

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Bo  
January 23, 2021 \*\*\* 10 Shevat, 5781

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.

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: Jeremiah 46:13 - 46:28

[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 Far Horizon (Bo 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l

<https://rabbisacks.org/bo-5781/>

To gain insight into the unique leadership lesson of this week’s parsha, I often ask an audience to perform a thought-experiment. Imagine you are the leader of a people that is enslaved and oppressed, that has suffered exile for more than two centuries. Now, after a series of miracles, it is about to go free. You assemble them and rise to address them. They are waiting expectantly for your words. This is a defining moment they will never forget. What will you speak about?

Most people answer: freedom. That was Abraham Lincoln’s decision in the Gettysburg Address when he invoked the memory of “a new nation, conceived in liberty,” and looked forward to “a new birth of freedom.” [1] Some suggest that they would inspire the people by talking about the destination that lay ahead, the “land flowing with milk and honey.” Yet others say they would warn the people of the dangers and challenges that they would encounter on what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom.” [2]

Any of these would have been the great speech of a great leader. Guided by God, Moses did none of these things. That is what made him a unique leader. If you examine the text in parshat Bo you will see that three times he reverted to the same theme: children, education and the distant future.

And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this rite?” you shall say, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.” (Ex. 12:26-27)

And you shall explain to your child on that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.” (Ex. 13:8)

And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, “What does this mean?” you shall say to him, “It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.” (Ex. 13:14)

It is one of the most counter-intuitive acts in the history of leadership. Moses did not speak about today or tomorrow. He spoke about the distant future and the duty of parents to educate their children. He even hinted – as Jewish tradition understood – that we should encourage our children to ask questions, so that the handing on of the Jewish heritage would be not a matter of rote learning but of active dialogue between parents and children.

So Jews became the only people in history to predicate their very survival on education. The most sacred duty of parents was to teach their children. Pesach itself became an ongoing seminar in the handing on of memory. Judaism became the religion whose heroes were teachers and whose passion was study and the

life of the mind. The Mesopotamians built ziggurats. The Egyptians built pyramids. The Greeks built the Parthenon. The Romans built the Coliseum. Jews built schools. That is why they alone, of all the civilisations of the ancient world are still alive and strong, still continuing their ancestors' vocation, their heritage intact and undiminished.

Moses' insight was profound. He knew that you cannot change the world by externalities alone, by monumental architecture, or armies and empires, or the use of force and power. How many empires have come and gone while the human condition remains untransformed and unredeemed?

There is only one way to change the world, and that is by education. You have to teach children the importance of justice, righteousness, kindness and compassion. You have to teach them that freedom can only be sustained by the laws and habits of self-restraint. You have continually to remind them of the lessons of history, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt," because those who forget the bitterness of slavery eventually lose the commitment and courage to fight for freedom. And you have to empower children to ask, challenge and argue. You have to respect them if they are to respect the values you wish them to embrace.

This is a lesson most cultures still have not learned after more than three thousand years. Revolutions, protests and civil wars still take place, encouraging people to think that removing a tyrant or having a democratic election will end corruption, create freedom, and lead to justice and the rule of law – and still people are surprised and disappointed when it does not happen. All that happens is a change of faces in the corridors of power.

In one of the great speeches of the twentieth century, a distinguished American justice, Judge Learned Hand, said:

I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.[3]

What God taught Moses was that the real challenge does not lie in gaining freedom; it lies in sustaining it, keeping the spirit of liberty alive in the hearts of successive generations. That can only be done through a sustained process of education. Nor is this something that can be delegated away to teachers and schools. Some of it has to take place within the family, at home, and with the sacred obligation that comes from religious duty. No one ever saw this more clearly than Moses, and only because of his teachings have Jews and Judaism survived.

What makes leaders great is that they think ahead, worrying not about tomorrow but about next year, or the next decade, or the next generation. In one of his

finest speeches Robert F. Kennedy spoke of the power of leaders to transform the world when they have a clear vision of a possible future:

Some believe there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills — against misery, against ignorance, or injustice and violence. Yet many of the world's great movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single man. A young monk began the Protestant reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and 32 year old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal. 'Give me a place to stand,' said Archimedes, 'and I will move the world.'

These men moved the world, and so can we all." [4]

Visionary leadership forms the text and texture of Judaism. It was the book of Proverbs that said, "Without a vision [chazzon] the people perish." (Prov. 29:18). That vision in the minds of the Prophets was always of a long-term future. God told Ezekiel that a Prophet is a watchman, one who climbs to a high vantage-point and so can see the danger in the distance, before anyone else is aware of it at ground level (Ezek. 33:1-6). The Sages said, "Who is wise? One who sees the long-term consequences [ha-nolad]." [5] Two of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century, Churchill and Ben Gurion, were also distinguished historians. Knowing the past, they could anticipate the future. They were like Chess Masters who, because they have studied thousands of games, recognise almost immediately the dangers and possibilities in any configuration of the pieces on the board. They know what will happen if you make this move or that. If you want to be a great leader in any field, from Prime Minister to parent, it is essential to think long-term. Never choose the easy option because it is simple or fast or yields immediate satisfaction. You will pay a high price in the end. Moses was the greatest leader because he thought further ahead than anyone else. He knew that real change in human behaviour is the work of many generations. Therefore we must place as our highest priority educating our children in our ideals so that what we begin they will continue until the world changes because we have changed. He knew that if you plan for a year, plant rice. If you plan for a decade, plant a tree. If you plan for posterity, educate a child. [6] Moses' lesson, thirty-three centuries old, is still compelling today.

