

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bo
January 20, 2024 *** 10 Shvat, 5784

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/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 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 March of Folly: Bo by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-march-of-folly/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-march-of-folly/>

There is a fascinating moment in the unfolding story of the plagues that should make us stop and take notice. At the opening of this week's parsha, seven plagues have now struck Egypt. The people are suffering. Several times Pharaoh seems to soften, only to harden his heart again. During the seventh plague, hail, he even seems to admit his mistake.

"Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. "This time I have sinned," he said to them. "The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong."
Ex.9:27

But as soon as the plague is over, he changes his mind:

"He and his officials" says the Torah, "hardened their hearts." Ex. 9:34

And now Moses and Aaron have come to warn of a further plague, potentially devastating, a plague of locusts that, they say, will devour all the grain left after the hail as well as the fruit of the trees. And for the first time we hear something we have not heard before.

Pharaoh's own advisors tell him he is making a mistake:

Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?" Ex. 10:7

These words immediately transform the situation. How so?

Back in 1984 the historian Barbara Tuchman published a famous book called *The March of Folly*. In it, she asked the great question: How is it that throughout history intelligent people have made foolish decisions that were damaging both to their own position and to that of the people they led?

By this she did not mean, decisions that in retrospect proved to be the wrong ones. Anyone can make that kind of mistake. That is the nature of leadership and of life itself. We are called on to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. With the wisdom of hindsight we can see where we went wrong, because of factors we did not know about at the time.

What she was talking about were decisions that people could see at the time were the wrong ones. There were warnings and they were ignored. One example she gives is of the legend of the wooden horse of Troy. The Greeks had laid siege to Troy unsuccessfully for ten years. Eventually they appeared to give up and sail away, leaving behind them a giant wooden horse. The Trojans enthusiastically hauled the horse inside the city as a symbol of their victory. As we know, inside the horse were thirty Greek soldiers who, that night, came out of hiding and opened the city gates for the Greek army that had sailed back under cover of night.

It was a brilliant ploy. Laocoön, the Trojan priest, had guessed that it was a plot and warned his people, in the famous words, "I fear the Greeks even when they come bearing gifts." His warning was ignored, and Troy fell.

Another of Tuchman's examples is the papacy in the sixteenth century which had become corrupt, financially and in other ways. There were many calls for reform, but they were all ignored. The Vatican regarded itself, like some financial institutions today, as too big to fail. The result was the reformation and more than a century of religious war throughout Europe.

That is the context in which we should read the story of Pharaoh and his advisers. This is one of the first recorded instances of the march of folly. How does it happen?

Some years ago, DreamWorks studio made an animated film about Moses and the Exodus story, called *The Prince of Egypt*. The producer, Jeffrey Katzenberg, invited me to see the film when it was about half complete, to see whether I felt that it was a responsible and sensitive way of telling the story, which I thought it was.

What fascinated me, and perhaps I should have understood this earlier, was that it portrayed Pharaoh not as an evil man but as a deeply conservative one, charged with maintaining what was already the longest-lived empire of the ancient world, and not allowing it, as it were, to be undermined by change.

Let slaves go free, and who knows what will happen next? Royal authority will seem

to have been defeated. A fracture would appear in the political structure. The seemingly unshakeable edifice of power will be seen to have been shaken. And that, for those who fear change, is the beginning of the end.

Under those circumstances it is possible to see why Pharaoh would refuse to listen to his advisors. In his eyes, they were weak, defeatist, giving in to pressure, and any sign of weakness in leadership only leads to more pressure and more capitulation. Better be strong, and continue to say "No," and simply endure one more plague.

We see Pharaoh as both wicked and foolish, because we have read the book. His advisors could see clearly that he was leading his people to disaster, but he may well have felt that he was being strong while they were merely fearful. Leadership is only easy, and its errors only clearly visible, in retrospect.

