



פרשת בא
Parshat Bo

Ashreinu | אשרינו

ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION



MOON NATION

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During these few weeks, we are treated to action-packed parshiyot -- the dramatic story of the Exodus from Egypt. The story of the Ten Plagues and the downfall of the Egyptian empire is surely

the most exciting of the entire Torah. Beneath the “fire-works” of the final three plagues we read about in the parsha there is a deeply profound sub-plot: that of the birth of the Jewish People as a national entity.

It is here, in this week’s parsha, that the Jewish People are presented with their first mitzvah as a nation. And which mitzvah does God decide is to be the first? Belief in God? Shabbat? Any of the Ten Commandments? No. It will be *Kiddush Hachodesh* -- sanctifying the new moon. This surely begs for an explanation. What is the

meaning behind this choice?

Some commentators offer the following explanation. The symbolism here is very rich: Moshe shows them a moon, with its cycles of waxing and waning. The moon goes through cycles of growing bigger and bigger, then shrinking smaller, and smaller, and smaller, until you think it is all gone. And then it regenerates. It grows and starts its cycle all over again.

Moshe tells the Jewish People, *exactly at this moment of their birth as a nation*, that you are about to embark on a journey -- a journey as a nation through history. And it won’t be a straight ride. There will be ups and there will be downs. But always remember: although there will be times when you think we are down and out and there is no hope for the Jewish People...do not worry: there will be a new beginning. The Jewish People will arise again, shake off the dust, and continue to grow.

There is no better example of this in our long and hard history than the horrors of the Holocaust followed a few short years later by the establishment of the State of

Israel. The Jewish people will always live and survive, even when it seems all hope is lost. It now becomes abundantly clear why God decides to introduce this vital message at the beginning of our national history.

STRONG CONNECTIONS

ABBY DENNIS ('20)

When the Jews were being forced out of Egypt by Pharaoh and the Egyptians, they left carrying matzah and maror wrapped in their clothing. The pasuk states:

”וַיִּשָּׂא הָעָם אֶת בִּצְקוֹ טָרֶם יְחִמְצוּ
מִשְׁאַרְתָּם צָרֹת בְּשִׂמְלֹתָם עַל
שִׁכְמָם”

“And the nation took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders” (Shmot 12:34).

Rashi comments that in addition to the dough, Bnei Yisrael brought along the leftover crumbs of matzah and maror.

Rashi adds that the Jews could have easily put their leftover crumbs of matzah and maror on the backs of their animals, but instead they chose to carry it on their shoulders and hold it close to them inside their clothing. This is because they loved following the commandments of Hashem, so they chose to wrap up the matzah in the most precious thing that they owned, their clothing, in order to fully embrace the mitzvot they were obligated in fulfilling.

If you look at the word מצוה, the *shoresh* can either come from the word צוה, which means command, or the word צוה, which means bond or connection. While it's true that mitzvot are commandments from Hashem, they are also meant to create a bond between us and Him. We learn from the Jews in Egypt that mitzvot provide us with the opportunity to connect with God.

There are many times in life where mitzvot might seem like a drag and we often lose sight of the real purpose of the mitzvot. We simply try to just do the mitzvah and then get it over with. Instead, we should

cherish them because they are our tickets to establishing a great connection with God. May we all work to find meaning in our mitzvot and strengthen our relationship with Hashem.

THE LIFE OF A HERO

SHALOM BRAUSER ('19)

George Washington. Harry Potter. Luke Skywalker. Three completely different characters, two of whom are fictional. But while they may seem unrelated, all three share important qualities. All of them answered a call to action and fundamentally changed the lives of those around them. They all battled the evils of their worlds, be it the British, the Dark Side, or He Who Shall Not Be Named. They are all heroes, following the path of the Monomyth of the Hero laid out by Joseph Campbell. And we know so much about them. From biographies and nursery rhymes about Washington, to a series of bestsellers and films describing the life of Harry Potter, to the most popular film series, Star Wars, our knowledge about these characters is at least substantial, if not overwhelming. And that's as it should be.

So the glaring question is, why do we know so little about Moshe? Moshe Rabbeinu, Hashem's emissary who took us out of Egypt, spoke face to face with God and gave us our Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu, who led us through the desert and formed us into a nation, remains the greatest Navi of all time. Logic would dictate that we would know of Moshe's childhood, his adolescence, and how he became our greatest leader. And yet, all we know about Moshe amounts to a few detail-sparing pesukim, with a few key sketches filled in by the midrash. Why?

The answer lies in the fact that Judaism is a God-centered, personal religion. We care little for earthly authority, and avoid it as much as possible (see Hashem's response to Bnei Yisrael's request for a king). Nor do we idolize leaders or designate saints. This is the message of Moshe's character being so blurry. It is not about the person, but the action.

