

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Bo  
February 1, 2020 \*\*\* 6 Shevat, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Portions

1: 10:1-3.....p. 374	4: 10:12-15.....p. 376	7: 11:1-3.....p. 378
2: 10:4-6.....p. 375	5: 10:16-23.....p. 376	maf: 13:14-16.....p. 393
3: 10:7-11.....p. 375	6: 10:24-29.....p. 377	Haf.: Jer. 46:13 –28.....p. 395

Bo in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3250/jewish/Bo-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3250/jewish/Bo-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The last three of the Ten Plagues are visited on Egypt: a swarm of locusts devours all the crops and greenery; a thick, palpable darkness envelops the land; and all the firstborn of Egypt are killed at the stroke of midnight of the 15th of the month of Nissan.

G-d commands the first mitzvah to be given to the people of Israel: to establish a calendar based on the monthly rebirth of the moon. The Israelites are also instructed to bring a “Passover offering” to G-d: a lamb or kid goat is to be slaughtered, and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that G-d should pass over these homes when He comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The roasted meat of the offering is to be eaten that night together with matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs.

The death of the firstborn finally breaks Pharaoh’s resistance, and he literally drives the children of Israel from his land. So hastily do they depart that there is no time for their dough to rise, and the only provisions they take along are unleavened. Before they go, they ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold, silver and garments—fulfilling the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt with great wealth.

The children of Israel are commanded to consecrate all firstborn, and to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year by removing all leaven from their possession for seven days, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption to their children. They are also commanded to wear tefillin on the arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and their resultant commitment to G-d.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/619493/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/619493/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

In this week’s Torah reading, we read of the devastation of the Egyptian nation through the final three of the Ten Plagues. In the haftarah we read of the punishment G-d visited upon Egypt centuries later, through the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

G-d reveals Egypt’s fate to Jeremiah: “Proclaim it in Egypt and let it be heard in Migdol, and let it be heard in Noph and in Tahpanhes. Say, ‘Stand fast and prepare yourself, for the sword has devoured round about you.’” The prophet then goes on to describe Egypt’s helplessness and the destruction that it will incur at the hands of the Babylonians.

The haftarah ends with G-d’s assurance to the Jewish people not to fear, for though they too will be punished and exiled, ultimately they will be redeemed:

“You fear not, O Jacob My servant, and be not dismayed, O Israel! for behold, I will redeem you from afar, and your children from the land of their captivity, and Jacob shall return and be quiet and at ease, and there shall be none who disturb his rest. You fear not, My servant Jacob, says the L-rd, for I am with you, for I will make a full end of all the nations where I have driven you.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

## The Story We Tell About Ourselves (Bo 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/bo-5780/>

Sometimes others know us better than we know ourselves. In the year 2000, a British Jewish research institute came up with a proposal that Jews in Britain be redefined as an ethnic group and not as a religious community. It was a non-Jewish journalist, Andrew Marr, who stated what should have been obvious. He said: "All this is shallow water, and the further in you wade, the shallower it gets."

It is what he wrote next that I found inspirational: "The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us. They have had their Bible, one of the great imaginative works of the human spirit. They have been victim of the worst modernity can do, a mirror for Western madness. Above all they have had the story of their cultural and genetic survival from the Roman Empire to the 2000s, weaving and thriving amid uncomprehending, hostile European tribes." [1]

The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us. I love that testimony. And indeed, from early on, storytelling has been central to the Jewish tradition. Every culture has its stories. (The late Elie Wiesel once said, "God created man because God loves stories"). Almost certainly, the tradition goes back to the days when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers telling stories around the campfire at night. We are the storytelling animal. But what is truly remarkable is the way in which, in this week's parsha, on the brink of the Exodus, Moses three times tells the Israelites how they are to tell the story to their children in future generations.

1. When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.' (Ex. 12:26-27)

2. On that day tell your child, 'I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' (Ex. 13:8)

3. "In days to come, when your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' say, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.' (Ex. 13:14)

*The Israelites had not yet left Egypt, and yet already Moses was telling them how to tell the story.* That is the extraordinary fact. Why so? Why this obsession with storytelling?