[1] Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address" (Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Penn., Nov. 19, 1863). [2] Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela (Back Bay Books, 1995). [3] Learned Hand, "The Spirit of Liberty" – speech at "I Am an American Day" ceremony, Central Park, New York City (21 May 1944). [4] The Poynter Institute, The Kennedys: America's Front Page Family (Kansas City, Mo.: Andrews McMeel, 2010), 112.

[5] Tamid 32a. [6] A statement attributed to Confucius.

## Sworn to Sacred Service by Daniel Nevins

<http://www.jtsa.edu/sworn-to-sacred-service>

The most powerful ritual in American life is the oath of office administered to our President. The text is prescribed by the Constitution, but its choreography is a matter of convention. Most Presidents have placed their left hand on a Bible as they raise their right and swear to execute their office faithfully, to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” This ritual signals solemnity and anticipation for the work awaiting our new leader.

The weaker arm (left, for most of us) is strengthened by contact with Scripture, as if to say that true strength comes not from muscles but from virtue. This gesture recalls [Deuteronomy 17:18-19](#) where the new king is commanded to write a copy of the Torah, to read it and keep it close by so that they will learn to revere God and guard the divine precepts. This pose also reminds me of wearing tefillin, with the left hand linked to the divine word, and the right ready for resolute and righteous action.

Those who take an oath—whether of testimony, of office, or of military commission—raise their right hand, alluding perhaps to [Isaiah 62:8](#), “the Lord has sworn by His right hand, by His mighty arm” (NJPS translation). In the civic oath ritual, the President commits to guard our American covenant with faithfulness, to draw strength from the people, and to hold nothing higher than their constitutional duties.

The raised right hand is open and empty, which to me implies transparency and readiness for action. One cannot commit fully to a new task while clinging still to an old one. This point is made in our Torah portion, just before the people of Israel commences its duties in worshipping God. Chapter 12 of Exodus contains instructions for the sacrifice of the paschal lamb, beginning with the designation of the animal. Moses calls the elders of Israel and says to them, “Draw out and take yourselves sheep according to your clans and slaughter the Passover offering” ([Exod. 12:21](#), trans. Robert Alter).

The phrase opens with two imperative verbs: *mishkhu*, “draw out,” (your hands) *u-kekhu*, “and take” (the offering). This strange doubling has yielded numerous interpretations. Robert Alter suggests that the two verbs may indicate haste, but Rashi cites *Midrash Lekah Tov* to assign distinct meaning for each one. If you already own sheep, then “draw out” one from the flock. If not, then go “take” or purchase one from the market. Rashi’s interpretation works as *peshat*, or the contextual reading, but for nearly two millennia our sages have squeezed more interpretive *derash* from the verbs.

The first imperative, *mishkhu*, can mean “withdraw,” indicating that something must be released before the new thing can be grasped. What must the Israelite release before offering the paschal lamb? Two answers are offered, one related to idolatry, and the other to theft. According to *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* (*Bo* 16:2),

followed by Ramban and others, this verse means that before the people of Israel can commence their worship of Adonai, they must relinquish the grip of idolatry. By sacrificing a sheep, an animal venerated by the ancient Egyptians, the Israelites make a dramatic shift to their new faith.

Alternatively, the Israelites must remove stolen objects from their hands and purchase the sacrificial lamb with their own property. This reading, based on the rabbinic claim that "the righteous keep far from theft," is applied to our verse by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Baal Haturim): First purify yourselves of dishonesty and theft, and then commit to worshipping the Lord. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz says that preventing theft is the foundation of faith, and therefore it must precede even the first command given to Israel in Egypt, the paschal sacrifice (*Keli Yakar to Gen. 1:1*).

