

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bo
February 1, 2025 *** 3 Sh'vat 5785

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.

Bo 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."

[The Necessity of Asking Questions: Bo by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l \(5772\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-necessity-of-asking-questions/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-necessity-of-asking-questions/>

It is no accident that Parshat Bo, the section that deals with the culminating plagues and the Exodus, should turn three times to the subject of children and the duty of parents to educate them.

As Jews we believe that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. Freedom is lost when it is taken for granted. Unless parents hand on their memories and ideals to the next generation – the story of how they won their freedom and the battles they had to fight along the way – the long journey falters and we lose our way.

What is fascinating, though, is the way the Torah emphasises the fact that children must ask questions. Two of the three passages in our Parsha speak of this:

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

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

There is another passage later in the Torah that also speaks of a question asked by a child:

In the future, when your child asks you, "What is the meaning of the

stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Deut. 6:20-21

The other passage in today's Parsha, the only one that does not mention a question, is:

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

These four passages have become famous because of their appearance in the Haggadah on Pesach. They are the four children: one wise, one wicked or rebellious, one simple and "one who does not know how to ask." Reading them together, the Sages came to the conclusion that [1] children should ask questions, [2] the Pesach narrative must be constructed in response to, and begin with, questions asked by a child, [3] it is the duty of a parent to encourage his or her children to ask questions, and the child who does not yet know how to ask should be taught to ask.

There is nothing natural about this at all. To the contrary, it goes dramatically against the grain of history. Most traditional cultures see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide or command. The task of the child is to obey. "Children should be seen, not heard," goes the old English proverb. "Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord," says a famous Christian text. Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. In Judaism, the opposite is the case. It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow.

Judaism is the rarest of phenomena: a faith based on asking questions, sometimes deep and difficult ones that seem to shake the very foundations of faith itself. "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" asked Abraham. "Why, Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people?" asked Moses. "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" asked Jeremiah. The book of Job is largely constructed out of questions, and God's answer consists of four chapters of yet deeper questions: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? ... Can you catch Leviathan with a hook? ... Will it make an agreement with you and let you take it as your slave for life?"

In yeshiva, the highest accolade is to ask a good question: Du fregst a gutte kashe. Rabbi Abraham Twersky, a deeply religious psychiatrist, tells of how when he was young, his teacher would relish challenges to his arguments. In his broken English, he would say, "You right! You 100 prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong."

Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became

a scientist. He replied, “My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to ask: ‘Izzy, did you ask a good question today?’ That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist.”

Judaism is not a religion of blind obedience. Indeed, astonishingly in a religion of 613 commandments, there is no Hebrew word that means “to obey”. When Hebrew was revived as a living language in the nineteenth century, and there was need for a verb meaning “to obey,” it had to be borrowed from the Aramaic: *le-tsayet*. Instead of a word meaning “to obey,” the Torah uses the verb *shema*, untranslatable into English because it means [1] to listen, [2] to hear, [3] to understand, [4] to internalise, and [5] to respond. Written into the very structure of Hebraic consciousness is the idea that our highest duty is to seek to understand the will of God, not just to obey blindly.

Tennyson’s verse, “Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die,” is as far from a Jewish mindset as it is possible to be. Why? Because we believe that intelligence is God’s greatest gift to humanity. Rashi understands the phrase that God made man “in His image, after His likeness,” to mean that God gave us the ability “to understand and discern.” The very first of our requests in the weekday Amidah is for “knowledge, understanding, and discernment.” One of the most breathtakingly bold of the rabbis’ institutions was to coin a blessing to be said on seeing a great non-Jewish scholar. Not only did they see wisdom in cultures other than their own, they thanked God for it. How far this is from the narrow-mindedness that has so often demeaned and diminished religions, past and present.

The historian Paul Johnson once wrote that rabbinic Judaism was “an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.” Much of that had, and still has, to do with the absolute priority Jews have always placed on education, schools, the Beit Midrash, religious study as an act even higher than prayer, learning as a life-long engagement, and teaching as the highest vocation of the religious life.

But much, too, has to do with how one studies and how we teach our children. The Torah indicates this at the most powerful and poignant juncture in Jewish history: just as the Israelites are about to leave Egypt and begin their life as a free people under the sovereignty of God. Hand on the memory of this moment to your children, says Moses. But do not do so in an authoritarian way. Encourage your children to ask, question, probe, investigate, analyse, explore. Liberty means freedom of the mind, not just of the body. Those who are confident of their faith need fear no question. It is only those who lack confidence, who have secret and suppressed doubts, who are afraid.