The simplest answer is that we are the story we tell about ourselves. [2] There is an intrinsic, perhaps necessary, link between narrative and identity. In the words of the thinker who did more than most to place this idea at the centre of contemporary thought, Alasdair MacIntyre, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." [3] We come to know who we are by discovering of which story or stories we are a part.

Jerome Bruner has persuasively argued that narrative is central to the construction of meaning, and meaning is what makes the human condition human. [4] No computer needs to be persuaded of its purpose in life before it does what it is supposed to do. Genes need no motivational encouragement. No virus needs a coach. We do not have to enter their mindset to understand what they do and how they do it, because they do not have a mindset to enter. But humans do. We act in the present because of things we did or that happened to us in the past, and in order to realise a sought-for future. Even minimally to explain what we are doing is already to tell a story. Take three people eating salad in a restaurant, one because he needs to lose weight, the second because she's a principled vegetarian, the third because of religious dietary laws. These are three outwardly similar acts, but they belong to different stories and they have different meanings for the people involved.

Why though storytelling and the Exodus?

One of the most powerful passages I have ever read on the nature of Jewish existence is contained in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1772). This is an unlikely place to find insight on the Jewish condition, but it is there. Rousseau is talking about the greatest of political leaders. First of these, he says,

was Moses who “formed and executed the astonishing enterprise of instituting as a national body a swarm of wretched fugitives who had no arts, no weapons, no talents, no virtues, no courage, and who, since they had not an inch of territory of their own, were a troop of strangers upon the face of the earth.”

Moses, he says, “dared to make out of this wandering and servile troop a body politic, a free people, and while it wandered in the wilderness without so much as a stone on which to rest its head, gave it the lasting institution, proof against time, fortune and conquerors, which 5000 years have not been able to destroy or even to weaken.” This singular nation, he says, so often subjugated and scattered, “has nevertheless maintained itself down to our days, scattered among the other nations without ever merging with them.”[5]

Moses’ genius, he says, lay in the nature of the laws that kept Jews as a people apart. But that is only half the story. The other half lies in this week’s parsha, in the institution of storytelling as a fundamental religious duty, recalling and re-enacting the events of the Exodus every year, and in particular, making children central to the story. Noting that in three of the four storytelling passages (three in our parsha, the fourth in Va’etchanan) children are referred to as asking questions, the Sages held that the narrative of Seder night should be told in response to a question asked by a child wherever possible. If we are the story we tell about ourselves, then as long as we never lose the story, we will never lose our identity.

This idea found expression some years ago in a fascinating encounter. Tibet has been governed by the Chinese since 1950. During the 1959 uprising, the Dalai Lama, his life in danger, fled to Dharamsala in India where he and many of his followers have lived ever since. Realising that their stay in exile might be prolonged, in 1992 he decided to ask Jews, whom he regarded as the world’s experts in maintaining identity in exile, for advice. What, he wanted to know, was the secret? The story of that week-long encounter has been told by Roger Kamenetz in his book, *The Jew in the Lotus*. [6] One of the things they told him was the importance of memory and storytelling in keeping a people’s culture and identity alive. They spoke about Pesach and the Seder service in particular. So in 1997 Rabbis and American dignitaries held a special Seder service in Washington DC with the Dalai Lama. He wrote this to the participants:

“In our dialogue with Rabbis and Jewish scholars, the Tibetan people have learned about the secrets of Jewish spiritual survival in exile: one secret is the Passover Seder. Through it for 2000 years, even in very difficult times, Jewish people remember their liberation from slavery to freedom and this has brought you hope in times of difficulty. We are grateful to our Jewish brothers and sisters for adding to their celebration of freedom the thought of freedom for the Tibetan people.”