Americans should demand integrity from our elected officials, and especially from the President. They must divest themselves of conflicts of interest and of any compromising commitments so that they can devote themselves fully to the Republic. Conflicts of interest are a perennial challenge for public officials, as exemplified dramatically in recent years. The Torah portion instructs officials, *mishkhu u-kehu, withdraw your hands from selfish and unworthy causes, and then stretch your hands forward in dedication to your country and its highest principles.*

As President Biden and Vice President Harris raise their hands and swear to protect our nation, how can we help them fulfill their duties? Only with collective effort can we construct a wise, strong, just, and righteous government. The undemocratic force of chaos and violence that recently defiled our Capitol demonstrates the danger of neglecting these duties. As Parashat Bo depicts a transition from plagues toward freedom, so may America and the world escape the grip of injustice and build more equitable and compassionate societies. This is the blessing that we seek, and this is the cause to which we should all lend a resolute right hand. (*Daniel Nevins is the Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership at JTS*)

### [The Hebrew Calendar is the First Commandment by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatBo5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&hsmi=106919231&hsenc=p2ANqtz-9_tM3HzLTx0-QQpQGlrXboeDAbqk9dEC4_b6jhzSaLsU97-5XW7XDLiq8dmtcQFcqIGeZkCiTn3nxnjGodVUNS7bfoTg&utm_content=106919231&utm_source=hs_email)

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Parashat Bo contains the first commandment given to the entire Jewish people as a unit. **1** This foreshadows the full Jewish religion where every aspect of life is guided by Torah and commandments in a covenantal partnership with God. But

which is the first commandment? If one reads the Torah in its plain meaning, the first instruction to the Israelites is in the third verse of chapter 12, to set aside a one year old lamb on the tenth day of Nissan (Exodus 12:3), and slaughter it on the fourteenth. The meat, roasted and eaten together with matzot and bitter herbs, was to be consumed in a family meal and in preparation for the Exodus from Egypt. This sacrificial meal became an annual observance, a recollection and celebration of the Exodus through the generations. **2**

However, according to the Oral Torah, the rabbinic tradition of interpretation (which our Rabbis teach is revealed at Sinai alongside with the Written Scriptures), the first commandment is found in the second verse, *"This month is the beginning of all the months, **3** the first month of the months of the year"* (Exodus 12:2). This is an instruction that the people of Israel observe their holidays henceforth in accordance with the starting date of the new month. The primary rabbinic court of the Jewish people **4** decides and declares the day on which the month begins. This is an essential function because the Hebrew calendar month is a lunar month. The moon circles planet Earth and completes a phase cycle (from new moon to new moon) in 29.5 days. Typically the new month is determined by alternating the start of the new month on the 29th day and on the 30th day. This keeps the calendar in sync with the lunar phase cycle. The instruction serves more than a functional purpose. The holidays are holy days. Behaviors on these days are markedly different than regular days. On the 15th day of Nissan, bread—which is eaten all year long—becomes absolutely prohibited and remains that way for seven days. Matzah, a standard food year round, becomes sacred and elevated to a mitzvah. Work which is permitted every weekday is not to be done on the 15th and 21st of Nissan. On the tenth day of Tishrei, aka Yom Kippur, life actions such as eating, drinking, washing, and sexual activity—which are celebrated and blessed all year long—are prohibited for 24 hours. By moving up the first of the month by a day, or delaying it for a day, the Court is turning a "normal" day into a "holy" day and vice versa.

What makes a day holy? Who creates an obligation to say prayers on a certain day, or to march around with a lulav and etrog, or to stay up all night studying Torah? You might think that God imbues each holy day with a special texture since, after all, God's commandments determine the special behaviors which we follow. But the Rabbis' answer is: Judaism is a covenant-partnership in which the human partner plays a central—even authoritative—role. It is the earthly court which decides that Yom Kippur will occur on Tuesday, not Wednesday, thereby endowing that tenth day of Tishrei with sacred character requiring life-altering behaviors and extended prayers. Their decision creates the 24 hours of special closeness to God when the Shekhinah is nigh and receptive to human repentance and piety. **5** I should add that this mitzvah of calendar setting reflects the Rabbis' interpretation of the unfolding covenant of Israel. The Rabbis teach that in their

times, God self limited further and called the people of Israel to a higher level of partnership authority than in the Bible. **6** *"Rabbi Judah said: 'These are the festivals of the Land which you shall proclaim' (Leviticus 23:37). God said: Before Israel became My people, the festivals were 'the festivals of the Lord.' But henceforth the festivals are those 'which you shall proclaim.'"* **7**

In another midrash on the verse in our parashah, the Rabbis say: *"This month shall be unto you'... [Before,] God would watch over everything... When Israel came of age, He handed over everything to them."* **8** Rabbi Soloveitchik stresses that this commandment represents God handing over final authority in all halakhic matters to the earthly court: *"the earthly court decrees, and the Holy One, blessed be He, complies."* **9** Soloveitchik says that this means that *"...Halakhic man received the Torah from Sinai not as a simple recipient but as a creator of worlds, as a partner with the Almighty in the act of Creation."* **10** In my view, this concept of partnership provides the authorization for our Jewish community and its spiritual leadership to uplift the Torah in our day. This includes incorporating leadership of people hitherto excluded, expanding halakhah to include positively the previously marginalized, and creating holy days marking our era's historical events such as the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel. There is another fundamental teaching embedded in the Hebrew calendar as defined by the Rabbis. While the lunar calendar was widespread, we know that various other calendars were circulating in the Jewish community. The Book of Jubilees (an influential religious text paralleling much of the Book of Genesis and other biblical passages), **11** is based on a solar calendar. Likewise, the Greeks and the Romans used a solar calendar. For the Rabbis, choosing a solar calendar would have coincided with the general culture's calendar and kept the holidays in their season. A straight lunar calendar was another choice.