Yet Pharaoh remains an enduring symbol of a failure to listen to his own advisors. He could not see that the world had changed, that he was facing something new, that his enslavement of a people was no longer tolerable, that the old magic no longer worked, that the empire over which he presided was growing old, and that the more obstinate he became the closer he was bringing his people to tragedy.

Knowing how to listen to advice, how to respond to change and when to admit you've got it wrong, remain three of the most difficult tasks of leadership. Rejecting advice, refusing to change, and refusing to admit you're wrong, may look like strength to some. But, usually, they are the beginning of yet another march of folly.

[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)

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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 on 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 so 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. [1] Shemot 12:2. All translations are from chabad.org [2] Rashi on Bereisheit 1:1. [3] While Rosh Hashanah is considered the Jewish New Year, the "head of months" described in Parshat Bo is the month of Nisan, during which Pesach is celebrated. Nisan is considered the first month of the Jewish calendar and Tishrei, the month of Rosh Hashanah, is the seventh. [4] Likutei Torah, Parshat Behar

[Bo: Slavery to Freedom: Staying Humble](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2024/01/12/bo-slavery-to-freedom/)

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Table for Five: Bo Edited by Slavador Litvak, the Accidental Talmudist

For seven days, leaven may not be found in your houses, for anyone who eats leavening — that soul shall be cut off from the assembly of Israel, whether a convert or a native of the land — Ex. 12:19

[Rabbi Pinchas Winston, Thirtysix.org](https://www.thirtysix.org/)

Let's say one piece of treif meat accidentally became mixed together with two identical pieces of kosher meat, and you can't tell which is which. What is the law? You might think you should throw all three pieces out since even if you eat just one, it might be the treif piece. Instead, the Torah employs a well-known law, acharei rabbim l'hatos—go after the majority, and since the majority of pieces are kosher, we treat all three as kosher. The rabbis worried that people would intentionally take advantage of this law, and mandated that all three pieces not be eaten (should such a situation occur, a person should consult a competent rabbi). But the principle is still the principle, that even a large amount of forbidden food can become permissible if nullified by the requisite amount of kosher food. The only exception is chometz on Pesach, which isn't nullified even if outnumbered by a million times its amount. And unlike other forbidden foods, chometz is kosher the rest of the year even on its own! Why the distinction? Chometz represents a person's evil inclination, their yetzer hara,

a person's own personal Pharaoh in their life. Free will means will free of the yetzer hara's influence, so for at least one week of the year we try to completely rid ourselves of it, if not actually, then at least symbolically. For this reason, even a mashahu—a little bit of chometz is forbidden even when we can't see it.

[Rabbi Abraham Lieberman, Judaic Studies, Shalhevet HS](#)

The Hebrew word for "leaven" used at the start of this verse is "se'or." Its etymology and origin is unknown and its usage is limited. It is found only 5 times in the entire Tanach and limited to being forbidden on Pesach and for its forbidden usage as part of the Korban Mincha, the Meal Offering.

Bread as we know it and the discovery of sourdough = yeast, that allowed bread to rise and get its taste and consistency, was discovered in Egypt. In the Ancient World it was the pride and prize of Egypt. Egyptian Royalty and the upper echelons of society ate bread. Unleavened bread was eaten by the rest of the population. I am convinced that the word "se'or" is of Egyptian origin and it means sourdough.

Why would the Torah forbid its usage with such a severe punishment as "being cut off from the Assembly of Israel"?

Pesach represents the physical freedom of the Jewish People from slavery. Inherent in that freedom is the choice to make meaningful decisions. Baking bread with sourdough and allowing to rise to a sophisticated level represents part of the very culture that enslaved the Jewish People. For seven days a year Torah forbids any connection to that culture as it reminds us of our simple beginning of as people, real and raw, with no outside influence, simply flour and water. Now in this state of foundational purity we can choose to be ready to march to Mount Sinai.