Cultures are shaped by the range of stories to which they give rise. Some of these have a special role in shaping the self-understanding of those who tell them. We call them master-narratives. They are about large, ongoing groups of people: the tribe, the nation, the civilisation. They hold the group together horizontally across space and vertically across time, giving it a shared identity handed on across the generations. None has been more powerful than the Exodus story, whose frame and context is set out in our parsha. It gave Jews the most tenacious identity ever held by a nation. In the eras of oppression, it gave hope of freedom. At times of exile, it promised return. It told two hundred generations of Jewish children who they were and of what story they were a part. It became the world’s master-narrative of liberty, adopted by an astonishing variety of groups, from Puritans in the 17th century to African-Americans in the 19th and to Tibetan Buddhists today.

*I believe that I am a character in our people’s story, with my own chapter to write, and so are we all. To be a Jew is to see yourself as part of that story, to make it live in our time, and to do your best to hand it on to those who will come after us.* [1] Andrew Marr, *The Observer*, Sunday 14 May, 2000. [2] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London, Duckworth, 1981; Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths And The Making*

Of The Self, New York, Guilford Press, 1997. [3] MacIntyre, op. Cit., 201. [4] Jerome Bruner, Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, Harvard University Press, 1986. [5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract and other later political writings, Cambridge University press, 2010, 180. [6] Roger Kamanetz, The Jew in the Lotus, HarperOne, 2007.

## The Liberating Power of the Calendar by Hillel Gruenberg <http://www.jtsa.edu/the-liberating-power-of-the-calendar>

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רִאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחַדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (Exod. 12:2)

In Parashat Bo, God instructs Moses to formally begin the counting of months, with the month of Aviv (later Nisan) kicking off what we now know as the Hebrew calendar. This injunction represents the first commandment given to the Children of Israel, and only the third or fourth in the entirety of the Torah. It might seem odd that this, of all the many commandments the children of Israel will eventually receive, is handed down first, even before the exodus from Egypt was completed. However, the institution of this uniquely Hebrew calendrical system (its overlap with other frameworks aside) was a necessary precursor to support both the communal-religious practice and mental emancipation of a newly (or rather, soon-to-be) free people.

The medieval commentator Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno offers a straightforward answer for the chronological primacy of this commandment, saying that slaves have no control over use of their own time, a slave's "days, hours, and minutes even, were at the beck and call of your taskmasters." Going further with this idea, the management and recording of time are not only fundamental characteristics of free people but of a free people in control of its own destiny.

The effective administration of a calendrical system is a feat shared by the great civilizations of human history. From Babylon to Rome to China in antiquity, Islam and Christendom in the Middle Ages—among countless others—the careful consideration and measurement of the phases of time reflected in the natural world provide the order and framework that facilitate all other societal achievements. Moreover, months are of special importance as an intermediate measure of time, serving as the container for the hours and weeks that make up our day-to-day existence, and comprising the years by which we measure the longer progression of the lives of ourselves, our families, and our wider communities.

Nahmanides's understanding of the inaugural commandment of the book of Exodus also speaks to the civilizational nature of the commandment. Of special concern for him is the phrasing that "this month shall mark **for you** the beginning of months" **רִאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים לָכֶם**, whereas in the following verse Moses and Aaron are instructed to speak to "the whole community of Israel" (12:3) about acquiring a sacrificial lamb. For Nahmanides, the wording "**for you**" (which follows the description in the preceding verse that God was speaking to Moses and Aaron) denotes that the calculation and recording of months is a task that must be overseen by leaders and experts. The specific connection of the counting of months to legal or technical expertise reinforces the connection between an effectively administered calendrical system and an organized community.

Hizkuni further stresses how this particular counting of months is relevant in the collective development of the Jewish people, explaining that the words "**for you**" imply this lunar (later lunisolar) calculation of months is exclusively for Jews and not for the gentiles among whom solar calendrical systems prevail. This seems to be even more significant when we consider two later mitzvot of no small importance that relate to the calculation of time: the observance of Shabbat and of Rosh Hashanah.

The counting of these smaller and larger measures of time relate not specifically to an experience or characteristic of the Children of Israel, but rather to the entirety of existence—with Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat respectively drawing our attention to the commencement and consummation of the work of creation. Even though the Rabbis of

the Mishnah indicate four “new years” (Rosh Hashanah 1:1), it is from this “first of months,” that all Jewish festivals are calculated. The ability to openly practice such communal observances is the exclusive province of free people and it is therefore no coincidence that the timing of major holidays is determined in relation to זמן חרותנו, the time of our liberation.

