



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Shabbat Bo 5763  
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### **Shalom!**

#### Introduction

Parashat Bo contains three basic themes. Chapters 10 and 11 of this *sidra* describe the last three plagues namely locusts, darkness, and the slaying of the firstborn. Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh to plead on behalf of the Israelites. However, the exact nature of Moses' request seems unclear. In the preceding *parasha*, Va'era, God says to Moses, "Go and tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the Israelites depart from his land." (Ex. 6:11) However in Bo, Moses stands before Pharaoh and says: "Let My people go that they may worship Me." (Ex. 10:3) Pharaoh and Moses then haggle over just who will be permitted to leave for the purpose of worship. Pharaoh agrees to let the men only go prior to the plague of locusts. Moses refuses and answers "We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the Lord's festival." (Ex. 10:9) The locusts descend upon Egypt and Pharaoh begs Moses to intercede with God for their removal. God hardens Pharaoh's heart and he refuses to let the Israelites leave so the plague of darkness ensues.

Pharaoh again summons Moses and agrees to allow all the Israelites to go and worship. Again Moses refuses because Pharaoh stipulates that their flocks and herds be left behind. This interchange is followed by the final and most devastating plague: the slaying of the firstborn.

The scene changes from plagues and confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh to laws concerning the celebration of Passover and the exodus from Egypt. The Jewish calendar was formalized by the second verse of Exodus 12 that informs us that the month in which Pesach occurs is to be the first month of the year. Next, Bo describes the preparation and eating of the paschal lamb. The command to smear the lamb's blood on the two doorposts and the lintel of their homes for protection against the tenth plague is also given.

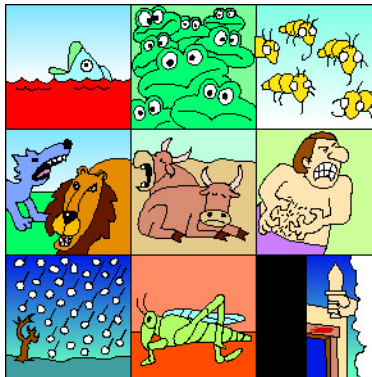
Bo contains the following additional mitzvot concerning the celebration of Pesach:

1. Pesach is to be a yearly festival celebrated for seven days.
2. Only unleavened bread may be eaten during Pesach.
3. All leaven is to be removed from Israelite homes.
4. On the first and seventh day there are to be “sacred convocations” and no work is permitted but food may be prepared.

During the night, the first-born in the land of Egypt begin to die. Pharaoh calls for Moses and Aaron and urges them to depart from Egypt immediately taking their families and livestock with them. The Israelites leave in such haste that there was no time for their bread to rise. They wrapped their kneading bowls in cloaks and placed them upon their shoulders. When the Israelites reached Succoth, they baked their unleavened dough into flat cakes and ate them because they had no time to prepare provisions for their journey. The Israelites, at Moses’ command, “borrowed” from the willing Egyptians objects of gold, silver, and clothing. The Israelites departed from Egypt after living there for 430 years.

The final section of Bo begins with the laws for consuming the Passover sacrifice and continues with mitzvot concerning the consecration of the first born to God. Bo tells us “Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine,” (Ex. 13:2) because God slew every first-born in the land of Egypt. Therefore, first-born Israelite males must be redeemed which is accomplished through the ritual we know today as *Pidyon Ha-Ben*.

Lastly, Parashat Bo contains one of the four biblical verses written on parchment and placed inside *Tefillin*, the small leather boxes attached to strips of leather and placed on the arm and forehead during morning prayers. The verse states, “And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead-in order that the teachings of the Lord may be in your mouth-that with a mighty hand the Lord freed you from Egypt.” ( Ex.13:9)



### Questions for your Family’s Discussion

1. Why did Moses request that the Israelites be permitted to leave Egypt to worship? God had specifically commanded Moses to beseech Pharaoh for the freedom of the

Israelites, (see Exodus 6:6,11,27) yet in Va'era, God instructed Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness." (Exodus 7:16) The idea of freeing the Israelites to worship God in the wilderness is repeated (see Ex.8:16 and 24; 9:13;10:3.7-9:24). Was this a ruse? Did God Moses understand that the hardhearted Pharaoh would never bargain for the permanent departure of his slaves? Did Moses think that undercover of temporary freedom the Israelites could permanently escape? Was Pharaoh aware of this possible strategy? Can you think of any other possible explanations?

