

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bo
January 24, 2026 *** 6 Shevat, 5786

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

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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)

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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

[Freedom's Defence by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l \(5767\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/freedoms-defence/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/freedoms-defence/>

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

It was the moment for which they had been waiting for more than two hundred years. The Israelites, slaves in Egypt, were about to go free. Ten plagues had struck the country. The people were the first to understand; Pharaoh was the last. God was on the side of freedom and human dignity. You cannot build a nation, however strong your police and army, by enslaving some for the benefit of others. History will turn against you, as it has against every tyranny known to humankind.

And now the time had arrived. The Israelites were on the brink of their release. Moses, their leader, gathered them together and prepared to address them. What would he speak about at this fateful juncture, the birth of a people? He could have spoken about many things. He might have talked about liberty, the breaking of their chains, and the end of slavery. He might have talked about the destination to which they were about to travel, the “land flowing with milk and honey”. Or he might have chosen a more sombre theme: the journey that lay

ahead, the dangers they would face: what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom”. Any one of these would have been the speech of a great leader sensing an historic moment in the destiny of Israel.

Moses did none of these things. Instead he spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. Three times in this week’s sedra he turns to the theme:

And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ you shall say... 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 answer... Ex. 13:14

About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators. That is what made Moses not just a great leader, but a unique one. What the Torah is teaching is that freedom is won not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, nor in the courts, national or international, but in the human imagination and will. To defend a country, you need an army. But to defend a free society, you need schools. You need families and an educational system in which ideals are passed on from one generation to the next, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. So Jews became the people whose passion was education, whose citadels were schools and whose heroes were teachers.

The result was that by the time the Second Temple was

destroyed, Jews had constructed the world's first system of universal compulsory education, paid for by public funds:

Remember for good the man Joshua ben Gamla, because were it not for him the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. At first a child was taught by a father, and as a result orphans were left uneducated. It was then resolved that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem, and a father (who lived outside the city) would bring his child there and have him taught, but the orphan was still left without tuition. Then it was resolved to appoint teachers in each district, and boys of the age of sixteen and seventeen were placed under them; but whenever the teacher was angry with a pupil, he would rebel and leave. Finally, Joshua ben Gamla came and instituted that teachers be appointed in every province and every city, and children from the age of six or seven were placed under their charge.
Baba Batra 21a

By contrast, England did not institute universal compulsory education until 1870. The seriousness the Sages attached to education can be measured by the following two passages:

If a city has made no provision for the education of the young, its inhabitants are placed under a ban, until teachers have been engaged. If they persistently neglect this duty, the city is excommunicated, for the world only survives by the merit of the breath of schoolchildren. Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 2:1

Rabbi Judah the Prince sent Rabbi Chiya and R. Issi and R. Ami on a mission through the towns of Israel to establish teachers in every place. They came to a town

where there were no teachers. They said to the inhabitants, “Bring us the defenders of the town.” They brought them the military guard. The rabbis said, “These are not the protectors of the town but its destroyers.” “Who then are the protectors?” asked the inhabitants. They answered, “The teachers.”
Yerushalmi Haggigah 1:6

No other faith has attached a higher value to study. None has given it a higher position in the scale of communal priorities. From the very outset, Israel knew that freedom cannot be created by legislation, nor can it be sustained by political structures alone. As the American justice Judge Learned Hand put it: “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it.” That is the truth epitomised in a remarkable exegesis given by the Sages. They based it on the following verse about the Tablets that Moses received at Sinai:

The Tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the Tablets. Ex. 32:16

They reinterpreted it as follows:

Read not charut, engraved, but cherut, freedom, for there is none so free as one who occupies himself with the study of Torah. Mishnah Avot 6:2

What they meant was that if the law is engraved on the hearts of the people, it does not need to be enforced by police. True freedom – cherut – is the ability to control oneself without having to be controlled by others. Without voluntarily accepting a code of moral and ethical restraints, liberty becomes license and society itself a battleground of warring instincts and desires.