But it is not only for reasons of societal cohesion and communal observance that the institution of a calendrical system was given primacy among the mitzvot. An orderly calendrical system is equally important for individual conceptions of time and one’s own sense of agency as a free person. In line with Nahmanides’s aforementioned commentary, to enslaved subjects the progression of time is to a great degree, if not entirely, imperceptible. Amidst the drudgery of forced labor, days, months, and even years might easily bleed into one another so as to present a static, unending, and immutable present in which the concept of personal or historical progress is unthinkable. In a similar vein, the political scientist Benedict Anderson draws a direct link between the rise of modern self-determined national communities and changing perceptions of time in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*. In the world of religiously justified dynastic realms, he argues, the human masses who were the subjects of these regimes perceived time (and by extension, their own lives) as unchanging, rather than dynamic, fluid, and capable of radical change or evolution. This is reflected in the static depiction of human activity and appearance over time—think of Medieval Christian imagery presenting ancient figures such as Mary or the Apostles in contemporaneous European dress and skin.

This was also evident in the apocalyptic “messianic” conception of time put forth by church and state alike, i.e. that the end of days was imminent and therefore any progress was both impossible and futile. “[T]he medieval Christian mind had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present.” (Anderson, 23) For similar reasons, many Orthodox Jewish figures who rigidly adhered to the messiah-centric conception of Jewish time opposed Zionism in its early days (and a few still do), claiming that the activities of early Zionist settlers constituted a challenge that human progress, rather than divine preordainment, could bring about the redemption of Israel.

For Anderson, only in infinite-yet-ordered “calendrical time” could societies of former subjects conceive of new egalitarian civilizations built upon the idea of the nation. Similarly, in our case, the newly liberated Israelites needed their own calendrical time, and not the doom-filled present and future of the slave, to envision a path forward for themselves in time and space. Only with this new mental framework could former subjects conceive of a world based on progress and change brought about through individual and collective agency.

These relatively recent parallels add another layer to the importance of a new calendrical structure for a previously enslaved people, and another reason for the primary placement of this mitzvah among the 612 others. It not only gave nascent Israelite society a civilizational system that was uniquely their own, but also a framework through which each Israelite could conceive of themselves as a free person moving forward in time and influencing their own future and that of their society. In receiving the system of the month (שָׁדֶשׁ/hodesh), the former Israelite slaves now possessed a particularly Jewish societal organization and a new understanding of their capacity for innovation (שִׁדּוּשׁ/hiddush) and progress as free people. (*Hillel Gruenberg is Director of Israel Engagement at JTS*)

[Bo by Rabbi Berel Wein](https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2261.html)

<https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2261.html>

The Torah reading of this week begins with the Hebrew word ‘bo.’ This word literally means to enter. Normally, if we wish to describe crossing a threshold to appear before a person, the word ‘bo’ is not usually the verb that is used. To enter, in this instance,

means to delve into the personality and the mind of the person, – to enter the conscience of that person, so to speak. So, why does the Torah use this verb 'bo' in connection with Moshe, appearing once again before the Egyptian Pharaoh, in order to tell him that he should liberate the Egyptian slaves and allow the Jews to live as free people outside of the land of Egypt?

I think the insight into this can be found in the words that the Lord imparted to Moshe. The Lord tells Moshe that he should be aware that his words will have no effect on the Pharaoh, and that the Pharaoh will not allow the Jews to be released from their bondage in Egypt. It appears Moshe is sent on a mission of futility, with the sole purpose to somehow change the mind and heart of the Pharaoh and allow him to free the Jewish people by sending them forth from his country as an independent nation. If this is the case, and it seems obvious that it is, then the entire conversation between the Lord and Moshe leaves us wondering as to what its purpose is, what is its import and reason. What are we to learn from it?

