

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Bo

Exodus 10:1-13:16

Torah Reading for Week of January 5-11, 2003

"Come in to Pharaoh," says G-d to Moses in the opening verse of *Bo* ("come"), "for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs before him."

Seven plagues have failed to convince Pharaoh to accede to Moses' demand in G-d's name to "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Time and again, while in the throes of a devastating plague, Pharaoh has promised to let the Hebrews go, only to renege the moment the affliction has been removed.

The eighth plague with which Moses threatens the Egyptians is the plague of locusts. "They will cover the face of the earth," warns Moses "and they will eat the residue of that which remains to you from the hail."

You say that you want to go serve your G-d? says Pharaoh. I'll let the men go, as long as the women and children stay behind. No, says Moses,

We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters; with our flocks and with our herds will we go.

Pharaoh warns Moses that his efforts will only bring tragedy upon his people, and orders him from the palace. All that night, a strong east wind blows; in the morning,

The locusts went up over all the land of Egypt... And they covered the surface of the whole earth,

Commentary

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "COME IN TO PHARAOH" (10:1)

Rabbi Simeon [bar Yochai] continued: It is now fitting to reveal mysteries connected with that which is above and that which is below. Why is it written, "Come in to Pharaoh"? Ought it not rather to have said, "Go to Pharaoh"? It is to indicate that G-d brought Moses into a chamber within a chamber, into the abode of the supernal mighty serpent that is the soul of Egypt, from whom many lesser serpents emanate. Moses was afraid to approach him, because his roots are in supernal regions, and he only approached his subsidiary streams. When G-d saw that Moses feared the serpent, He said, "Come in to Pharaoh"

(Zohar)

FOR I HAVE HARDENED HIS HEART AND THE HEART OF HIS SERVANTS (10:1)

When Pharaoh would soften, his servants and ministers would harden themselves; when they would soften, Pharaoh would harden; when both would soften, G-d would harden their hearts.

(Midrash HaGadol)

Moses was distressed to see the forces of evil capable of such resolution and determination. So G-d said to him: they, on their own, do not possess such power. It is only because I have hardened their hearts.

(The Chassidic Masters)

WE WILL GO WITH OUR YOUNG AND WITH OUR OLD, WITH OUR SONS AND WITH OUR DAUGHTERS (10:9)

Pharaoh was willing to let the menfolk go, as long as the children remain behind; for as long as the younger generation remains "in Egypt," there would be no future for the people of Israel.

The "Pharaoh's" of our day have the same attitude. If the older folk wish to cling to Jewish tradition, that is perfectly acceptable; but the youth should be raised in "the spirit of the times" .

(Maayanah Shel Torah)

AND [PHARAOH] SAID TO THEM: "...SEE, THERE IS EVIL BEFORE YOU" (10:10)

Pharaoh said to them; "By my astrological art I see the star 'evil' rising towards you in the wilderness; it is a sign of blood and slaughter."

Consequently, when Israel sinned by worshiping the Golden Calf and G-d said to slay them, Moses said in his prayer (Exodus 32:12), "Why should the Egyptians speak and say: He brought them forth in evil." The Egyptians will say: Indeed, we have already said, "See, there is evil before you." Hence, "G-d bethought Himself concerning the evil" (ibid., v. 14).

G-d then changed the blood of which this star was an emblem to the blood of the circumcision. Thus, when Joshua circumcised the people of Israel in the desert (before they entered the Holy Land), he said (Joshua 5:9): "This day have I removed from you the reproach of the Egyptians" — that which the Egyptian said to you, "We see blood impending over you in the wilderness."

(Rashi)

AND G-D TURNED A VERY STRONG WEST WIND, WHICH TOOK AWAY THE LOCUSTS, AND CAST THEM INTO THE SEA OF REEDS; THERE REMAINED NOT ONE LOCUST IN ALL THE BORDERS OF EGYPT (10:19)

When the locusts first came, the Egyptians rejoiced and said: "Let us gather them and fill barrels with them." Then did G-d say: 'Wretches! Will you rejoice with the plagues I have brought upon you?' Immediately, "G-d turned a very strong west wind... there remained not one locust in all the borders of Egypt" — even those that had been pickled in their pots and barrels took wing and fled..