The one essential, though, is to know and to teach this to our children, that not

every question has an answer we can immediately understand. There are ideas we will only fully comprehend through age and experience, others that take great intellectual preparation, yet others that may be beyond our collective comprehension at this stage of the human quest. Darwin never knew what a gene was. Even the great Newton, founder of modern science, understood how little he understood, and put it beautifully: “I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

In teaching its children to ask and keep asking, Judaism honoured what Maimonides called the “active intellect” and saw it as the gift of God. No faith has honoured human intelligence more.

[The Worst Possible Plague by Rebecca Galin](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-worst-possible-plague/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-worst-possible-plague/>

Terror. Annoyance. Foreboding. Among the Egyptians, each plague feels so much worse than anticipated. A shared sense of eeriness seeps in as the world becomes apocalyptic. Yet, each time a plague ends, the depth of the horror dissipates, forgotten until the next one arrives—more all-consuming and destructive than before. Locusts, darkness, death, grief. The world is overturned by a foreign God. Egyptian safety depends on the emotional whims of their leadership, plagues ending only when God softens Pharaoh’s heart.

What plague do you see outside your window? Fire and smoke, drought, disease, or gun violence? Or perhaps you, like the Israelites, are spared while your neighbors experience devastation. Deportation, infestation, or discrimination—whether natural or human-made, these experiences evoke the same fear that the Egyptians felt. Is our darkness as dark as their darkness? Are our plagues as terrible as the ones that the Egyptians experienced?

In Exodus 11:5, Moses tells Pharaoh of the final, most horrific plague:

And every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle.

The death of the first-born son would strike all Egyptian families from the richest and most powerful to the slaves who labor alongside the Israelites. The Torah: A Women’s Commentary suggests that “the intent of this act is to affect all Egyptian households, from the highest male aristocracy to the lowest female slave. The Torah is not concerned with the guilt or innocence of any specific victim, nor with the ethical implications of blanket punishments; the focus remains resolutely on

exemplifying God's supreme power." It doesn't matter that Pharaoh is the one calling the shots, refusing to let the Israelites go. The plagues impact all Egyptians.

Furthermore, the Torah does not tell us how each plague impacted different groups of Egyptians. We don't know if the locusts were as bothersome to Pharaoh's courtiers as they were to the Egyptian slave girl behind the millstones. However, we do know the plagues were "the most severe they had ever been" and "the most severe ever will be." Regarding the locusts, Exodus 10:14 states:

[N]ever before had there been so many, nor will there ever be so many again.

If the locusts in Egypt were "the worst locusts of all time," all subsequent human experiences with locusts must be less bad, right?

Rashi and Hizkuni both wrestle with later examples of really bad locusts in Tanakh, such as those in Joel. Because Rashi and Hizkuni need Tanakh to be correct in stating that the Egyptian experience of locusts is "the worst of all time," they need to solve the inconsistency of Joel having horrific locusts. Hizkuni quotes and agrees with Rashi's take, saying:

ואחריו לא יהיה כן, "and there will never be a plague of locusts like this;" according to Rashi, the meaning is "a single type of locust." Seeing that the Bible records other plagues of locusts at least as severe (Psalms 105:34, Joel 1:4), and Rashi was surely aware of this, we must understand the words of Rashi as referring to a single species of locusts at the same time. In the days of Joel ben Patuel each type of locust came separately, one after the other.

By distinguishing between different species of locusts, Rashi and Hizkuni allow all locust plagues to be "the worst of all time."

Perhaps Rashi and Hizkuni are right to narrow the definition of the plagues. While we need to understand that what the Egyptians experienced was "the worst possible" experience of locusts and that their collective cry over the deaths of the first-born sons was "the loudest cry there could possibly be," the depths of their despair do not diminish the depths of our despair today. The Torah needs to be clear that the Egyptians experienced horrible pain so that we understand that our freedom came at a cost to others. That clarity doesn't take away from the pains we experience today. We face "different species of locusts." Our cries of mourning hit a different pitch. Just as their grief was "the worst possible" grief, so too, our grief is "the worst possible grief." We don't have to compete for who has it hardest during a plague because we all do.