2. Why do you think the month of Nissan, during which we celebrate Pesach, is considered the first month of the year by the Torah, rather than Tishri, when we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world?

3. Bo tells us that the Israelites "borrowed" objects of gold and silver from the Egyptians. It is obvious that these items could not be returned; therefore the use of the word "borrowed" is inaccurate. Why do you think the Torah uses the word "borrowed"? Why do you think the Israelites had time to "borrow" gold and silver, but no time to prepare food for their long journey? Were the Israelites entitled to this gold and silver?

### **Texts to Wrestle With**

1. The book of Exodus refers twenty times to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The initial 10 references occur after the first 5 plagues stating, "Pharaoh hardened his heart." The last 10 references to hardening refer to the final 5 plagues and state that, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."

Reread these examples which include the different ways in which the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is mentioned:

From Va'era: Exodus 7:22; 8:11,15,28; 9:7,12

From Bo: Exodus 10:1,20,17; Exodus 11:10;

What explanation does the Torah provide for God's behavior? How do you understand God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart?

2. Read the quotation below from the psychologist Erich Fromm. Does it provide any insight into the hardening of Pharaoh's heart?

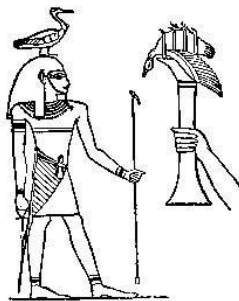
"Every evil act tends to harden man's heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good act tends to soften it, to make it more alive. The more man's heart hardens, the less freedom he has to change; the more is he determined already by previous action. But there comes a point of no return, when man's heart has become so hardened and so deadened that he has lost the possibility of freedom, when he is forced to go on and on until the unavoidable end which is, in the last analysis, his own physical or spiritual destruction." (You Shall Be as Gods, p.101)

3. Was the Israelites escape from Egypt a miracle? Were the plagues miraculous? What is a miracle? Do the texts below agree or disagree about the nature of miracles? How would you define a miracle?

“Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing;” (Gates of Prayer, p. 170)

“A miracle cannot prove what is impossible; it is useful only to confirm what is possible.” (Moses Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:24)

“In short, I do not believe in miracles. Not if the word be interpreted in its usual sense as exceptions to the laws of nature. I believe in miracles only as occurrences and events that are far too marvelous for me fully to comprehend but that are entirely consistent with nature’s accustomed patterns....Do you know any word more descriptive than miracle for the fact that within the tiny, submicroscopic cell each of us was at the moment of conception were already contained the seeds of all the physical traits, all the mental characteristics, all the emotional proclivities, all the creative possibilities of the adults we are today? Compared to that, a sea splitting in two...is simple child’s play. There are more miracles without magic in this universe than the wisest of us could ever identify. The trouble is that most of the time we’re looking for them in the wrong places.” (Roland B. Gittelsohn, Man’s Best Hope, Random House, New York, 1961, pp. 114-118)



### **Towards an Action Agenda**

1. List the miracles that have occurred in your lives individually and as a family.
2. In order to become more aware of the miracles that surround us daily learn one new blessing each Shabbat from the list below:

Upon smelling the fragrance of trees or shrubs:

Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam,bo-re atzei v’samim.

Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who creates fragrant trees.

Upon seeing wonders of nature, including lightning, shooting stars, vast deserts, high mountains, and a sunrise:

Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, oseh ma'aseh v'reshit.  
Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Source of Creation.

Upon seeing a rainbow:

Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, zokher ha-b'rit v'ne'eman bi-v'rito v'kayam b'ma'amaro.  
Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who remembers His covenant, is faithful to it, and keeps His promise.

Upon seeing the ocean:

Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, she-asah et-ha-yam ha-gadol.  
Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who has made the great sea.

Upon seeing trees or creatures of striking beauty:

Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, she-kakhah lo b'olamo.  
Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who has such beauty in His world.

## **Shabbat Shalom!**

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: <http://www.bjeny.org/>

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