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so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every plant of the land... and there remained no green thing through all the land of Egypt...

Once again, Pharaoh begs Moses to pray to G-d that the plague be removed; once again, he promises to let them go; and once again, no sooner did the plague end than "G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the children of Israel go."

Darkness

For the ninth plague to strike Egypt,

G-d said to Moses: "Stretch out your hand towards heaven, that there shall be darkness over the land of Egypt — palpable darkness."

And Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. A man saw not his fellow, neither rose any from his place for three days.

But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

By now, Pharaoh has agreed to let even the young children go; "only let your flocks and your herds stay behind." Moses refuses: "There shall not a hoof be left behind; for of them must we take to serve G-d."

"Go out from my presence," says Pharaoh to Moses. "Take heed to see my face no more; for in the day you see my face again, you shall die."

Says Moses: "You have spoken well; I will see your face again no more."

G-d speaks to Moses: "One more plague I will bring upon Egypt, after which he will let you go from here" — a plague in which all the firstborn of Egypt shall die. Moses relays G-d's words to Pharaoh..

G-d also tells Moses to instruct the children of Israel

Commentary

(Chidushei HaRim)

(Midrash Rabbah)

STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND TOWARDS HEAVEN, THAT THERE SHALL BE DARKNESS OVER THE LAND OF EGYPT (10:21)

Why did G-d... bring darkness upon the Egyptians? Because there were transgressors in Israel who had Egyptian patrons and lived in affluence and honor, and were unwilling to leave. So G-d said: "If I bring upon them publicly a plague from which they will die, the Egyptians will say: 'Just as it has passed over us, so has it passed over them.'" Therefore He brought darkness upon the Egyptians for three days, so that the [Israelites] should bury their dead without their enemies seeing them.

(Midrash Rabbah)

A MAN SAW NOT HIS FELLOW, NEITHER ROSE ANY FROM HIS PLACE FOR THREE DAYS (10:23)

There were seven days of darkness... during the first three, "a man saw not his fellow"; during the last three days, he who sat could not stand up, he who stood could not sit down, and he who was lying down could not raise himself upright.

(Midrash Rabbah)

There is no greater darkness than one in which "a man saw not his fellow" — in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of his fellow man. When that happens, a person becomes stymied in his personal development as well — "neither rose any from his place."

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "YET WILL I BRING ONE PLAGUE MORE UPON PHARAOH..." (11:1)

Ordinarily, G-d spoke with Moses only outside of the city, which was full of idols and impurities. On this occasion, however, He spoke to him in the throne-room of Pharaoh's palace. For Moses had said to Pharaoh, "You have spoken well; I will see your face again no more"; yet in the following verses, he conveys this new message from G-d to Pharaoh! This means that G-d appeared to Moses in the very epicenter of the idolatry and depravity of Egypt.

(Nachmanides)

AND G-D SPOKE TO MOSES... "PLEASE, SPEAK INTO THE EARS OF THE PEOPLE, THAT EVERY MAN ASK OF HIS NEIGHBOR, AND EVERY WOMAN OF HER NEIGHBOR, ARTICLES OF SILVER, AND ARTICLES OF GOLD..." (11:2)

To what is this comparable? To a man who is locked up in prison and is told: "Tomorrow you shall be freed from prison and given a lot of money." Says he: "I beg you, free me today, and I ask for nothing more..."

[But G-d had said to Abraham at the "Covenant Between the Pieces": "Know thee that your children shall be strangers in a foreign land, [where] they will be enslaved and afflicted ... and afterwards they will go out with great wealth" (Genesis 15:23).]

So G-d had to plead with them: "Please! Ask the Egyptians for gold and silver, so that the Righteous One should not say: 'They will be enslaved and afflicted' He fulfilled, but He did not fulfill 'and afterwards they will go out with great wealth.'"

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that "every man ask of his neighbor, and every woman of her neighbor, articles of silver, and articles of gold" before they depart from Egypt.

Mitzvot

G-d then conveys to Moses and Aaron a series of mitzvot (divine commandments) in preparation for their Exodus from Egypt

The first mitzvah is to set the Jewish calendar in accordance with the monthly birth of the new moon, and

regard the month of the Exodus as "the head of the months."