I believe that the insight necessary to understand this conversation lies in the fact that God tells Moshe that Heaven has hardened the heart of Pharaoh, i.e. that Pharaoh is now incapable of making the correct choice for his own salvation and the salvation of his people. The Talmud teaches us that people who are completely evil, based on previous behavior and actions, are incapable of repenting and choosing wisely, even when they stand on the precipice of hell itself.

We are witness to the fact that many times in life people, usually very bad people who previously had the opportunity to repent and do good, find themselves trapped by their very nature. Though these are circumstances that they have brought upon themselves, even though they are aware that their policies and behavior may be suicidal in nature and harmful to them in the extreme, they are unable to prevent themselves from falling into the abyss that they themselves have created by their stubborn mindset.

The Lord tells Moshe that this is the case regarding Pharaoh. He is unable, even if he wanted to withdraw from the situation that he himself has entered, through his previous behavior and decisions. His greatest advisors have told him that he is destroying Egypt and himself. Yet Pharaoh is unable to regain his sense of balance and make the wise choice that will save the lives of thousands of Egyptians and himself as well.

So, the Lord told Moshe, 'bo'- enter into his mind, and when you are able to do so, you will appreciate that Pharaoh is not going to be able to save himself. This lesson, regarding human stubbornness and futility, is the reason that the Torah uses the verb 'bo' when referring to the conversation and narrative that introduces this week's Torah reading.

[Parashat Bo by Rabbi Bruce Alpert  
https://ajrsem.org/2020/01/parashat-bo-5780/](https://ajrsem.org/2020/01/parashat-bo-5780/)

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months.” (Exodus 12:2) This has to be one of the most jarring verses in all of Torah. After eleven uninterrupted chapters of perhaps the most dramatic story ever told – the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh – we find ourselves in what quickly becomes a detailed discussion of the observance of the festival of Pesah. Gone is the ratcheting tension of human obstinacy in the face of divine wrath and in its place, twenty-eight verses of calendars, cooking instructions and details for future observances.

And yet, in this mass of interrupting detail, I find the answer to what I consider a particularly troubling verse in this week's parashah, Bo. It too concerns the celebration of a festival. Faced with yet another plague, Pharaoh asks Moses who among the Israelites will depart with him should he be allowed to leave. Moses answers that essentially the entire camp will leave “for this is, for us, the Lord's festival.” (Exodus 10:9)

I am troubled by what this festival might be. We associate the term “the Lord's festival,” with fixed times and defined observances intended to create historical memory. This festival does not appear to have any of that. Indeed, were the Israelites to be released

from Egypt in any way that could be construed as being by Pharaoh's leave, than the celebration that follows might well be construed a festival to him rather than to God. This cannot possibly be Moses's end.

Rabbeinu Bahya partially addresses my concerns when he says the festival of which Moses speaks is Shavuot. He reasons from Exodus 3:12 where, at the burning bush, God tells Moses that "when you have freed the people from Egypt, you will worship God at this mountain." The first Pesah is to be celebrated in Egypt, and Sukkot makes no mention of celebrating at a mountain. Hence the festival must be Shavuot.

I see in Rabbeinu Bahya's analysis a desire to bring Moses's demand back within the bounds we would recognize as "the Lord's festival." Still, it begs the question of whether there can be a Shavuot without a Pesah – can one receive God's Torah without being liberated by God? The very name of the festival derives from the idea that we count the weeks between one holy day and the next. Rabbeinu Bahya only takes us so far.

For the rest, I turn back to my rattled reaction to Chapter 12. I think there is a deeper reason why the Torah interrupts its narrative of the plagues just at its most dramatic. The effect of this interruption – so cool and dispassionate after the tense action and reaction of the preceding drama – is to remind us that this story has played out exactly as God intended. We may have found ourselves caught up in the ever-escalating battle between Pharaoh and Moses, but in the end, it has all been leading us inevitably toward "this month shall mark for you the beginning of the months." Ever since God promised Moses that he would redeem Israel with an outstretched arm and with great judgments (Exodus 6:6) we have been heading inexorably toward what would become the Lord's first festival. It can be no other way.