This idea, fateful in its implications, was first articulated by Moses in this week's sedra, in his words to the assembled Israelites. He was telling them that freedom is more than a moment of political triumph. It is a constant endeavour, throughout the ages, to teach those who come after us the battles our ancestors fought, and why; so that my freedom is never sacrificed to yours, or purchased at the cost of someone else's. That is why, to this day, on Passover we eat matza, the unleavened bread of affliction, and taste maror, the bitter herbs of slavery, to remember the sharp taste of affliction and never be tempted to afflict others.

The oldest and most tragic phenomenon in history is that empires, which once bestrode the narrow world like a colossus, eventually decline and disappear. Freedom becomes individualism ("each doing what was right in his own eyes", Judges 21:25), individualism becomes chaos, chaos becomes the search for order, and the search for order becomes a new tyranny imposing its will with the use of force. What, thanks to Torah, Jews never forgot is that freedom is a never-ending effort of education in which parents, teachers, homes, and schools are all partners in the dialogue between the generations.

Learning - Talmud Torah - is the very foundation of Judaism, the guardian of our heritage and hope. That is why, when tradition conferred on Moses the greatest honour, it did not call him 'our hero', 'our prophet' or 'our king'. It called him, simply, [Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher](#). For it is in the arena of education that the battle for the good society is lost or won.

[Where We Stand is What We Learn: Bo by Luciana Pajacki Lederman](#)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/where-we-stand-is-what-we-learn/>

As a Talmud teacher, I am constantly aware of the dynamic web of relationships in which learning takes place—between me, the students, and the text we explore together—each quietly and continually shaping the relationship between the others. But as Director of the Beit Midrash, I am especially attuned to the role of the surrounding environment: how the space itself can either nurture or inhibit those relationships.

In this second role, I am often in conversation with faculty about the pedagogical value of bringing their students into the Beit Midrash—a space designed for learning out loud and in partnership, where students' thinking becomes visible and professors gain opportunities to offer more targeted and nuanced feedback. I am also in constant dialogue with students about how to upgrade the physical space to better support their learning: Can we bring in more light? Provide different kinds of seating for different bodies? Create quieter corners for those with auditory sensitivity? What kinds of textual aids should we be adding to the shelves?

Such attention to relationships and environment draws on David Hawkins's pedagogical framework, often referred to as the relational triangle. Originally developed to help educators evaluate and improve learning experiences, this framework has since been extended beyond education to other professional areas as well—wherever two people (or roles) stand in relationship to a shared object of work, inquiry, or concern, such as community organizing, counseling, and supervision. Even in our daily roles as family and community members, the framework offers a shared language for attending not only to the individuals involved and the task at

hand, but also to the context—and to how that context either facilitates or impedes the unfolding of relationships and shared purpose.

The relational triangle can also help us reflect on the surrounding environment in which God chose to deliver to Moses and Aaron the first mitzvah, inviting us to consider how context shapes even moments of divine instruction.

In Parashat Bo, the Torah introduces what Rabbi Yitzchak (Yalkut Shimoni, 187) considers to be **מִצְוָה ראשונה שֶׁנִּצְטוּ בָּהּ** /the first mitzvah given specifically to the Israelites, the commandment to sanctify the new month (Rosh Hodesh):

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים וְרֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים הַשָּׁנָה:

This month shall mark you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (Exodus 12:1)

Why begin with Rosh Hodesh?

One possible answer is that through the commandment of sanctifying the new month, God was empowering the Israelites to partner in determining the calendar that would set their new shared occasions and shape their common history. In this way, Rosh Hodesh marked the beginning of the Israelites' transition from slavery, where others controlled their time, to freedom, in which they became masters of their own time.

Yet before the Torah tells us what this first mitzvah is, it is careful to tell us where it is given—and it is this emphasis on place that troubles the commentators. Exodus 12:1, the preamble to the introduction of the mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh, says:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:

“God said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:1).