The second mitzvah is to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d while still in the land of Egypt:

On the tenth day of this month, they shall take to them every man a lamb... a lamb for each household...

You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month; and the entire community of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it towards evening.

The First Seder

They shall take the blood, and put it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses in which they shall eat it. And they shall eat the meat in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened

Commentary

(Talmud, Berachot 9b)

Why was it so important that the Children of Israel should carry out the wealth of Egypt, to the extent that this was foretold hundreds of years earlier to Abraham as an indispensable component of their redemption?

Every creation contains a "spark of holiness" which embodies its divine purpose. When a person utilizes an object, force and phenomenon to serve the Creator, thereby realizing its function within G-d's overall purpose for creation, he "redeems" and "elevates" the divine spark at its core.

Every soul has its own "sparks" scattered about in the world, which actually form an integral part of itself: no soul is complete until it has redeemed those sparks which belong to its mission in life. Therein lies the purpose of *galut* in all its forms: the exile of the soul from its sublime origins to the physical world, and the various exiles that nations and individuals experience in the course of their history, impelled from place to place and from occupation to occupation by seemingly random forces. All is by Divine Providence, which guides every man to those possessions and opportunities whose "spark" is intimately connected with his.

As the father and prototype of all exiles, the Egyptian *galut* was a highly concentrated period of history, in which the foundations were laid for all that was to unfold in subsequent centuries. The material world contains 288 general "sparks" (each of which includes innumerable offshoots and particles); of these, 202 were taken out of Egypt, redeemed and elevated when the Jewish people carried off its gold and silver and used it to construct a Sanctuary for G-d in the desert (see Exodus 25).

(The Chassidic Masters)

THIS CHODESH (NEW MOON, MONTH) SHALL BE TO YOU THE HEAD OF MONTHS; IT SHALL BE FOR YOU THE FIRST OF THE MONTHS OF THE YEAR (12:2)

G-d showed Moses the new moon at its moment of rebirth, and said to him:

"When the moon is reborn, mark the beginning of a new month."

(Mechilta)

There was a large courtyard in Jerusalem called Beth Ya'azek, where all the witnesses (who had seen the appearance of the new moon) used to assemble, and the *bet-din* (rabbinical court) used to examine them. They used to entertain them lavishly there, so that they should have an inducement to come.

The pair of witnesses who arrived first were cross-examined first. The senior of them was brought in and they said to him: "Tell us how you saw the moon — in front of the sun or behind the sun? to the north of it or the south? how big was it, and in which direction was it inclined? and how broad was it? ... Rabban Gamaliel used to have diagrams of the phases of the moon on a tablet on the wall of his upper chamber, and he used to show them to the unlearned and ask, "Did it look like this or this?"

After that they would bring in the second witness and question him. If their accounts tallied, their evidence was accepted. The other pairs were questioned briefly — not because they were required at all, but so that they should not be disappointed and discouraged from coming (the next time)..

The head of the *bet-din* would then proclaim: "Sanctified!", and all the people would repeat after him, "Sanctified! Sanctified!"

(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah ch. 2)

What blessing was to be recited by one who beholds the new moon, in the period when Israel used to sanctify the new month? Some of the Sages hold: "Blessed be He who renews the months." Others say: "Blessed be He who consecrates the months." And others say: "Blessed be He who hallows Israel," since unless Israel sanctify it, it is not sanctified at all.

(Midrash Rabbah)

The people of Israel set their calendar by the moon, because they are the

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*bread: and with bitter herbs they shall eat it...**Thus shall you eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your band; you shall eat it in haste, it is G-d's passover.**For will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast: and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am G-d.**And the blood shall be to you for a sign upon the**houses where you are: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.*

The event shall be established a festival for all generations, "for on this very day I have brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt... Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses... in all your habitations shall you eat matzot (unleavened bread)."

The Exodus*And it came to pass at midnight, that G-d smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt: from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle.**And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all Egypt; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there***Commentary**

moon of the world.

