



Around the Shabbat Table **Bo**

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*This week's writer: David Woolfe
Religious School Director, Hewlett-East Rockaway Jewish Centre, Etz Chaim*

Shalom!

Introduction

This week's parasha marks the crescendo in the story of our liberation from bondage in Egypt. Up to this parasha, Moses has confronted Pharaoh seven times and seven times Pharaoh has refused to let the Jews go into the desert to worship God. And seven times Egypt has been visited by a plague sent by God. And so we come to the events of parashat Bo.

In parashat Bo, Egypt is visited by the final three plagues – by locusts, by darkness and then, in a poetic balance to Pharaoh's earlier decree that the first-born male children of Israel be thrown into the Nile, by the killing of the first-born of Egypt. Before the terrible justice of this tenth plague, God teaches Moses the first mitzvah that is given to all Israel: the marking of the new month. Following this, Moses is instructed in the manner of Passover observance.

While God's involvement in the fundamental event in Jewish history – the breaking of time by the timeless – is nearly overwhelming, what is striking about parashat Bo is the extent to which God is involved in the decisions of *individual* people to bring about the Exodus from Egypt. The parasha begins with God telling Moses that he is to go to Pharaoh for "I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers" (Exodus 10:1). Later in the parasha, as part of their preparation before leaving Egypt, God instructs the Children of Israel to borrow objects of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors. And what is more, God "disposes the Egyptian people favorably toward [the Children of Israel]." (Exodus 11:3) In these instances and in others in the parasha, God appears to take a direct hand in the human decisions that will bear on the events to come.

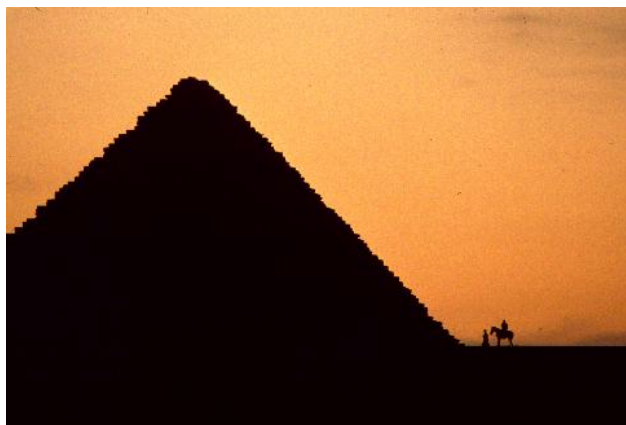
After the plague of locusts, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and confessed to them. "I stand guilty before the Lord your God and before you. Forgive my offense..."

The plague of locusts was lifted. And then the Lord “stiffened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not let the Israelites go.”

There followed the plague of darkness after which Pharaoh once again summoned Moses and Aaron, telling them to “go and worship the Lord”. In doing so, he stipulated that the flocks and herds of the Children of Israel be left behind but that “even your children can go with you.” At this point, Moses “ups the ante” and tells Pharaoh that, “You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to the Lord our God; our own livestock too shall go along with us...” We don’t know what Pharaoh’s reaction to these new demands might have been because, according to the text, “...the Lord stiffened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not agree to let them go.” The implication, however, is troubling. Perhaps Pharaoh *might* have acceded to Moses’ terms. But God stiffened his heart so he wouldn’t. And so we arrive at the tenth plague, the slaying of the first-born of the Egyptians. Only after that terrible night did Pharaoh relent. We had been freed by God’s “mighty hand” and we hurried toward the desert.

We rightly celebrate this monumental moment in our history and yet...there is a great deal that is troubling. Our rabbis go to great lengths to justify God’s behavior in “stiffening” and “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart – for example, Rambam (Maimonides, the philosopher and physician, who lived 800 years ago) suggests that Pharaoh’s sins were so grievous and so consistent that he “forfeited the opportunity” to repent. But a simple reading of the text shows God’s intervention resulting in Pharaoh’s continue intransigence. The “borrowing” of gold and silver from the Egyptians, when the text suggests that the real reason was to strip the Egyptians of some of their wealth, also comes across as a bit questionable.

What are we to make of this parasha? Does it demonstrate God’s might, as our tradition teaches? Does it serve as an educational text, to teach us the rituals of Passover? Or does it call upon us to evaluate our own hearts and motivations in how and why we make decisions? Most likely all three, and more.



Questions for your Family’s Discussions

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. As a parent, how do you deal with your child's occasional intransigence? Discuss with your child (in a way that is developmentally appropriate) the various methods of punishment and inducement that you use to get his or her cooperation. Which methods does s/he think are most effective and why?
2. What do you think the text means when it says that God "hardens" or "stiffens" Pharaoh's heart?
3. Have there been any instances when you were considering one decision but outside events seemed to impose another decision?
4. According to some scholars, the goods given to the Israelites represented "reparation money," paying the Israelites for their forced enslavement. Black activists in the United States have used this precedent to argue for reparation payments to African Americans. And in an unusual, if not bizarre turn of events, an Egyptian has tried to sue Israel for the money that it took during the Exodus.

Read these articles and discuss what your feelings are about these issues:

- On the suit against Israel:
<http://www.jrep.com/Mideast/Article-5.html>
- On the issue of African-American reparations:
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4065408/>



A Text to Wrestle With

In the parasha, God calls upon all of us to teach and remember the lessons of the Exodus:

- ☆ And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this rite? You shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses." (Exodus 12:26-27).

It is through questions and answers that we come to understand ourselves and our traditions. Sometimes the Biblical text is very clear and direct in explaining why we are to do what we do. Other times, it is a good deal less clear. How clearly do you explain to your children the reasons you do what you do?

Towards an Action Agenda

One thing that is decidedly missing from the Biblical text is any clear indication of how the “average” Egyptian felt about the drama that was unfolding in his or her midst. Certainly, each Egyptian felt the burden of the decisions of the Pharaoh. The plagues spared no individual Egyptian.

While we don't know if the average Egyptian sought to petition the Pharaoh about events that were happening in the country, we know that we can. Consider something that you think the government should do differently and write a letter or email to your elected representative making your views known. Maybe your voice can keep a leader's heart from being hardened. If you're not sure how to reach the right people, start with <http://www.firstgov.gov/> to find the contact information for government officials.



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

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