Given that the Torah had just stated that God “had stiffened the heart of Pharaoh so that he would not let the Israelites go from his land” (Exod. 11:10), it seems obvious that they were still in Egypt. Why, then, does this verse emphasize this context again in relation to the first mitzvah?

The Mekhilta interprets this apparent redundancy as meant to convey that God gave the first mitzvah specifically in the אֶרֶץ/land of Egypt, as opposed to the כְּרֶךְ/city. Just as Moses went outside the city to pray for the cessation of thunder and hail (Exod. 9:29), so, too, God would not speak about mitzvot within the city, a place filled with idolatry.

According to this midrash, the handing over of time, granting the Israelites ownership of their own calendar, would be less distracting and more effective in an isolated space, away from the modus operandi of the surrounding culture that had been so deeply ingrained in them.

In his early collection of sermons, *Derekh Hamelekh*, the Piaseczno Rebbe (Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, Poland, 1889–1943) rejects the Mekhilta’s interpretation. According to the Rebbe, by emphasizing that the mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh was given בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם—in the land of Egypt—the Torah wanted to teach that being within the city, and not outside it, was essential in order to show that changes can start anywhere, גַּם לְמָקוֹם שֶׁאַתֶּם נִמְצְאִים/even where they are currently located. God knew that this was only the beginning of the challenge. For many years to come, the Israelites would need to learn how to organize their time in a new way, different

from the patterns of life they were conditioned to and from those that would continue to surround them. So, according to the Piaseczno Rebbe, rather than introducing Rosh Hodesh in ideal conditions, away from everything and everyone, God wanted to show that it was possible to begin imagining this new way of life and working toward it even while they were still embedded in the old Egyptian patterns.

Later, while living in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Piaseczno Rebbe revisited the expression **בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם** and offered a slightly different interpretation. As he himself was trying to find new meanings in the Torah to offer consolation and hope to the Jews locked with him inside the ghetto, the Piaseczno Rebbe understood that God was especially concerned about Moses' ability to transmit and guide the people into the implementation of this mitzvah, **כִּיּוֹן שְׁלִצְרָהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁבְּמִצְרַיִם לְבַד** **כִּיּוֹן שְׁלִצְרָהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁבְּמִצְרַיִם לְבַד** /since this commandment was spoken solely for the sake of the Israelites who were in Egypt. So, God wanted to make sure that Moses himself heard it, **בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם**. If Moses were to understand the wisdom of Rosh Hodesh and be an effective leader, he needed to receive it from God while very much connected and attuned to the plight and suffering of the people he was guiding.

Whether through a safer and more secluded space—where the Israelites could focus and feel comfortable experimenting with new ways of living, as suggested by the Mekhilta—or through immersion in challenging circumstances—where the Israelites could begin to imagine incremental change and Moses could remain attuned to the lived realities of the people he was meant to lead, as suggested by the Piaseczno Rebbe—these interpretations of **בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם** in Exodus 12:1 converge on a shared insight: Even God—the teacher par excellence—understood that excellent students (Moses and

Aaron) and an excellent lesson (the mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh) were not sufficient, on their own, to guarantee effective transmission. Careful attention to the surrounding environment in which that transmission would take place was essential to its success and for God's words to take root and endure.

(Luciana Pajecki Lederman is Director of the Beit Midrash and Nishma Summer Program at JTS.)

[Bo: What Brings Light? By Rabbi Rafi Ellenson](https://truah.org/resources/rafi-ellenson-bo-moraltorah_2026/)

[https://truah.org/resources/rafi-ellenson-bo-moraltorah_2026_ /](https://truah.org/resources/rafi-ellenson-bo-moraltorah_2026/)

This week, in Parshat Bo, the plague of darkness has enveloped all of Egypt. A darkness that, as the commentator Sforno writes, was not “merely the absence of light [that] could be dispelled by kindling a fire...this was ‘an opaque darkness’... nothing could penetrate it.” It was a darkness that could be grasped, felt in the hand. The descriptions are vivid. We are told that people could not see one another, not even the person sitting right next to them. It was a darkness more intense than any night sky.