(Zohar)

The moon begins to shine on the first of the month and increases in lumiance till the fifteenth day, when her orb becomes full; from the fifteenth till the thirtieth day, her light wanes, till on the thirtieth it is not seen at all. With Israel too, there were fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon. Abraham began to shine... Jacob added to this light... and after them came Judah, Perez, Chetzron, Ram, Aminadav, Nachshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David. When Solomon appeared, the moon's orb was full... Henceforth the kings began to diminish in power... With Zedekiah [in whose time the Holy Temple was destroyed] the light of the moon dimmed entirely.

(Midrash Rabbah)

It is written (Genesis 1:16), "And G-d made the two great luminaries"; but then it says, "The great luminary... and the small luminary"?

[Indeed, at first they were both great; but then] the moon said to G-d: "Master of the Universe! Can two kings wear the same crown?"

Said G-d to her: "Go diminish yourself."

Said she to Him: "Master of the Universe! Because I have said a proper thing, I must diminish myself?"

Said He to her: "You may rule both during the day and at night."

Said she to Him: "What advantage is there in that? What does a lamp accomplish at high noon?"

Said He to her: "The people of Israel shall calculate their dates and years by you."

Said she to Him: "But the sun, too, shall have a part in that, for they shall

calculate the seasons by him."

Said G-d: "The righteous shall be called by your name—'Jacob the Small,' 'Samuel the Small,' 'David the Small.'"

Still G-d saw that the moon was not appeased. So G-d said: "Offer an atonement for My sake, for My having diminished the moon." This is the significance of what Reish Lakish said: "Why does the he-goat offered on Rosh Chodesh (the first of the month) differ from the others in that it is specified as 'for G-d'? G-d is saying: "This he-goat shall atone for My diminishing of the moon."

The months of the year are lunar months, as it is written: "... This *chodesh* shall be to you the head of months." So said our sages: G-d showed Moses the figure of the [new] moon in a prophetic vision, and said to him: "Thus you should see and sanctify."

However, the years which we figure are solar years, as it is written: "Keep the month of spring" (i.e., ensure that the month of Passover is always in the spring season).

The solar year is eleven days longer than a year of [twelve] lunar months. Therefore, when this surplus accumulates to the amount of 30 days — either a little more or a little less — one adds an extra month so that the year has 13 months; this is what is called a *shanah meuberet* ("pregnant year"). Because one cannot make the year to consist of so many months plus so many days, since the verse says, "[It shall be for you the first of] the months of the year" — implying that the year should consist of months, and months only..

The moon is concealed each month, and remains invisible for approximately two days — for about one day before it is closest to the sun and about one day after it is closest to the sun, after which it can be seen in the west in the evening. The night on which it is visible in the west marks the beginning of the month, and one counts from that day 29 days. If the moon is visible on the eve of the 30th, then the 30th day is *Rosh Chodesh* ("head of the month"); if not, then the 31st day is *Rosh Chodesh*, and the 30th day

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was not one dead.

And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said: "Rise up, and get you out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel; and go, serve G-d, as you have said. Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also."

And Egypt was urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they

said: We are all dead men.

So hastily were the Children of Israel driven out by the Egyptians that "the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders."

Nor did they forget to take the wealth of Egypt with them, as G-d had requested. "They requested of the Egyptians articles of silver, and articles of gold, and garments. G-d gave the people favor in the sight of Egypt, so that they gave them such things as they required; and they despoiled Egypt."

And the children of Israel journeyed from Raameses to Sukkoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.

A mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, very much cattle.

Commentary

belongs to the previous month.

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Sanctification of the Month)

Time is the first creation (see Sforno on Genesis 1:1); thus, the sanctification of time is the first mitzvah commanded to Israel.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

ON THE TENTH DAY OF THIS MONTH, THEY SHALL TAKE TO THEM EVERY MAN A LAMB... YOU SHALL KEEP IT UNTIL THE 14TH DAY OF THE SAME MONTH; AND THE WHOLE ASSEMBLY OF THE CONGREGATION OF ISRAEL SHALL SLAUGHTER IT TOWARDS EVENING (12:3-6)

When G-d told Moses to slay the paschal lamb, Moses said: "Master of the Universe! How can I possibly do this thing? Don't You know the lamb is the Egyptian god? 'Lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?'"