So when Moses tells Pharaoh in 10:9 that the Israelites must depart in order to observe the Lord's festival, I think he is actually speaking passed Pharaoh. He is speaking of a time that Israel will mark by their deliverance into God's hands. He is speaking of a moment celebrated with symbols of Israel's own history. And he is speaking of a story that Jews, countless generations hence, can recall as their story. That will be the festival that Israel must observe. That will be the Lord's festival. *(Rabbi Bruce Alpert (AJR '11) is Rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue in Wallingford, CT)*

### Plagues & Performativity by Leon Kraiem

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qLr1tGsBUosRc90cXFESODxaoeH-vBA48VUmjwqnlKk/edit>

This parashah covers the last of the ten plagues that God brings upon Egypt before Pharaoh finally relents and lets Israel go. In my mind, the sequence of this narrative was always fairly straightforward: Moshe asks Pharaoh to let his people go. Pharaoh refuses. God sends plagues until Pharaoh submits. Then, mission accomplished, he lets our people go.

But that's not the story that's told in the text. "Go to Pharaoh," God tells Moshe at the start of Parashat Bo, "for I have hardened his heart, and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am the LORD." (10:1-2)

The simple meaning of this verse seems to be that God did not display signs in order to soften Pharaoh's heart so that he would let Israel go. On the contrary—God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh wouldn't let Israel go so that God could display the signs. Which provokes the obvious question: What, then, is the purpose of the signs? Why cause all that suffering if it isn't necessary—quite the contrary—to taking Israel out of Egypt?

We need an answer to this question because we live in a particularly performative age. The matters that Moshe discussed with Pharaoh are the same urgent issues on the table today—religious freedom; displacement; reparation. Our goal when convening with the

pharaohs of our day on these topics should be to win them over whenever possible, not to harden their hearts and raise the stakes of the conflict. But the more conflict there is, the more opportunity we have to show the world that we're the good people, not the bad people—and the plagues seem to be exactly that sort of gratuitous showdown.

One way to resolve this tension could be to make a utilitarian argument—sure, a lot of first-borns were slain in the moment, but how many more were saved by the knowledge of God that's been haunting the human conscience ever since? Sometimes you have to make the contrast between good and evil stark in order for people to pick a side; and once the lesson is learned, it avoids a lot more damage than was necessary in order to teach it.

But the plagues, I think we should understand, were not a performance at all—if they were, the verse might say “in order that you might see...” Instead, it says “in order that you might know.” It is precisely when the redemption hasn't happened yet—when the innocent are still being abused, and the divine pretensions of the powerful seem plausible—when we don't see any signs of God's presence—that it matters to know Who's really in charge. This knowledge is not just a comfort to Israel when, as has often happened, we find ourselves at the mercy of some or another Pharaoh, nor was its communication to us in Egypt just a model for showing solidarity with people when we can't provide them much else.

The memory of God's might in Egypt is also a reminder that no pretension to infallibility goes unknown for what it really is. No one is above being cut down to size—and, as we learned as slaves in Egypt, if you think you're big, and you treat others as though they are small, don't be surprised when the One who really knows you comes along and sets the record straight. (*Leon Kraiem, is a Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus & Student at Brandeis University.*)

[Haftarah: A Message of Solace by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein \(Conservative Yeshiva Faculty\)](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qLr1tGsBUosRc90cXFESODxaoeH-vBA48VUmjwqnlKk/edit)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qLr1tGsBUosRc90cXFESODxaoeH-vBA48VUmjwqnlKk/edit>  
Many factors enter into the equation of whether individuals and nations survive and prosper. Judea, during the period before the destruction of the First Temple, was a little nation caught in the maelstrom between two world powers, Egypt and Babylonia. It seemed that juggling alliances would be the determiner of its fate. Still, it may be argued that Judea's fate was sealed, that nothing it did would save it from being destroyed and conquered. But was it doomed? Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) answered this question in these words: “And now, do not fear, My servant Yaakov, nor be panicked, Israel. For I am about to rescue you from afar and your seed from the land of captivity, and Yaakov shall once more be quiet and tranquil with none making him tremble. As for you, do not fear, My servant Yaakov, said the Lord, for I am with you. I will make an end of all the nations where I have dispersed you, but of you I will not make an end, yet I will chastise you in justice, will surely not leave you unblamed.” (verses 27-28)