However, a lunar year is about eleven days shorter than a solar year and therefore the months—and dates of holidays—migrate through the year. The Rabbis ruled for a modified lunar calendar so as to preserve the seasonal nature of the holidays. **12** They cited: *"Keep the month of Aviv... because in the month of Aviv, God took you out of Egypt..."* (Deuteronomy 16:1). **13** The Rabbis opted for a luni-solar calendar, a lunar months calendar combined with a solar year calendar. **14** Choosing a pure solar calendar would put the Hebrew calendar in lock step with the general culture, but would marginalize the particularist and separate elements in Jewish tradition. These are the elements which motivate Jews to remain a distinctive people, even in the midst of a welcoming general culture. Choosing a pure lunar calendar would represent cutting the Hebrew calendar off from the general culture's calendar and going into a "time ghetto." By shaping a luni-solar calendar, the Rabbis assured that Judaism would follow its own path (with holidays not coming out on the same solar date every year). At the same time, by intercalating months, the sacred days would reconnect and interact with

the general calendar. In the past two millennia of Jewish history, the Jews as a minority lived primarily among Christians and Muslims. Had the Jewish calendar been solar they would have been completely at home with Christian time and strongly separated from the Muslim calendar. Had the Hebrew been a purely lunar calendar, the Jews would have been completely at home with Islamic time and strongly separated from the Christian calendar. By choosing a luni-solar calendar, the Rabbis signaled that Jewish religion should be dialectically related to its host cultures. Judaism should maintain its grand vision and not go into a cultural ghetto that would drift toward becoming a tribal, self-centered faith. Judaism should maintain its universal involvement but not give up its particularist values and way of life. The dialectical way is more challenging to live by. However, it enables a constantly renewing culture and faith in which nothing human is alien to it. At the same time, it upholds the uniqueness of Judaism and diversity of humankind's many tribes. <sup>1</sup> Earlier commandments were given to individuals. Abraham was commanded to circumcise himself and his sons (Genesis 17:10ff). The Torah tells that after Jacob was wounded in his side, the custom was adopted by the Children of Israel not to eat the sinew of the thigh of kosher animals (Genesis 32:32). <sup>2</sup> See Exodus 12:6-11. <sup>3</sup> Setting Nissan, the month of Exodus, as the new New Year going forward is another way of saying that the Exodus is a revolutionary development by which people will measure time in a new way. Compare that during the French Revolution, the Revolutionary Convention established a new calendar to replace the Gregorian calendar. September 22, 1792, the day when the National Convention proclaimed France as a republic was declared Day 1 of Year 1 in the new calendar. <sup>4</sup> Such as the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court in ancient Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> "Seek God when God is [easily] found; call out to Him when He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). God is easily found on the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur; see Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 18a. <sup>6</sup> This thesis is spelled out in detail in my book, *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming). For now, see my essay on Parashat VaYitzei, "The Journey to Maturation in the Covenant", available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/journey-maturation-covenant>. <sup>7</sup> Devarim Rabbah 2:14, cited in Joseph B. Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*, p. 81. According to Soloveitchik, this shift is articulated in the halakhah. The Shabbat grows out of the cosmic process of Creation long before humanity or the Jewish people came into existence. Therefore, Shabbat comes every seventh day without any rabbinic court designation. In the Kiddush and other prayers, we thank and bless God "who sanctifies the Shabbat." The holidays, on the other hand, grow out of Jewish history (Exodus, Sinai, desert journey, etc.); their actual date of occurrence is set by rabbinic court action. In the Kiddush and liturgy, therefore we thank and bless God "who sanctifies Israel and [who in turn sanctify] the festivals." <sup>8</sup> Shemot Rabbah 15:30. Cited also in *Halakhic Man*, p. 81. <sup>9</sup> *Halakhic Man*, p. 81. <sup>10</sup> *Halakhic Man*, pp. 81-82. Emphasis mine. <sup>11</sup> Dated c. first century BCE but believed to contain earlier material. The Book of Jubilees was not incorporated in the Bible but was influential in its time. It is found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and was referred to by early Christians.

Bo by Rabbi Berel Wein  
<https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2360.html>

Since every word of our holy Torah carries with it many layers of significance and importance, it is incumbent upon us to understand why this particular word, *Bo*, is employed by the Torah to describe a certain situation.

In the opinion of the commentators to the Torah, the word *Bo*, which appears at the beginning of this week's reading, contains a deeper meaning than the simple translation meaning 'to come.' The fact that the word is then followed by the Hebrew word '*e'*' meaning not only 'to' but perhaps more literally 'into,' gives us insight into what the word *Bo* in this context really means.