Said G-d: "By your life, Israel will not depart from here before they slaughter the Egyptian gods before their very eyes, that I may teach them that their gods are really nothing at all." This is what He actually did; for on that night He slew the Egyptian firstborn, and on that night the Israelites slaughtered their paschal lamb and ate it.

(Midrash Rabbah)

That year, the 10th of Nissan was a Shabbat; this is why the Shabbat before Passover is called *Shabbat HaGadol* ("The Great Shabbat") — because a great miracle happened on that day. For when the Children of Israel took their paschal lambs on that Shabbat, the Egyptian firstborn converged on them and asked them: "Why are you doing this?" They replied: "It is a passover sacrifice to G-d, for He will kill the firstborn of Egypt." The firstborn approached their fathers and Pharaoh to request that Israel be allowed

to go, but they refused; so the firstborn waged war against them, killing many of them. Thus the verse (Psalms 136:10) proclaims: "[Offer thanks] to He who smote the Egyptian with their firstborn."

(Tosofot on Talmud, Shabbat 87b)

I WILL PASS THROUGH THE LAND OF EGYPT THIS NIGHT, AND WILL SMITE ALL THE FIRSTBORN IN THE LAND OF EGYPT... AND AGAINST ALL THE GODS OF EGYPT I WILL EXECUTE JUDGMENTS: I AM G-D (12:12)

"I will pass" — I, and no angel; "I will smite" — I, and no seraph; "I will execute" — I, and no messenger; "I am G-d" — I am He, and no other

(Passover Haggadah)

AND AGAINST ALL THE GODS OF EGYPT I WILL EXECUTE JUDGMENTS (12:12)

Those that were of wood rotted; those that were of metal melted.

(Rashi)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AT MIDNIGHT, THAT G-D SMOTE ALL THE FIRSTBORN IN THE LAND OF EGYPT (12:29)

The Jews in Egypt had sunk to the "forty-nine gates of impurity" so that, morally and spiritually, they were virtually indistinguishable from the Egyptians. Thus, when G-d passed over the Jewish firstborn to kill the Egyptian firstborn, the divine attribute of justice argued: "How are these any different from these? These are idol-worshippers, and these are idol-worshippers!" Nevertheless, G-d chose to extract the Children of Israel from "the bowels of Egypt" and acquire them as His chosen people.

This is why the plague of the firstborn occurred precisely at midnight. The first half of the night embodies the divine attribute of *gevurah* (justice), and its second half, the divine attribute of *chesed* (benevolence). Midnight is the juncture that fuses and supersedes them both, since the power to join two opposites can only come from a point that transcends their differences. "Midnight" is thus an expression of a divine involvement in creation that

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And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were driven out of Egypt, and could not delay, neither had they prepared for themselves any provision...

And Moses said to the people: "Remember this day, in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand G-d brought you out from this place: no leavened bread shall be eaten. This day you came out, in the month of spring."

More Mitzvot

Moses also instructs them to observe the following mitzvot as commemorators of the Exodus:

- * Each year, on the 14th of Nissan, all leaven must be removed from every Jewish home; that night, matzah should be eaten and the story of the Exodus told to one's children. No leaven should be eaten or be found in one's possession for seven days.
- * All firstborn should be consecrated to G-d, in commemoration of G-d's killing the firstborn of Egypt and sparing the Jewish firstborn. Firstborn animals are to be sacrificed as offerings to G-d, and firstborn sons are to be "redeemed."
- * The *tefillin* should be worn as "a sign on your arm and a remembrance between your eyes, that G-d's Torah be in your mouth; for with a strong hand did G-d bring you out of Egypt."

Commentary

transcends all standard criteria for punishment or reward.

(Ohr HaTorah)

A MIXED MULTITUDE WENT UP ALSO WITH THEM (12:38)

The Hebrew word *rav* ("multitude") has a numerical value of 202; the "mixed multitude" represents the 202 sparks of holiness that the Jewish people extracted from Egypt (see commentary on 11:2 above)

(The Kabbalists)

AND IT CAME TO PASS ON THAT VERY DAY, THAT G-D TOOK THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL OUT OF EGYPT (12:51)

In the Passover Haggadah we say: "If G-d had not taken our forefathers out of Egypt, we, our children, and our children's children, would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt..."