[Rabbi Elchanan Shoff, Beis Knesses of Los Angeles](#)

It is a most severe violation of Torah law to have chometz in one's possession on Passover. Sefer Hachinuch explains that this is to remind us of the miracle performed on our behalf in Egypt, culminating in a mad dash to freedom when even bread hadn't time to rise. We must allow this idea to sink into our hearts – for it is the center of the Torah and its teachings: God chose our people, He and He alone took us from slavery to freedom. We must never forget who we are, and where we come from. We have a remarkable history, special ancestors, and a unique story.

Throughout Jewish history, our people have refused to give in to tyrants, have been prepared to die in order to cling to Shabbat and circumcision and all of our precious mitzvas. We learned to be on God's side, and not to prefer the side of power or popular opinion. We only continue to exist, because like our ancestor Abraham, we would rather be on God's side in a fiery furnace, than in comfort on the side of wickedness and tyranny. It is for this reason that there are still Jews despite every attempt to eradicate us! Jew: always be bursting with pride! You represent every

value of goodness and kindness. One who forgets all of this, will sadly be cut off from his people. Stay on God's side always. Be proud of your people always, and never forget: God freed you from Egypt.

[Gila Muskin Block, Executive Director, Yesh Tikva](#)

Pesach can be one of the loneliest holidays for people in struggle. The Torah itself prescribes a strong focus on children and the holiday is often celebrated intergenerationally. Yet, besides for the social sensitivity, this pasuk also highlights the importance of inclusion as core to its halachic celebration.

The pasuk has an interesting reason for the requirement to remove Chametz, leavened bread, from our homes. It says that we must do so because whoever eats chametz will be cut off from the community of Israel, whether a Ger or a citizen.

I would think that the only reason to remove chametz from my home is so that I or my family don't come to eat it. But this pasuk gives us a much broader reasoning: It's so that the Ger does not eat it either. The responsibility for their observance is somehow on me.

Who is a Ger? Chazal generally understands Ger to be either a Ger Tzedek, a convert, or a Ger Toshav, a non-Jewish individual living among Jewish people. Both of these interpretations come from the core meaning of Ger: a stranger. A stranger is someone who does not readily feel included in the community, someone who is likely vulnerable.

I would like to suggest that by including the Ger in our requirement to remove chametz, the pasuk teaches us that at the core of our observance of Pesach is the importance of caring for the vulnerable among us. Even more, it's about taking responsibility for them.

[Tova Leibovic-Douglas, Founder and Director of theritual.house](#)

Judaism is a tradition of questions and when reading this verse from Passover, I am flooded with many questions: What does it mean for a soul to be cut off? How is this determined and implemented? Is this punishment not somewhat harsh? There are textual traditions for how to engage with said questions. I would like to invite us into a relatively new pathway. The Torah is a mirror for our soul and when learning, we are tasked to ask how this ancient wisdom text is relevant to us today. We are living in a world and currently creating communities that are spiritually cutting one another out. If a person does not think exactly like us, they no longer belong to us. In a moment that is as heart-wrenching and traumatic for us all as a people, instead of growing closer, we are segmenting. In the biblical legal world there are three main ways to be spiritually cut off: eating leavened products on Passover, working on Shabbat, not circumcising a male child. Many of us, I imagine have not cut off a

Jewish individual for doing any of these transgressions. Yet, we are cutting souls off for merely seeing the world differently. How did we get here? How do we get out? For me, the answer is always to look towards the text and this verse is the call to feel the intensity of this concept, so that we can remember that it is limited and not the answer.

Yahrtzeits

Fran Nelson remembers her husband Fred Nelson on Sat. Jan. 20

Elaine Berkenwald remembers her husband Stanley Klughaup on Mon. Jan. 22

Larry Ozarow remembers his father Boris Ozarow on Tues. Jan. 23

Bob Woog remembers his mother Nina Frankel Woog on Thurs. Jan. 25.

Shabbat Shalom