Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

Parashat Bo

January 28, 2022 *** 6 Shevat, 5783

Bo in A Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3250/jewish/Bo-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Bo," means "Come [to Pharaoh]" and it is found in Exodus 10:1.

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 46:13-28.*

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/619493/jewish/Haftorah-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 haftorah 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 haftorah 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 Spiritual Child: Bo by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-spiritual-child/

The American writer Bruce Feiler recently published a best-selling book entitled The Secrets of Happy Families.[1] It's an engaging work that uses research largely drawn from fields like team-building, problem-solving and conflict resolution, showing how management techniques can be used at home also to help make families cohesive units that make space for personal growth.

At the end, however, he makes a very striking and unexpected point: "The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative." He quotes a study from Emory University that the more children know about their family's story, "the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, the more successfully they believe their family functions."[2]

A family narrative connects children to something larger than themselves. It helps them make sense of how they fit into the world that existed before they were born. It gives them the starting-point of an identity. That in turn becomes the basis of confidence. It enables children to say: This is who I am. This is the story of which I am a part. These are the people who came before me and whose descendant I am. These are the roots of which I am the stem reaching upward toward the sun.

Nowhere was this point made more dramatically than by Moses in this week's parsha. The tenth plague is about to strike. Moses knows that this will be the last. Pharaoh will not merely let the people go. He will urge them to leave. So, on God's command, he prepares the people for freedom. But he does so in a way that is unique. He does not talk about liberty. He does not speak about breaking the

chains of bondage. He does not even mention the arduous journey that lies ahead. Nor does he enlist their enthusiasm by giving them a glimpse of the destination, the Promised Land that God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the land of milk and honey.

He talks about children. Three times in the course of the parsha he turns to the theme:

> And when your children say to you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' you shall say… Exodus 12:26
>
> On that day you must tell your child, 'This is because of what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt.' Exodus 13:8
>
> And in the future, when your child asks, 'What what is this?' you shall answer… Exodus 13:14

This is wonderfully counterintuitive. He doesn't speak about tomorrow but about the distant future. He does not celebrate the moment of liberation. Instead he wants to ensure that it will form part of the people's memory until the end of time. He wants each generation to pass on the story to the next. He wants Jewish parents to become educators, and Jewish children to be guardians of the past for the sake of the future. Inspired by God, Moses taught the Israelites the lesson arrived at via a different route by the Chinese: If you plan for a year, plant rice. If you plan for a decade, plant a tree. If you plan for a century, educate a child.

Jews became famous throughout the ages for putting education first. Where others built castles and palaces, Jews built schools and houses of study. From this flowed all the familiar achievements in which we take collective pride: the fact that Jews knew their texts even in ages of mass illiteracy; the record of Jewish scholarship and intellect; the astonishing over-representation of Jews among the shapers of the modern mind; the Jewish reputation, sometimes admired, sometimes feared, sometimes caricatured, for mental agility, argument, debate, and the ability to see all sides of a disagreement.

But Moses' point wasn't simply this. God never commanded us: Thou shall win a Nobel Prize. What He wanted us to teach our children was a story. He wanted us to help our children understand who they are, where they came from, what happened to their ancestors to make them the distinctive people they became and what moments in their history shaped their lives and dreams. He wanted us to give our children an identity by turning history into memory, and memory itself into a sense of responsibility. Jews were not summoned to be a nation of intellectuals. They were called on to be actors in a drama of redemption, a people invited by God to bring blessings into the world by the way they lived and sanctified life.

For some time now, along with many others in the West, we have sometimes neglected this deeply spiritual element of education. That is what makes Lisa Miller's recent book The Spiritual Child,[3] an important reminder of a forgotten truth. Professor Miller teaches psychology and education at Columbia University and co-edits the journal Spirituality in Clinical Practice. Her book is not about Judaism or even religion as such, but specifically about the importance of parents encouraging the spirituality of the child.