Our sages explain that the Children of Israel had become so entrenched in the paganism and depravity of Egypt, that the Exodus came at the very last possible moment, as they approached the very brink of total indistinguishability from the Egyptians. Had they remained slaves in Egypt a moment longer, there would have been no "Children of Israel" to redeem.

(Rebbe's Haggadah)

"Egypt rejoiced when they went" (Psalms 105:38). Said Rabbi Berechia: This is comparable to a fat man who is riding on a donkey. The donkey longs: "O when will he get off me"; and he longs: "O when will I get off the donkey." As soon as he gets off, the man is happy and the donkey is happy. Still I do not know: who is the happier?

So, too, when the Jews were in Egypt, and the plagues were befalling the Egyptians, the Egyptian were longing: "O when will the Jews get out!" And the Jews were longing: "O when will G-d redeem us!" As soon as they went out and were redeemed, these were happy and these were happy. Still, I did not know: which was the happier? Until King David came and said: "Egypt rejoiced when they went."

(Midrash Tehillim)

AND YOU SHALL RELATE TO YOUR SON ON THAT DAY, SAYING: THIS IS DONE BECAUSE OF THAT WHICH G-D DID TO ME WHEN I CAME OUT OF EGYPT (13:8)

In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt; as it is written: "... This is done because of that which G-d did to me when I came out of Egypt."

(Talmud, Pesachim 116b)

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FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

THE SOUL OF EVIL

Among the fifty-three Parshiot (“sections”) of the Torah, several stand out as milestones in its narrative of the history of humanity and of the people of Israel. The Parshah of *Bereishit* recounts G-d’s creation of the world in six days and Adam’s banishment from Eden; *Lech Lecha* describes Abraham’s journeys to bring the truth of the One G-d to a pagan world; *Yitro* includes the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah to Israel; and so on.

A list of pivotal Parshiot would certainly include the Parshah of *Bo*, which tells of the exodus of the children of Israel from the land of Egypt. The Exodus marked our birth as a people, and we are enjoined to “Remember the day that you went out of Egypt, all the days of your life.” Indeed, when G-d revealed Himself to us at Sinai, He introduced Himself not as the Creator of heaven and earth, but as “...your G-d, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt!” For the defining element of our relationship with G-d is not that we are beings created by Him (of which there are many others in G-d’s world), but that we are free beings—beings in whom He has invested of His own infinity and eternity, beings empowered by Him to transcend the constraints of the material world and the limits of their own natures.

The Name

Bo means “come.” The name derives from our Parshah’s opening verse, in which G-d instructs Moses to “come to Pharaoh” to warn him of the seventh plague (the plague of locusts) and once again deliver the divine demand that the ruler of Egypt set free the children of Israel.

The Torah considers the name of a thing to be the articulation of its essence; certainly, such is the case with the Torah’s own names for itself and its components. The name of a Torah section always conveys its primary message and the common theme of all its subsections and narratives.

One would therefore expect the section of the Exodus to be called “Exodus,” “Freedom,” or some other name that expresses the significance of this defining event in the history of Israel. Instead, it

derives its name from Moses’ coming to Pharaoh—an event that seems but a preliminary to the Exodus. Indeed, the concept of the leader of Israel coming to Pharaoh’s palace to petition him to let the Jewish people go—implying that the Jews are still subservient to Egypt and its ruler—seems the very antithesis of the Exodus!

The phrase “Come to Pharaoh” also evokes much discussion in the commentaries. Why does G-d tell Moses to come to Pharaoh? Would it not have been more appropriate to say, “Go to Pharaoh”?

The Zohar explains that Moses feared confronting Pharaoh inside his palace, at the hub of his power. (On earlier occasions, Moses had been directed to meet Pharaoh in other places, such as on the king’s morning excursions to the Nile). So G-d promised Moses that He Himself would accompany him to Pharaoh. The word “come” is thus to be understood in the sense of “come with me”; G-d is saying to Moses, “Come with Me to Pharaoh.”