It was not sufficient for Moshe merely to visit or come to the Pharaoh of Egypt to deliver the warnings from God regarding the plagues that were going to descend upon the Egyptian nation, because of their refusal to free the Jewish people from bondage.

Moshe could have delivered this information by proxy, by messenger, by letter or any of the other means that human beings used then to communicate one with another.

Rather, it was necessary for Moshe to enter into the brain and feelings of Pharaoh, so to speak, that propels the entire narrative of this week's reading and will lead to the great moment of freedom and emancipation for the Jewish people.

It is as though the Lord, so to speak, wants Moshe to really understand the stubbornness and almost suicidal behavior of the Pharaoh, and to appreciate that it is this intransigence itself that will be his undoing and the destruction of Egypt. It is as though the Torah is teaching us that if one is unable to comprehend the depths of the personality of evil, one can never really combat evil in a practical and strong fashion. It is this recognition of the evil lurking originally, though only in the background of events, that is the beginning of the process of preventing it from triumphing.

The Jewish people were fooled by the Pharaoh into volunteering for their own forced labor and eventual slavery. They did not recognize his call for patriotism as the true evil that lay behind his national the plan for them. The Jewish people were so willing to be recognized as good Egyptians that they volunteered to become their own worst enemy and submit themselves to centuries of slavery and servitude.

Jewish people, for centuries, have often been unable to perceive that they themselves create the seeds of their own destruction. In the rush for acceptance and approbation by others, Jews are often blinded, willfully overlooking the evil arising around them.

It is insufficient to come to the Pharaoh to argue one's case. One must be able to come 'into' Pharaoh and to see the true motivation that created this situation of sadness and servitude. This lesson, recorded for us in the Torah, forms a message that applies to all ages of Jewish existence and to all circumstances of political, social, and national life.

Shabbat shalom

### Reparations: Seeding a Better Future: Bo by Rabbi Mary Zamore

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/reparations-seeding-better-future>

*"The ongoing wounds of slavery and centuries of entrenched racial discrimination continue to fester and impact every part of American society. Such injustices will endure unless proactive steps are taken to acknowledge and eliminate them. One means of addressing centuries of entrenched racial discrimination is through reparations. Reparations can take many forms including expressions of remorse, education, monetary compensation, and more."* –

Excerpted from URJ's 2019 Resolution on the Study and Development of Reparations for Slavery and Systemic Racism in the U.S.

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Bo, as the soon-to-be freed Israelites prepare to leave Egypt, the Egyptians are struck with the plagues of locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn. After the darkness, God instructs Moses: "Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold" (Exodus 11:2).\* The text continues: "The Eternal disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people" (Exodus 11:3).

These verses have led to much discussion in biblical commentaries on a central ethical question: Did the Egyptians willingly and freely give the Israelites their treasures? A fulcrum for these commentaries, the Hebrew word v'yishalu, translated here as "borrow," can also mean "ask" or even "demand" (Exodus 11:2). This opens a debate about the transparency of the Israelites' intention to take these objects out of Egypt forever. Another hub of commentary explores God's role in predisposing the Egyptians to give away their precious possessions. Like the controversies over the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, there are numerous unresolved questions around free will and integrity.

The ethical questions surrounding these verses ask whether the Israelites received their reparations fairly. However, the contradictions within the text do not deny the narrative's basic premise that the Israelites labored as slaves for more than 400 years in Egypt. They had sojourned to Egypt to flee famine in Israel, stayed at Pharaoh's behest, and then were enslaved when the political winds shifted. According to the Torah, 600,000 Israelites were freed from Egyptian servitude (Exodus 12:37). The silver and gold they received is widely considered as compensation for their unpaid labor, as well as recognition of their suffering.

(Jubilees 48:18; BT, Sanhedrin 91a) The reparation would help jumpstart their new lives (Peninei Halakhah, Pesach 1:4:4).

The Egyptian valuables may be likened to the items given to the Hebrew indentured debt-servant upon released from servitude: "When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Eternal your God has blessed you" (Deuteronomy 15:13-14). In this case, the servant was bound into servitude to pay off debt and released in the Sabbatical year, not enslaved for generations (Deuteronomy 15:12). The animals and produce the freed servant received helped seed a new life and offered an opportunity to rebuild financial security.

This parashah also raises the question: Why did God tell the Israelites to ask for silver and gold rather than work animals and produce? Precious metals hold value. They are not perishable or susceptible to disease; they do not need water and feed; they travel easily. In addition, the Israelites left Egypt with their own herds. Later, God sustained them with manna, and Miriam helped them find water. Then, for what purpose did they need silver and gold? According to several commentaries, they would be used in the building of the mishkan, the portable tabernacle (Midrash Tanchuma, Terumah, 4; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:35:1; Or HaChaim on Exodus 25:2).