Children are naturally spiritual. They are fascinated by the vastness of the universe and our place in it. They have the same sense of wonder that we find in some of the greatest of the psalms. They love stories, songs and rituals. They like the shape and structure they give to time, and relationships, and the moral life. To be sure, sceptics and atheists have often derided religion as a child's view of reality, but that only serves to strengthen the corollary, that a child's view of reality is instinctively, intuitively religious. Deprive a child of that by ridiculing faith, abandoning ritual, and focusing instead on academic achievement and other forms of success, and you starve him or her of some of the most important elements of emotional and psychological well-being.

As Professor Miller shows, the research evidence is compelling. Children who grow up in homes where spirituality is part of the atmosphere at home are less likely to succumb to depression, substance abuse, aggression and high-risk behaviours including physical risk-taking and "a sexuality devoid of emotional intimacy". Spirituality plays a part in a child's resilience, physical and mental health and healing. It is a key dimension of adolescence and its intense search for identity and purpose. The teenage years often take the form of a spiritual quest. And when there is a cross-generational bond through which children and parents come to share a sense of connection to something larger, an enormous inner strength is born. Indeed the parent-child relationship, especially in Judaism, mirrors the relationship between God and us.

That is why Moses so often emphasises the role of the question in the process of education: "When your child asks you, saying…" – a feature ritualised at the Seder table in the form of the Mah nishtanah. Judaism is a questioning and argumentative faith, in which even the greatest ask questions of God, and in which the rabbis of the Mishnah and Midrash constantly disagree. Rigid doctrinal faith that discourages questions, calling instead for blind obedience and submission, is psychologically damaging and fails to prepare a child for the complexity of real life. What is more, the Torah is careful, in the first paragraph of the Shema, to say, "You shall love the Lord your God …" before saying, "You shall teach these things diligently to your children." Parenthood works when your children see that you love what you want them to learn.

The long walk to freedom, suggests this week's parsha, is not just a matter of history and politics, let alone miracles. It has to do with the relationship between parents and children. It is about telling the story and passing it on across the generations. It is about a sense of God's presence in our lives. It is about making space for transcendence, wonder, gratitude, humility, empathy, love, forgiveness and compassion, ornamented by ritual, song and prayer. These help to give a child confidence, trust and hope, along with a sense of identity, belonging and at-home-ness in the universe.

You cannot build a healthy society out of emotionally unhealthy families and angry and conflicted children. Faith begins in families. Hope is born in the home.

[1] Bruce Feiler, The Secrets of Happy Families, New York, William Morrow, 2013.
[2] Ibid., 274. Feiler does not cite the source, but see: Bohanek, Jennifer G., Kelly A. Marin, Robyn Fivush, and Marshall P. Duke. "Family Narrative Interaction and Children's Sense of Self." Family Process 45.1 (2006): 39-54. [3] Miller, Lisa. The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving, New York, St Martin's Press, 2015.

Choosing Justice Over First-Born Status: Bo by Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson
https://truah.org/resources/parshat-bo-lev-meirowitz-nelson-moraltorah/

Rereading this week's parshah, with its familiar story of the final three plagues, I was struck by a new observation: It seems Pharaoh was not a firstborn.

Never mind my assumptions about who gets to be king; never mind the portrayals offered by modern midrashim from Zora Neale Hurston's Moses, Man of the Mountain to Prince of Egypt. The text of the Torah seems pretty self-evident:

> In the middle of the night, THE ETERNAL struck down all the [male] first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle. And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians — because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead. (Exodus 12:29-30)

Pharaoh survives the plague; therefore he must not have been a firstborn.

I'm not the first one to notice this discrepancy. Rashi picks up on it but reaches the opposite conclusion. Referencing the midrash known as the Mechilta, he writes that Pharaoh was a firstborn but was spared by this plague so that God could show him God's full might at the Red Sea.