The Zohar goes on to say that Moses is being invited by G-d to meet with the innermost essence of Egypt’s ruler and god. Thus we have another meaning of the phrase “Come to Pharaoh—”come” in the sense of “enter within.” To liberate the people of Israel from the “great and mighty serpent,” it was not enough to merely go to Pharaoh; Moses had to enter into the core of Pharaoh, into the very root of his power.

My River

Who is Pharaoh and what does he represent? What is his “innermost essence”? Why did Moses dread confronting Pharaoh in his palace if G-d Himself had sent him there? And how does “coming into Pharaoh” hold the key for the Exodus from Egypt and the liberation of the soul of man?

The prophet Ezekiel describes Pharaoh as “the great serpent who couches in the midst of his streams, who says: My river is my own, and I have made myself” (Ezekiel 29:3). In other words, the evil of Pharaoh is not defined by the promiscuity that characterized the pagan cults of Egypt; not by his enslavement and torture of millions; not by his bathing in the blood of slaughtered children; but by his egocentrism, by his regarding his own self as the source and standard for everything.

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

For this is the root of all evil. Self-centeredness might seem a benign sin compared to the acts of cruelty and depravity to which man can sink, but it is the source and essence of them all. When a person considers the self and its needs to be the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, his morality—and he might initially be a very moral person—is a sham. Such a person is ultimately capable of committing any act, should he regard it as crucial to himself or to his self-defined vision of reality.

Ultimately, every good deed is an act of self-abnegation, and every evil deed is an act of self-deification. When a person does a good deed—whether it involves contributing a single coin to charity or devoting an entire lifetime to a G-dly cause—he is saying: there is something greater than myself to which I am committed. When a person violates the divine will—whether with a minor transgression or with the most heinous of crimes—he is saying: “My river is my own, and I have made myself”; good is what is good to me, evil is what is contrary to my will; I am the master of my reality, I am god.god.

The Soul of Evil

So is the ego evil? Is this fundamental component of our soul an alien implant that must be uprooted and discarded in our quest for goodness and truth?

In the final analysis, it is not. For the cardinal law of reality is that “There is none else besides Him” (Deuteronomy 4:35)—that nothing is contrary to, or even separate from, the Creator and Source of all. The ego, the sense of self with which we are born, also derives from G-d; indeed, it is a reflection of the divine “ego.” Because G-d knows Himself as the only true existence, we, who were created in His image, possess an intimation of His “sense of self” in the form of our own concept of the self as the core of all existence.

It is not the ego that is evil, but the divorcing of the ego from its source. When we recognize our own ego as a reflection of G-d’s “ego” and make it subservient to His, it becomes the driving force in our efforts to make the world a better, more G-dly place. But the same ego, severed from its divine moorings, begets the most monstrous of evils.

This, explains the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is the deeper significance of the opening verses of the Parshah of Bo. When G-d commanded Moses to “Come to Pharaoh,” Moses had already been going to Pharaoh for many months. But he had been dealing with Pharaoh in his various manifestations: Pharaoh the pagan, Pharaoh the oppressor of Israel, Pharaoh the self-styled god. Now he was being told to enter into the essence of Pharaoh, into the soul of evil. Now he was being told to penetrate beyond the evil of Pharaoh, beyond the mega-ego that insists “I have created Myself,” to confront Pharaoh’s quintessence: the naked “I” that stems from the very “self” of G-d.

Moses did not fear the evil of Pharaoh. If G-d had sent him, G-d would protect him. But when G-d told him to enter into the essence of Pharaoh, he was terrified. How can a human being behold such a pure manifestation of the divine truth? A manifestation so sublime that it transcends good and evil and is equally the source of both?

Said G-d to Moses: “Come to Pharaoh.” Come with Me, and together we will enter the great serpent’s palace. Together we will penetrate the self-worship that is the heart of evil. Together we will discover that there is neither substance nor reality to evil—that all it is, is the misappropriation of the divine in man.

If this truth is too terrifying for a human being to confront on his own, come with Me, and I will guide you. I will take you into the innermost chamber of Pharaoh’s soul, until you come face to face with evil’s most zealously guarded secret: that it does not, in truth, exist.

When you learn this secret, no evil will ever defeat you. When you learn this secret, you and your people will be free.