This was true for the Egyptians, at least. Their short-sightedness towards their slaves manifested itself in a blindness of sorts. Darkness, in Bo, was not merely the absence of light, but the collapse of moral vision — the inability to see the person beside you.

The Israelites, by contrast, were granted some respite in this moment. “But all of the Israelites had light in their dwelling places.” These slaves, who had suffered so much, were able to preserve connection within their homes. Connection is also light. The Torah invites us to imagine the Israelites in their

dwelling places, together, tending to their hearths, caring for each other. Rabbi Abraham Twerski writes, “The essence of Torah is consideration of others... If one lights a candle for oneself, the room becomes brighter for everyone else as well. Likewise, if one brings light to another, one sees oneself more clearly as a result through that light.”

This kind of darkness — and this kind of light — is not just ancient history. It is a part of our historical and contemporary realities as Americans today. As I reflected on Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Day this past weekend, I was struck by Rabbi Twerski’s resonance with a famous quote by the Rev. Dr. King, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Judaism is a wise tradition that prizes community over isolation, connection over disengagement, care and love over neglect. To be a Jew is to be someone who brings light to others — and who sees light in and through others. A Chasidic master, the Or HaMe’ir, teaches that when the Torah tells us that “people could not see one another,” it means “that they did not consider them... They did not take to heart how much they could learn from the goodness of the people around them.”

Like many of us, my eyes have been glued to my phone and to my television, watching the horrific scenes of ICE taking over Minneapolis, in a moment already marked by violence and fear after the killing of Renee Nicole Good. And I’m trying to find the light.

So, over and over, I am struck by the creative resilience of Minnesotans overwhelmingly responding to this violence with

nonviolence, remarkable kindness, and goodness to their neighbors — undocumented and otherwise. Bringing groceries to those who fear leaving their homes. Creating impromptu groups of activists who document and alert their neighbors when agents threaten to break up their communities.

I ask myself: who is in darkness at this moment? Who is experiencing light? And, is love truly enough to drown out hate?

Bo doesn't allow us the comfort of saying that darkness is uniform. Though the darkness immobilized the Egyptians in their hate, and the Israelites experienced the light of community, the Egyptians remained in control, and the Israelites were still enslaved. It is not that the light the Israelites felt erased their danger, but it did make movement possible.

It would be too neat — and too false — to say that everyday Minneapolis citizens are only experiencing light. Fear, even with the light of community support, is all too real. Immigrant-owned businesses in Minneapolis have closed themselves this week for fear of deportation amidst a lack of due process. This is also darkness.

But darkness does not get the final word. I am inspired by the work that everyday people — like you and me — can do, and are doing, to enact a better world. Light is not optimism here, but rather, responsibility. The choice to serve people's immediate needs, and to stand watch for our neighbors. Many are still in abject darkness, even with the power of community all around them. But still — this is what light looks like.

We need our goodness, our community, and our light for the long haul. Torah demands us — not only in Minnesota, but throughout the United States — to continue to see the light in

others and to refuse to let our allyship be immobilized by fear. It demands that we keep rising from our places and choosing connection over withdrawal, even when the cost is real.

We are not made to be alone in our individual flames during these times. We are made to be together as a bright and united light, strong enough to make movement possible.

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Yahrtzeits

Richard Cohen remembers his mother Ida Cohen on Saturday January 24th

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her grandmother Rose Rosenfeld on Tuesday January 27th

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's sister Ethel Schockett on Tuesday January 27th

Alice Solomon remembers her father Leo Blitzer on Tuesday January 27th

Fran Nelson remembers her husband Fred Nelson Thursday January 29th

Elaine Berkenwald remembers her husband Stanley Klughaupt on Friday January 30th