Rashi's reading makes dramatic sense. The whole purpose of the ten plagues was to show the world — beginning with Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Israelites themselves — that God is the supreme divinity. Having Pharaoh succumb to the tenth plague, when the story isn't quite over, would be clumsy storytelling. But to my mind, in his rush to make Pharaoh a firstborn, Rashi

misses out on an interesting alternate interpretation.
One of the hallmarks of Genesis is the recurring trope of the younger son supplanting the older: Seth is chosen over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph and Judah over Reuben; Ephraim is placed before Menashe. This continues into Exodus and beyond: Moses is the baby of the family, as is David. We usually read this as a marker of worthiness over birth order, breaking from the status quo, a leg-up for the underdog. We sometimes even take it a step further, as a statement of a foundational Jewish ethic: valuing righteousness over power structures, obedience to a supernal authority over deference to earthly ones.
What if Pharaoh was also such an underdog, a younger son who somehow gained the throne? Clearly that wouldn't make him the good guy, but it does scramble our clean symbolic narrative of morality. It becomes harder to claim there is a "Jewish ethic of power" encoded in the Genesis stories of sibling rivalry.
Let's complicate the picture further. Two parshiyot ago, while Moses is on his way back to Egypt after the burning bush episode, God gives him this instruction: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says THE ETERNAL: Israel is My first-born son.'" (Exodus 4:22) (It's also worth noting that in the following verse, God continues, "If you refuse to release My firstborn, I will kill your firstborn" — foreshadowing, or perhaps fair warning for, the terrible final plague that we read this week.) So Israel, the younger child, has completed its evolution and ascended to the coveted status of firstborn. Aaron and Moses, the middle and youngest of three, have been challenging Pharaoh — also a younger child — through nine plagues. And now, Pharaoh's firstborn lies dead at his feet, presumably elevating his younger son to the position of heir.
Firstborns can be supplanted in many different ways, not all of them virtuous. Reading this parshah this year, in the early weeks of Israel's new ultra-right government, I can't help but think about how logics of power and precedence are applied to the occupation by both Jewish and Palestinian extremists. Arguments about who was here first — who is the "firstborn" of the land of Israel/Palestine, if you will — are made in both directions. Each claims the land as their birthright (to the exclusion of the other) and rightful ancestral plot. Who will use what kind of power to drive whom out, and who will claim they are doing so under the mantle of divine approval? In the terms of our story, who will be Israel and who will be Pharaoh? Who is on a moral and spiritual journey that frees them up to achieve their truest self — and who is on the verge of overreaching and losing all?
At the end of the ninth plague — the darkness that prevented "each person from seeing their fellow or moving from their place for three days" (Exodus 10:23) — Pharaoh dramatically tells Moses, "Be gone from me! Take care not to see me

again.” (Exodus 10:28, emphasis added) Literarily, both the plague and Pharaoh’s response point us to the antidote to this impasse: seeing the other. As our teacher Rabbi Danielle Stillman pointed out in her (M)oral Torah for Vayishlach earlier this fall, Jacob and Esau’s meeting (including Jacob’s wrestling with the angel the night before) is full of face imagery — see Genesis 32:31-32 and 33:10. That acknowledgement, that seeing of a person in their whole self — regardless of how they have wounded you in the past — points a path towards reconciliation.

I am not so naive as to think that Jews and Palestinians seeing each other as human is the key to ending the occupation — and, to be clear, neither is Rabbi Stillman. What I do know is that seeing each other’s humanity is an unavoidable bare minimum, because the politics of wrestling for firstborn status are failing everyone who lives between the river and the sea. And the consequences of delay could be catastrophic.

(Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson (he/him) is T’ruah’s Director of Leadership and Learning and was ordained in 2013 from Hebrew College, where he was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. In 2017, Lev was honored by the Covenant Foundation with a Pomegranate Prize, which recognizes early-career Jewish educators.)