Of course, those with the least power and privilege face the hardest recovery from plagues. The Egyptian slave girl likely starved when the locusts devoured the

crops, while Pharaoh remained well-fed. However, Rashi and Hizkuni's insights remind us that grief and despair do not need to be qualified to be valid. Losing a home is materially harder to recover from for a low-income family than a celebrity family, but the grief for both families is "the worst that has ever been" and "the worst there will ever be." We can acknowledge privilege without diminishing pain. By illustrating the depths of the Egyptians' despair, Parashat Bo allows us to feel the depths of our own. When we give ourselves permission to feel our pain and acknowledge its reality, we can move through it and beyond it. Living a life filled with plagues can harden our hearts. Honoring our grief—and the grief of others—can soften them again. *(Rebecca Galin is a student at the Rabbinical School of JTS)*

[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. (*Shaul Judelman teaches at Yeshivat Simchat Shlomo in Israel and is*

coordinator at Roots, a grassroots movement that aims to improve the co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians through local initiatives.) [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

[Haftarat Bo: Where Everybody Knows Your Name by Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander](https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-bo-rabbi-brander/)
<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-bo-rabbi-brander/>

“Egypt is a handsome heifer”(Jeremiah 46:20). This vivid metaphor in this week’s Haftarah from Yirmiyahu depicts the Egyptian empire’s downfall at the hands of the Babylonians. Addressing this description of Egypt as a fattened cow, the traditional commentators (Radak, Abarvanel) explain that the kingdom’s great wealth had bred complacency and arrogance in its foreign relations – a strategy doomed to fail under the attack of Nebuchadnezzar and his legions. Ultimately, Egypt’s abundance ended up being the kingdom’s ruin, as illustrated in the closing chapters of Yirmiyahu.

In truth, this narrative repeats itself throughout Tanach. Egypt is portrayed as a lush and fertile land, sustained by the waters of the Nile (Bereishiet 13:10). Yet when famine strikes, the palace repeatedly seizes the opportunity to consolidate power at the expense of the vulnerable . This is also true in the days of Avraham, when Sarah is taken captive; and it occurs once again during the famine foretold by Yosef, when the royal coffers purchase all the real estate in the country from ordinary Egyptians in exchange for bread.

As Shemot begins, we see the Egyptian empire use its power to enslave the Jewish people, compelling them to build enormous architectural projects to glorify Pharaoh. Egypt’s great wealth could have been a source of benevolence. Yet time and again, bounty leads to exploitation and violence. Never do we see the Egyptian empire demonstrate an interest in giving or sharing. Rather, it was entirely focused on self interest, constantly leading to conflict with the neighboring nations – including, as in our Haftarah, with the Babylonians.

I believe this is why – as my wife Ruchie pointed out – unlike other kingdoms and rulers in Tanach we are never given the personal names of Egyptian kings, only the title “Pharaoh”. That is not the case with other empires, where the names of the rulers are recorded. In Biblical Egypt, individual identity was unimportant; the focus was solely on reinforcing the power of the monarchy and sustaining the empire’s dominance.

Contrast this self-centered outlook with the solidarity our ancestors demonstrated during their time in Egypt. Despite their enslavement, they maintained a caring disposition, even sharing what little bread they had to eat (Shibbolei HaLeket on

the Haggadah). And in our parsha, they unite to ensure that everyone has a portion of the Korban Pesach to partake in as they prepare together to leave Egypt. When there is genuine concern for the individual, names hold meaning and serve a purpose.

This same sense of solidarity – the commitment to valuing each individual and using our resources not for personal gain, but for collective benefit – has been powerfully on display here in Israel for months, and especially during these extraordinarily challenging past few weeks.

As we witness the release of hostages, we hold our breath and pray that they will all come home. Emily, Romi, Doron, Liri, Karina, Daniella, Naama, Agam, Arbel, Gadi. Everyone knows their names. Despite the high price, their liberation has brought collective joy, as their freedom is also our shared salvation. This ethos of solidarity and sensitivity rather than selfishness forms the backbone of our shared identity, and it is the wellspring of strength that enables us to persevere. *(Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone)*

Yahrtzeits

- Richard Cohen remembers his mother Ida Cohen on Tuesday, February 4th
- Bob Axelrod remembers his mother Irene Axelrod on Wednesday, February 5th
- Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's sister Ethel Schockett on Friday, February 7th
- Alice Solomon remembers her father Leo Blitzler on Friday February, 7th