for our

communities, wherever we may be.

Another question comes to mind as we ponder what we should remember, namely, What should we forget? It is remarkable that Jews have never expressed resentment against Egypt for the many years of slavery our ancestors spent there. Is it because that event happened so long ago? How long should we harbor anger against Spain, Germany, and the countries that persecuted us in the past? One of the notable events of modern times was the way in which Israel welcomed President Anwar Sadat of Egypt to Jerusalem. We chose not to remember the cruelties that had preceded this event. Do we tend to remember too much and forget too little? This week's portion is a call to remember the good and forget that which makes us less than human.

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### **FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT by David B. Kudan**

This week's *parashah*, *Bo*, sets forth the basic instructions for the ritual observance of the Passover *seder*. However, it is not until Deuteronomy that a few specific words are prescribed for the "telling," which is at the core of the *Magid* section, the account of the Exodus.

The requirement that we recount the story of the Exodus at the *seder* can, in truth, be accomplished with a minimum of words. Some years ago I attended a family *seder* in Israel at which the grandfather, who was leading the *seder*, sought to explain the meaning of that occasion to his five-year-old grandson. He placed a saltshaker next to his grandson and a peppershaker at his own side of the table. Gesturing toward the saltshaker, the grandfather explained, "This is Egypt," and indicating the peppershaker, he stated, "This is Israel." After pointing back and forth from one to the other, he concluded, "We used to live there; now we live here. Let's eat!"

Although the economy of expression and lack of familiar ritual at that Israeli *seder* disturbed me at the time, its message has retained its power for me over the years, and I have never forgotten that particular telling. While I hesitate to recommend such a truncated *seder*, I must admit that it was one of the most memorable *s'darim* I have attended and that it serves as a powerful reminder that less is often more when we seek to communicate a message.

Indeed, learning how to convey a message in just a few simple words can often be a good exercise for those who wish to communicate effectively. Noting that Exodus's prescriptions for the telling of the *seder* do not provide any specific words, we feel justified in asking whether it might be possible to express the message of Passover without any words at all but rather with symbolic actions alone. If we strip away the words of the *seder*, we find embedded within our observance a symbolic activity that has become nearly invisible to us because the pattern of the *seder* has left such a profound imprint on all of the other holidays that we do not see it for what it is.

This pattern, the most significant message, is that the *seder* begins at twilight, descends into darkness, and continues into the next morning. True, the reason *s'darim* are supposed to last until morning is so that we may talk about the holiday all night. But perhaps the real reason the rabbis of Bnai Brak of old encouraged all that talking was to emphasize the symbolic, nonverbal message of the passage from darkness to daybreak. Thus while debates, discussions, and recitations are important, what is most essential is the mostly unspoken message: We began our life as a people amidst the darkness of slavery and emerged into the light of freedom, soon to be augmented by the light of Torah.

In *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Rabbi Plaut cites the following comment by Sefat Emet: "Israel orders its calendar by the moon, for it is used to living in the night of history." (p. 467) Indeed all of our holiday observances begin at night, and we emerge in the morning affirming our survival, announcing that we as a people have the power to persevere through darkness. Passover is the paradigm of darkness turning to light. As the Mishnah exults: "God took us out of slavery into freedom and from suffering to joy, from mourning to celebration, and from darkness to great light." (*P'sachim* 10:5)

We need only to return to our *parashah* to see how very essential is the power of light as a symbol of hope for our people in even our darkest hours. The Bible contrasts the impact of the terrible plague of darkness on the Egyptians—a palpable darkness that left them unable to see one another and prevented them even from moving about—with its lack of effect on the Israelites. As the Torah teaches us: "The Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings." (Exodus 10:23) It is this light of hope, born of suffering, that has allowed us to live through many a dark age and to kindle the lamps of hope and faith for many other peoples who have been affected by the darkness of injustice and inhumanity.

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