Parshat Bo: Taking Notice in Our Time by Rabbi Shaul David Judelman

https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/05-parshat-bo-taking-notice-in-our-time

When someone says “Jewish time,” they usually mean they’re running late, and when they say “Jewish geography,” they usually mean that specific game we play of trying to figure out which Jews we know in common. But the original Jewish geography, according to our mystical tradition, has three components- Place, Time and Soul (Olam, Shanah and Nefesh). Much of environmental Torah hinges on Place - the land we live on and our obligations to it. However, time is another basic dimension in which we exist and interact with our world, and it has its own environmental lesson to explore.

Parshat Bo highlights the notion of time: “This month will be to you the head of the months.”[1] The commandment to mark the month of Nisan is the very first mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a whole. Our redemption begins with a demarcation of time.

Rashi’s first question on the entire Torah is about this verse. If the Torah is the book of the Jewish people’s Divine Law, he asks, “What is the reason that it opens with Creation?”[2] The question is certainly rhetorical, and perhaps facetious. Could you imagine the Torah starting with anything but Creation? But the link between these beginnings is crucial - our understanding that the world was created and is under Hashem’s control must precede acceptance of the mitzvot. In turn, our understanding of the calendar is so basic to our nation and

relationship with Hashem that it rivals the importance of Creation, and is our first mitzvah.
The word we receive with the commandment of time is chodesh, month, or more literally, newness. It is extremely instructive that our word for this basic time unit implies renewal and revelation, as opposed to a continuation of the status quo. Even the word for year, shanah, is connected to the word for change, shinui. These names have connotations that indicate an approach based in progress and linear advancement, however, that is only one aspect of "Jewish time." Far from being conceived as purely linear, the Jewish calendar reflects the cyclical nature of the year with a precise system of holidays and observances connected to each moment and season. The beginning of our year, as proclaimed in the first commandment in Parshat Bo, is the linchpin of that connection. [3] The Torah calls Pesach "Chag haAviv," the holiday of the spring. The Talmudic prescription of the Jewish leap year, implanting an extra month in the year, is done in order that Pesach will indeed always occur in the spring.
The Sages could have declared a purely astronomical, lunar calendar; based on the Torah's prescription they took steps to ensure that the calendar also reflects the cycles of nature. The Jewish calendar is not merely an artificial human construct: Hashem's mitzvot ensure that the calendar aligns humans with plants, animals, and the rest of the natural world.
The confluence of redemption and springtime may not be coincidental. Everyone is aware of the tremendous energy of renewal that occurs in the springtime. The rebirth of flowers and greenery, the new life in the fields - these are all symbols of our redemption. In this way, our concept of Time - Shanah - is intertwined with the Soul - Nefesh. We are reminded—on Pesach, on Rosh Chodesh, on Shabbat and with the rising of the sun each day—that renewal is possible at every moment.
Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, in a teaching about Pesach, mentions an anthropocentric view that the renewal of spring actually stems from the redemption of the Jewish people.[4] The truth, he teaches, is that there is no such primacy or causality; the Divine energy that brings forth the birth of spring in nature is the exact same energy that brought about the redemption of our people in Mitzrayim. And it is precisely the return of spring each year that inspires our personal redemption with each Pesach.
You may find yourself in a synagogue on Shabbat where many people have been relying upon their watches and modern clocks to tell the time. However, if it is time for kiddush levana, sanctification of the moon, we are pulled back to Hashem's original tool to measure time. There is something beautiful in how our

tradition's attention to the natural cycles still impacts us today, how our Jewish practice brings us outdoors to find our connection with Hashem.
Rabbi Menachem Frumin of the Israeli town of Tekoa once asked, "How can Jews, who are commanded to develop yirat Shamayim (fear of Heaven), live in a place where they can't even see the shamayim (skies)?"
Being true to "Jewish time," then, involves both an openness towards renewal and change and a synchronization with natural cycles. In keeping these both in mind, we can better live in harmony with Hashem and commit ourselves to care of His environment. (*Shaul Judelman teaches at Yeshivat Simchat Shlomo and is coordinator at* Roots*, a grassroots movement that aims to improve the co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians through local initiatives.)*

