

United We Stand

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Parshas Bo

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The Parsha's Path

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"We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds ..." (10:9).

This week's Parsha recounts the last three plagues - locusts, darkness, and the Plague of the Firstborn. Before the plague of locusts, Moshe warns Pharaoh of the utter destruction that would ensue, and Pharaoh's servants beg him to negotiate. Pharaoh relents and asks "who will be going?" Moshe replies that everyone - the young and old, sons and daughters, flocks and herds - would be going with them, for it is a Festival of G-d. Pharaoh scoffs at the notion, sarcastically replying that G-d would indeed be with them the day he would let that happen. After the plague is underway, Pharaoh agrees to let everyone go - "even your children may go with you" (10:24) - except for their animals, terms which Moshe refuses. Only after the plague of the Firstborn does Pharaoh fully break down.

The Kli Yakar points out that Moshe's phraseology indicated his subservience to the rest of the people (and even the animals dedicated for korbanos), while Pharaoh puts Moshe as primary and the children as secondary. While the Kli Yakar notes that this is proper, as Moshe was displaying his humility while Pharaoh was showing Moshe proper respect, perhaps it also reflects a wider difference in perspective.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz zt"l points out that all of Pharaoh's negotiations reveal a complete lack of appreciation of what he was dealing with. Pharaoh could not bring himself to acknowledge G-d and the inevitable moral implications of such an acknowledgement, and so through it all he saw his dealings with Moshe purely through the prism of a business arrangement. If he would have stopped to appreciate the message G-d was sending him, of course Pharaoh would have felt compelled to meet all of Moshe's demands.

Perhaps, along a similar vein, Pharaoh could not bring himself to appreciate the unique collective identity of the Jewish people, which is defined by their commitment to G-d. As representatives of G-d and His Torah, the implications of recognizing this special status would be equivalent to recognizing G-d Himself. Thus,

while Moshe could speak of the Jewish people in a way in which he was subsumed among them, Pharaoh could only address Moshe as an individual who was in charge of a tribe of people.

This idea is really at the core of the Exodus narrative, and antisemitism in general. The beginning of the Jews' slavery started when the former Pharaoh denied the good they had done for Egypt and reframed them as a pernicious threat. This started just as the Jews became bigger and a more dominant presence in Egyptian life. Egypt, which was completely attached to physical pleasures with zero connection to the spiritual, saw the Jews' elevating lifestyle as a threat. The Ten Plagues sought to show the Egyptians (and the Jews) that there is no evading the deep and fundamental connection between the physical and spiritual; G-d rules every aspect of the physical world and none of it can be taken for granted without recognizing its source and acting accordingly.

Egypt resisted until every last bit of physical pleasure was ripped away from them - including life itself, as manifested in the Plague of the Firstborn. The Exodus story behooves us to reflect on how we might be resisting our uncompromising responsibility to acknowledge and use G-d's gifts to the fullest, and continue to improve our commitment as G-d's servants and G-d's representatives.

Deeper Meanings

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Consecrate to me every firstborn, man and beast (13:2).

This week's plague (the plague of the firstborn) causes Pharaoh to break down and let our people go. As our ancestors prepare to depart from Egypt, G-d commands Moshe regarding several laws dealing with the sanctity of the firstborn. A Jewish firstborn son (born naturally to two non-Kohanim/Levites) is sanctified to G-d and must be redeemed from a Kohen when he is 30 days old (in a process called *pidyon haben*). Likewise, a firstborn animal must be offered as a sacrifice to G-d, and a firstborn donkey must be redeemed.

In (13:15), Moshe makes clear that the reason for these laws is that G-d slew the Egyptian firstborns. The *Ibn Ezra* explains that while G-d killed the Egyptian firstborn,

He saved the Jewish firstborn. The *Sforno* takes this idea further, explaining that the Jewish firstborn deserved to be killed just like the Egyptians, but G-d saved them anyway.

What connection is there between salvation and sanctity? Why should being saved, a passive experience, make the firstborn special?

Perhaps we can suggest that the salvation of the firstborn parallels the salvation of the Jewish people as a whole. There too, some commentators have claimed the Jews were unworthy of being saved, being virtually indistinguishable from their Egyptian counterparts. Nevertheless, the process of salvation formed the Jewish people into a nation. As soon as we are given freedom, G-d begins giving us commandments.

What was so formative about the exodus to the Jewish identity? On a basic level, as we recount every Pesach, we become intimately aware of the Hand of G-d - and indebted to Him. We also recognized that it is not by man's strength that he succeeds, but by G-d's, which is a defining principle in how we relate to ourselves, to others, and the world at large. But on the other hand, why did we have to be subsumed in Egyptian culture for 210 years for such a message to be conveyed? Why could there not have simply been one quick war against the Egyptians, when G-d rained His ten plagues upon them and split the sea?

Perhaps the answer is that we had to be intimately familiar with the Egyptian culture in order to appreciate what it means to be a Jew. Often the best way to discover who we are is to discover who we are not. Converts often have a much more profound appreciation of Judaism, having a sharp picture of the difference between a Jewish life and a non-Jewish one. When they saw first-hand the terrible fate that befell the Egyptians, having prior understanding of everything the Egyptians represented, and contrasting that sight with their own salvation, it created a profound sense of separation from the Egyptian ideals and a desire to embody the sanctified lifestyle that G-d separated us for.

This was similar to the experience of the firstborn. They knew they were hardly different from their Egyptian counterparts who were deservedly destroyed. This created a powerful compulsion to be as different from the Egyptians as possible. The firstborn thus reached such a heightened level of spirituality that they merited eternal consecration, and for us to appreciate that, we became obligated to consecrate the firstborn of both man and beast.

The importance of contrasting ourselves with who we are not applies equally to all of our character traits, and it is a crucial tool that can help us use bad people and bad experiences as inspiration for self-

perfection. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Herman zt"l, the *tzadik* of New York who was known in particular for his generous hospitality, emigrated to America as a 14-year-old boy and stayed with relatives. His parents were with him for a short time to make the arrangements before heading back to Europe, during which time he got a job making \$1.25 a week and arranged with his relatives to pay them \$1 a week for room and board. Shortly after his parents left, however, his relatives changed their price to \$1.25. It was a Friday, and young Yaakov Yosef ran out of the house and cried himself through Shabbos on a bench in Central Park. Afterwards, he picked himself up and resolved that when he would have the means, he would welcome everyone into his home with open arms, and indeed he did. (*All for the Boss, cited by Rabbi Yisroel Miller*). A bad experience or a bad role model can serve as the most powerful opportunity for self-definition, helping us to realize who we're not and to separate as far as possible from such traits. Let us strive to recreate the salvation of the Exodus in our own lives, and use every experience to grow.

Goal of the week

Choose one area of physical pleasure in your life and make a concrete step to acknowledging G-d's role in it more.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Tzilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers.

Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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