This message of solace is addressed symbolically to the father of the people, Yaakov, even though he is long gone. Literarily, this allows the prophet to speak both to the individual and to the nation. The nation he addresses is in for hard times, exile, destruction and domination – all of these are the ingredients of despair and hopelessness. Yirmiyahu's insight is precious. He issues a religious imperative to seek hope in the bad times and not to be overwhelmed by them. Redemption and restoration are possible. All that is required is will and faith. This message has become the anthem of the Jewish people that has fostered its creative survival throughout the ages.

Surrender to despair in the face of bad times was never an option, only an opportunity. There will be bad times in life and no one remains unscathed, not on the national level nor as individuals. It is possible to weather the bad times and ultimately to triumph over them. Yirmiyahu reminds us that we are never alone. God is with us both in good times and in bad. He is the source of our solace. He is our anchor, our strength and our ultimate source of hope.



## Bo by Rabbi Michael Katz

<https://gem.godaddy.com/p/6b9e201?fact=557227-156715680-11701354334-d82be33d68d953c765225424530493fab98b7de1>

Isidore Isaac Rabi was an American physicist who won the Nobel Prize in 1944 for discovering Nuclear Magnetic Resonance. How did he get to be so smart? Every day when he came home from school, his mother Sheindel met him with: "Izzy, did you ask any good questions today?" That's the source of all wisdom- asking good questions. As a teacher, I'm always hopeful when a student raises his or her hand, only to be disappointed with "Can I go to the bathroom?" or "Is this going to be on the test?" Those aren't the questions that Mrs. Rabi had in mind.

What she did have in mind are the questions that children asked their parents the night the Israelites left Egypt. Families slaughtered a lamb, placed the blood on the doorpost, they gathered for a last meal of fresh pita, roasted lamb and romaine lettuce, and dressed as if they would be going on a journey at any moment. The children noticed the unusual things that were happening, and they asked a critical question: "*What does all this mean?*" Yes, that question became the source of "The Four Questions" that children sing at the Passover Seder today. But our kids aren't really asking tough, meaningful questions; they're just showing off that they have learned some jibberish by rote. Back then, it was a real question. And as Mrs. Rabi reminds us, there is nothing more important than real questions. The very essence of Jewishness is questioning. That's what the Talmud is all about, and all of Judaism is based on the Talmud. Asking questions and searching for answers.

One of the questions that the Israelites asked back then was "Should we go or should we stay?" According to the Rabbis, 80% of the slaves were afraid to leave Egypt; only one-fifth took a chance in the desert. The rest disappeared from our history. Jews in Russia during the pogroms asked that same question, as did Jews in Germany in 1938, as do Jews in Europe today. After Pittsburgh and Poway and Monsey, a few Jews in America are beginning to ask that same question: "Do we go or do we stay?" Ask a good question, and search for the right answer.

The future of American democracy may depend on citizens, and their elected representatives asking good questions. Are we allowed to question and challenge our leaders, or do we merely go along with whatever they tell us? Congress could learn an important lesson from Mrs. Rabi, and from that little kid back in Egypt who asked his father: "*What does all this mean?*" (*Rabbi Katz is the Rabbi at Temple Beth Torah in Westbury, NY*)

## Yahrtzeits

\*Linda Chandross remembers her husband Robert Chandross on Sat Feb 1 (Shevat 6).

\*Richard Cohen remembers his mother Ida Cohen (Chaya bat Yitzhak v'Sara Tova) on Sat Feb 1 (Shevat 6).

\*Irwin Primer remembers his sister Ethel Schockett on Tue Feb 4 (Shevat 9).

\*Fran Nelson remembers her husband Fred Nelson (Feivel) on Wed Feb 5 (Shevat 10).