The will of God takes many forms, so much so that the form becomes irrelevant. We recognize the greatness of our leaders only in the context of strict spirituality,

as *ovdei Hashem*. The Torah relates Moshe's actions to give us a role model for serving God. This is the case with all positive characters in Tanach. Tzadikim deserve praise and receive it. But we must remember that the Jewish people did not need Moshe like the Continental Army needed Washington, or like the Wizards needed Harry. Hashem, and He alone, is the one true hero of our history.

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

AKIVA ROSENTHAL ('20)

Parshat Bo includes the first mitzvah given to the Jews as a nation, “החודש הזה לכם”, the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh. Why does Hashem want the first connection with his people to pertain to the upcoming month? Why not focus on the miraculous exodus from Egypt or Jewish values?

Rabbi Label Lam explains through the analogy of investors listening to a speaker give advice on improving their returns. However, the speaker first talks about his grandfather's difficult journey to America and to a successful life. The significance of the speaker's back-story is seemingly unnecessary at first but is later considered valuable, as it inspires others to be as devoted as he was. Rabbi Lam connects this to Rosh Chodesh. Just as the Jews may initially perceive the Torah as useless, Hashem is trying to tell them that, just like the speaker's grandfather, Bnei Yisrael have the potential to rise from slaves to kings by taking control of their life. Hashem is trying to help the Jews find a more meaningful life through fulfilling mitzvot and following in Hashem's ways.

It is easy to be content with simply surviving through the weekly hardships without searching for the underlying purpose in our actions, or the direction in which our lives are going. Rashi says that the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh guides us toward finding the ideal lifestyle by reminding us every month that we have control over our lives and the time to change is now.

May we all succeed in leading a meaningful life by taking control of our lives and following in the ways of Hashem.

DEDICATION TO HASHEM

ADINA HIRSCH ('19)

Parshat Bo concludes Bnei Yisrael's suffering in Mitzrayim. Hashem just performed the final set of *makot*, plagues, and Bnei Yisrael are on the cusp/brink of freedom. However, right before they leave Mitzrayim, Hashem commands Bnei Yisrael to fulfill a series of mitzvot, including two specifically strange ones: Korban Pesach and Brit Milah. Chazal explain that Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael these two mitzvot to make them worthy of redemption.

Rabbi Pinchas Friedman highlights an interesting question regarding these two mitzvot. Why did the combination of Brit Milah and Korban Pesach suddenly transform Bnei Yisrael, allowing them to merit redemption? What is it about these two mitzvot that make Bnei Yisrael more worthy?

The Bnei Yissaschar points out that these two mitzvot are the only two positive mitzvot for which the punishment is *kareit*. The Bnei Yissaschar explains the severity of the punishment is because these mitzvot embody loyalty to Hashem. Rejecting these mitzvot is equivalent to rejecting all forms of *Avodat Hashem*, and therefore warrants a punishment of *kareit*, spiritual exclusion. When Bnei Yisrael performed the mitzvot of Korban Pesach and Brit Milah, they proved their commitment to Hashem, fully embracing a life of fulfilling mitzvot.

But still, why did Hashem choose these specific mitzvot to demonstrate Bnei Yisrael's dedication to Him and to His mitzvot?

The Sefat Emet explains that both of these mitzvot were firsts in the history of Bnei Yisrael. Brit Milah was the first mitzvah given to Avraham, and Korban Pesach was the first mitzvah Bnei Yisrael performed as a nation. The first of anything sets a precedent to continue to follow and shows a person's intentions in performing the action. According to Rabbi Friedman, these mitzvot represent the true meaning of *mesirat nefesh*, sacrificing one's soul. After Bnei Yisrael spent 210 years in Egypt, they were completely disconnect-

ed from Hashem. Korban Pesach and Brit Milah allowed Bnei Yisrael to fully embrace their spirituality and dedicate their *neshamot* to Hashem.

The Slonimer Rebbe defines the different aspects of *mesirat nefesh* involved in these mitzvot. The mitzvah of Korban Pesach demonstrates Bnei Yisrael's *mesirat nefesh* through emunah. Bnei Yisrael risked their lives by sacrificing lambs, which were considered gods by the Egyptians. They then have emunah that Hashem will pass over their houses during *makkat bechorot*. The mitzvah of Brit Milah affirms Bnei Yisrael's *mesirat nefesh* through kedushah. Bnei Yisrael transform their physical bodies to holy vehicles for God's service through Brit Milah. This covenant between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem symbolizes Bnei Yisrael's dedication to a life of avodat Hashem.

May we all be worthy of geulah through strengthening our emunah and cementing our commitment to a life of *avodat Hashem*.



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