Reparations do not merely pay wages lost, they restore psychological and financial security. They allow those held back by injustice to dream of a future and invest in it. At their best, they are customized to the needs of the people who have been wronged. In a 2019 New Yorker article, Ta-Nehisi Coates explained the process by which Americans need to explore reparations as part of the repair of 400 years of systematic racism in America:

"A policy for repair. I think what you need to do is you need to figure out what the exact axes of white supremacy are, and have been, and find out a policy to repair each of those. In other words, this is not just a mass payment."

The needed reparations, Coates argues, must consider the extensive violence done to Black Americans and the massive loss of generational wealth systematically denied to our fellow citizens for four centuries. His position is reflected in the Union for Reform Judaism's 2019 Resolution on the Study and Development of Reparations for Slavery and Systemic Racism in the U.S., which calls on Reform Jews to:

1. Advocate for the creation of a federal commission to study and develop proposals for reparations to redress the historic and continuing effects of slavery and subsequent systemic racial, societal, and economic discrimination against Black Americans;
2. Urge our congregations and their members to take active steps to redress the destructive effects of historic and ongoing systemic racism, including through education and conversations within our congregations and

communities using resources such as the RAC's Reflect, Relate, Reform toolkit, and other nationally recognized resources; and

3. Commit to ongoing assessment and evaluation to strengthen our own institutions' efforts to combat implicit and explicit bias and promote racial equity.

Parashat Bo shows us that reparations must be customized to the recipients' requirements. May we listen carefully to the pain inflicted on our fellow citizens to understand what Black Americans need to seed a better future. As we strive to be antiracist, may we be open to the possibilities of reparations and repair.

*\*Note that earlier God twice predestines these verses, "But then I will bring judgment upon the nation they are serving; after that they shall go out with many possessions" (Genesis 15:14) and "And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:21-22). (Rabbi Mary L. Zamore is the executive director of the Women's Rabbinic Network.)*

*Just for fun:*

[What are the Most \(and least\) Jewish Innauguration Speeches by PJ Grisar](https://forward.com/culture/462411/inauguration-speeches-joe-biden-donald-trump-abraham-lincoln-franklin/)

<https://forward.com/culture/462411/inauguration-speeches-joe-biden-donald-trump-abraham-lincoln-franklin/>

On Jan. 20, Joseph R. Biden, Jr. will deliver the 59th inaugural address, a tradition that began with George Washington, was denied to a handful of presidential replacements and — I've learned through a thorough study of the 58 other speeches — one that, like a particularly long Yom Kippur sermon, is given to a whole lot of bloviating.

Speechcraft has evolved in the two centuries since Washington held forth before a crowd at Manhattan's Federal Hall. With its refinements have come an ebb and flow of Jewish references and sentiment from our 45 (44 if you don't count Grover Cleveland twice) gentile Commanders in Chief. The places where these allusions come into play might surprise you. But rest assured, they begin at the very beginning.

[How Anxious Were Our Presidents?](#)

In 1789, the Father of Our Country kicked things off with that most Jewish of themes: agita.

"Among the vicissitudes incident to life no event could have filled me with greater anxieties than that of which the notification was transmitted by your order, and received on the 14th day of the present month," Washington said of his elevation to the presidency.

He then discussed his decision to accept, weighing his desire to retire "on the one hand" and difficulty of the task before him "on the other hand." That's right, Washington pulled something a [rhetorical Tevye](#).

Washington was far from the last to talk about anxiety. 22 other speeches addressed angst to some extent. Usually, though, the concern was the nation's anxieties about national debt, impending Civil War or threats from abroad. Martin Van Buren's speech used "anxiously" twice — referring to himself and "anxious" once — referring to doubters of the government's endurance — and so he may be called our most anxious president.

Given that the word and its derivatives were retired under Nixon, along with the age of anxiety, could we say our presidents are now more self-assured? Probably not. Their speechwriters — many of whom have been Jewish — almost definitely aren't.

### [Did Any Inauguration Speeches Talk About Israel?](#)

The first and only mention of the word "Israel" in an inaugural speech referred to the ancient Jewish nation or people — and maybe to Jacob — but not the modern state.

Thomas Jefferson said that for the success of his second administration he would need "the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life."

Jefferson wasn't the only president to paint America in Promised Land terms. Why hasn't contemporary Israel gotten more than an oblique mention? My guess is that it's due to presidents getting less specific in terms of explicit policy in the modern era — they used to go on at length about the gold standard — except when they achieved something big in their first term or were setting the table for a major initiative in the second.

The first administration that made a huge breakthrough with Middle East peace — the Carter Administration — wasn't around long enough to boast about the Camp David Accords. Clinton didn't mention the Oslo Accords in his second inaugural (possibly because of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination after the fact). If he had been given the opportunity to deliver a second inaugural address, Trump would have probably mentioned the Abraham Accords and he might have been right to, given that it was his most substantial diplomatic achievement.

