



Around the Shabbat Table

Parashat Bo

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Shalom!

Introduction

Parashat Bo presents us with the remarkable events which lead to the most significant moment in our communal history – the Exodus from our ancestor's slavery in Egypt. In this portion, we are witness to the final three plagues that God brought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Along the way, we are introduced to some of the images, ideas, concepts and realities which form the bedrock of our Jewish experience, ritual, and custom.

The vocabulary of words and ideas that fill the narrative of parashat Bo is enough to evoke every Jew's deep memories and hopes: matzah; the Angel of Death; Pesach; the New Year; God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and; the sacrifice of the paschal lamb. From this portion, we are given such significant rituals and customs as the laying of tefillin and Pidyon HaBen.

Parashat Bo offers the powerful narrative that wrenches us finally from slavery and delivers us amazed and hopeful at the shores of the Red Sea.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Shabbat, you might want to discuss the following issues and questions:

- I. What does it mean to “harden one's heart”?

While not for the first time, we read in parashat Bo that God “hardens Pharaoh's heart”, causing him to deny our freedom even in the face of the terrible plagues God brings upon him and Egypt. While the text almost begs us to consider the question of

free will in light of God's action, it might be more interesting to examine when we act to "harden our own hearts". Why do we sometimes choose *not* to be responsive to our children, or parents, our friends, even when we know that we should be?

2. Ritual Objects.

Although it feels almost like an afterthought to the narrative of the Exodus, parashat Bo introduces us to the first Torah verses that refer to tefillin. First, identify some of the ritual objects that you have in your house (Chanukah menorah, Shabbat candlesticks, and kiddush cups are just some suggestions) and then discuss how these and other ritual objects help us to make our being Jewish "real" in everyday terms.

Some Texts to Wrestle With

- ✧ The *hagaddah*. How does the *hagaddah* present the events of the Exodus? How does this presentation agree and differ from the way the events are presented in the Torah? For example, note that Moses' name is not even mentioned in the story as it is told in the *hagaddah*. Also, is the *hagaddah* itself a ritual object? Consider the above discussion in answering this question.
- ✧ The *v'ahavta* prayer. In this prayer (taken directly from the Torah, but not from parashat Bo) we read, "...and you shall bind them to you hand as a sign and set them between your eyes as a symbol..." What is the connection between these words, parashat Bo, and tefillin?

Towards an Action Agenda

- ✧ Start now to plan your next seder. Assign various family members "parts" and responsibilities based on their interests and ability. Have some members create artwork to portray aspects of the story of the Exodus. Have others prepare to explain what is happening at various parts of the seder. Have others consider ways to incorporate Torah narrative into your seder.

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site.

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