How Does Moses Cope When Expectations Fall Short? - Bo by Andy Weissfeld
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-does-moses-cope-when-expectations-fall-short/

All of us have been in situations when we feel something has fallen short of our expectations. Even trivial things, such as a favorite sports team underperforming, a dessert missing the mark, or a train running late can cause significant frustration. Just imagine the disappointment or sadness one can feel when a much more important matter fails to go as hoped. Moses finds himself in this situation in this week's parashah, as God's promise to free the Israelites has yet to fully play out. How does Moses cope with the fact that his expectations have not yet been met? One especially challenging section of our parashah offers a clue.
Before the Israelites have been freed and Moses announces the final plague, God makes a prediction in Exodus 11:1–3 that seems completely unattainable:

> *"And Adonai said to Moses, "I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all. Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold. Adonai disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people. Moreover, Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh's courtiers and among the people." (Exod. 11:1–3)*

Is this to say that after the devastating plagues and Pharoah hardening his heart, the Egyptians all of a sudden will treat the Israelites "favorably"? That Moses, the key figure in the destruction of Egypt, will become its most adored leader? At this point in the narrative, this vision could not be farther from the reality on the ground. In the verses that follow, Moses must snap back to reality to deliver the most devastating news a parent can ever hear to Pharoah, that God will soon

exact the Plague of the Firstborn.
Biblical scholar Robert Alter also struggles with the narrative purpose of these three verses, observing that they "do not seem smoothly integrated into the narrative progress" (Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses, 257). He points out that chapter ten concludes with Moses saying he will never see Pharaoh's face again (Exod. 10:29), yet Moses appears before Pharoah in verses 11:4–8 to announce the final plague. He cites Umberto Cassuto, the 20th-century Italian and Israeli Biblical scholar, "who sees it as kind of a flashback in Moses's mind—of God's initial promise to confound Egypt and to liberate Israel before the annunciation of the last plague" (ibid.).
Indeed, Moses had good reason to expect favorable treatment and great wealth. At the Burning Bush, God assured Moses that God "will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty handed" (Exod. 3:21). God even promised Abraham that God "will execute judgement on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth" (Gen. 15:14). Sometimes when real-life is hard, visualizing a more ideal reality for a few seconds can help us feel grounded. Perhaps this "flashback," which validates the valiant and just nature of Moses's original intentions, and certainty of God's promise, helped him cope with disappointing feelings from unmet expectations of freedom. That short dream keeps Moses's eyes on the prize, reminding him to do whatever it takes get his people to the finish line, even if it may not look exactly the way he dreamed it.
Moses falls short of his goals many times as a leader: he probably asks Pharoah to let the Israelites go at least a dozen times before he succeeds in securing his people's freedom. Moses's ability to "flashback" to a vision of a better future powers his relentless drive. Psychologist Angela Duckworth would call this grit, "passion and perseverance for long-term goals . . . a goal you care about so much that it organizes and gives meaning to almost everything you do." In order to maintain his grit in a moment where reality has yet to meet his expectations, Moses takes a second to reflect and dream about the better future that he and his ancestors have worked tirelessly to procure.
We can learn from Moses when our own lives take unexpected turns. By keeping himself grounded in the bigger picture, Moses helps the Israelites endure the slow path to redemption. While this is no antidote, taking a step back to remind ourselves about our larger goals can provide a temporary spark of motivation or sigh of relief. Shabbat Shalom. *(Andy Weissfeld is a student at the Rabbinical School of JTS- Class of 2023)*

Yahrtzeits

Richard Cohen remembers his mother Ida Cohen on Sat. Jan. 28.
Bob Axelrod remembers his mother Irene Axelrod on Sun. Jan. 29
Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's sister Ethel Schockett on Tue. Jan. 31
Alice Solomon remembers her father Leo Blitzer on Tue. Jan. 31
Fran Nelson remembers her husband Fred Nelson on Wed. Feb. 1
Elaine Berkenwald remembers her husband Stanley Klughaupt on Fri. Feb. 3