### [Which \(Jewish\) Biblical Passages Have The Presidents Quoted?](#)

Presidents have spoken about the "sacred fire" of our liberty (Washington) or the "divine inspiration" of our founding (Warren G. Harding) or have presented America as a light unto other nations (too many to name). They have also quoted Scripture and quite a few of them have drawn from the Hebrew Bible.

John Quincy Adams quoted Psalm 127: "except the Lord keep the city the watchman waketh but in vain."

Abe Lincoln, in his second inaugural, also liked the psalmists, stating, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Psalm 19:10)

Clinton riffed on Nehemiah by saying, "May God strengthen our hands for the good work ahead."

James A Garfield quoted Isaiah: "Let our people find a new meaning in the divine oracle which declares that 'a little child shall lead them,' for our own little children

will soon control the destinies of the Republic.”

So did JFK, who said, re: our relationship with our enemies, “let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to ‘undo the heavy burdens ... and to let the oppressed go free.’”

Nixon quoted Malachi 3:20, “The peace we seek to win is not victory over any other people, but the peace that comes ‘with healing in its wings.’” He was also one of the few presidents to quote at length from a poet, Archibald MacLeish, who wrote “Jews in America,” a 1936 rebuke of antisemitism. Nixon would later be caught on tape being an antisemite.

Warren G. Harding pulled from the minor prophet Micah, saying: “I have taken the solemn oath of office on that passage of Holy Writ wherein it is asked: ‘What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?’”

Carter, a devout evangelical, took his cue from Micah, too, quoting his admonition, “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”

As for Trump, he favored the Song of Ascents, saying “how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity.” Wishful thinking.

[Which Speeches Were the Most Jewish?](#)

In my opinion — that of one who has read nearly 60 speeches — three speeches rise to the top of the heap in terms of their Jewish content.

While explicit references to Jews are few and far between (Reagan mentioned Stars of David on Arlington tombstones, George W. Bush alluded to synagogues and the “truths of Sinai” and Obama called us a “nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers”) the first inaugural speeches of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson are steeped in Jewy-ness.

Lincoln’s immortal speech in 1861 immediately broke with tradition by being essentially an extended legal argument attempting to assuage the Southern states and urge them to stay in the Union. He read from the Constitution, presented a straightforward resolution not to interfere in the rights of states and said the following:

“I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our National Constitution, and the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.”

Lincoln bounded from this logical, legal exegesis to flights of high rhetoric that gave Steven Pinker [book titles](#). Who can read that and not think that Lincoln — who some [like to speculate was secretly Jewish](#) — wouldn’t be a gifted Talmudist,

or at least a popular professor at Cardozo.

The fact that Lincoln was saying he would not interfere in the South's institution of slavery here is pretty bad. But so is the fact that Woodrow Wilson, [a racist](#), came quite close to saying "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*," when he affirmed that "Justice, and only justice, shall always be our motto," in his own maiden inauguration speech.

FDR, in his 1933 address, said that the challenges of the Great Depression, while immense, did not meet the standards of a biblical blight.

"We are stricken by no plague of locusts," Roosevelt said. He then went on to articulate our national challenge with a metaphor about the "temple of our civilization."

Roosevelt appeared to be going for a Jesus thing — the money changers in the Temple who inspired Christ to start flipping tables. But Roosevelt described the "unscrupulous money changers" as those that "have no vision, and when there is no vision the people perish." That's a play on Proverbs 29:18.

The money changers having fled, "we may now restore that temple to the ancient truths," Roosevelt vowed.

It was a reference that no doubt spoke to both his fellow Christians and to Jews, a group that would become huge backers of the New Deal. After all, the Yidden know a bit about rededicating temples.

In Roosevelt's three more terms, he had three more chances at making Jewish references — with the help of speechwriter Samuel Rosenman. He continued with the temple reference in round two, saying how the Republic pledged itself to "drive from the temple of our ancient faith those who had profaned it." Strong Maccabee vibes.

Ted Sorenson, whose mother was Jewish — and who probably wrote most of JFK's "Profiles in Courage" — drafted LBJ's 1965 inauguration speech. Debuting a day after a concert featuring violinist Isaac Stern, the address is chockablock with Jewish themes, including a section called "The American Covenant."

"They came here—the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened—to find a place where a man could be his own man," Johnson said of the American people. "They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish."

Johnson then outlined the articles of the Covenant, citing a commitment to justice that is betrayed — along with America — when "any citizen denies his fellow, saying, 'His color is not mine,' or 'His beliefs are strange and different.'" "The American covenant called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man," Johnson stated, going on to say, "The judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored."

He also presciently affirmed that we are "fellow passengers on a dot of earth," well before Carl Sagan coined the phrase "[Pale Blue Dot](#)."

Johnson, whose benediction included a Houston rabbi, ended his speech saying: "For myself, I ask only, in the words of an ancient leader: 'Give me now wisdom

and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great?"

That leader? Solomon. Enough said. Johnson's ready for his haftorah.

[Which Inauguration Speech Was the Least Jewish?](#)

On March 4, 1841, William Henry Harrison delivered a nearly two-hour address on a dreary, cold winter day — without a coat or hat on.

In the speech, he professed what all his predecessors were content to imply, saying he "deem[ed] the present occasion sufficiently important and solemn to justify me in expressing to my fellow-citizens a profound reverence for the Christian religion."

A month later, Harrison died of pneumonia. Many have attributed his presidency — our shortest — to his underdressed first address to the nation — our longest. Most scholars now believe that it is unlikely that the remarks led to his death, but if he had a Jewish mother there'd be no need for speculation. He would have worn a coat and muffler that day.

*...and one more from the same author:*

[Biden Cites Psalms and a Songwriter of Jewish Themes at Inauguration by P](#)

[forward.com/culture/462490/biden-cites-psalms-and-a-songwriter-of-jewish-themes-at-inauguration/?](https://forward.com/culture/462490/biden-cites-psalms-and-a-songwriter-of-jewish-themes-at-inauguration/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Afternoon%20Newsletter%20(Sunday%20RSS)%20USE%20THIS&utm_maildate=01/20/2021)

[utm\\_source=PostUp&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Afternoon%20Newsletter%20\(Sunday%20RSS\)%20USE%20THIS&utm\\_maildate=01/20/2021](https://forward.com/culture/462490/biden-cites-psalms-and-a-songwriter-of-jewish-themes-at-inauguration/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Afternoon%20Newsletter%20(Sunday%20RSS)%20USE%20THIS&utm_maildate=01/20/2021)

Joseph R. Biden, Jr. began his presidency with a speech urging American unity as we move forward through a dark season of disease and uncertainty. In his address, he cited both Scripture and an operatic anthem penned by a songwriter known for works based on the lives of Holocaust survivors.

Following a benediction by Father Leo O'Donovan, who paraphrased Solomon's prayer to God for wisdom from II Chronicles, Biden stepped forward to address how America had overcome the Capitol siege and its challenge to democracy.

"At this hour my friends, democracy has prevailed," Biden said. "The American story depends not on any one of us — not on some of us — but on all of us."

Calling on Americans to face the threats of white supremacy and extremism through common cause, Biden acknowledged the "dark winter" the country faces with the coronavirus and the hardships it has placed in the way of so many. But, he indicated that things may change.

"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning," Biden said, quoting [Psalms 30:5](#).

Biden expressed his confidence that America would overcome the challenges before it, and said that once we emerge from them, we will add a new chapter to the American story, a story he likened to the song "American Anthem" by Gene Scheer.

"There's one verse that stands out, at least for me, that goes like this," Biden said.

“The work and prayers of centuries have brought us to this day. What shall be our legacy? What will our children say? Let me know in my heart, when my days are through, America, America I gave my best to you.”

Scheer wrote the song in 1998 and it was first performed by soprano Denyce Graves, who recently sang it as part of Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s memorial ceremony at the Capitol. In 2006, Norah Jones popularized her rendition, recorded for Ken Burns’ World War II documentary miniseries, “The War.”

As a librettist, Scheer is no stranger to that period. His work for the stage, with collaborator Jake Heggie, includes “Another Sunrise,” based on author and dissident Krystyna Zywulska’s story of survival in Nazi-occupied Poland and “Farewell Auschwitz,” based on free translations of Zywulska’s lyrics, composed during her time in the infamous concentration camp.

Scheer and Heggie also wrote “Out of Darkness: Two Remain,” about Zywulska and Gad Beck, a gay survivor of the Holocaust.

Biden made Scheer’s words a central part of his speech, saying, “Let us add our own work and prayers to the unfolding story of our great nation. If we do this, then when our days are through, our children and our children’s children will say to us, ‘They gave their best. They did their duty. They healed a broken land’”

## Yahrtzeits

*(Since I didn't send out a brochure last week, I am going to include this weeks yahrtzeits as well as this coming week's)*

### Yahrzeits for January 16th

Linda Chandross remembers her husband Robert Chandross on Tuesday January 19th (Shevat 6)

Richard Cohen remember his mother Ida Cohen (Chaya bat Yitzhak v'Sara Tova) on Tuesday January 19th (Shevat 6)

Blossom Primer remembers Irwn’s sister Ethel Schockett on Friday January 22nd (Shevat 9)

### Yahrtzeits for January 23<sup>rd</sup>

Fran Nelson remembers her husband Fred Nelson (Feival) on Saturday January 23rd (Shevat 10).

Larry Ozarow remembers his father Boris Ozarow ( Dov-Ber) on Tuesday January 26th (Shevat 13).

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her Grandmother Rose Rosenfeld On Wednesday January 7th.

Bob Woog remembers his mother Nina Frankel Woog (Nahama bat Jacob va Shoshanah) on Thursday January 28th (Shevat 15).