



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shabbat Bo
January 2005**

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Introduction

In Parasha Bo, Moses and Aaron implore Pharaoh to permit the Israelites to leave Egypt and worship God. Pharaoh again ignores the recommendations of his advisors who beg him to listen to the entreaties of Moses and Aaron. God tells Moses “Bo” (Go) once again to Pharaoh and deliver the warning of the eighth plague. Pharaoh’s heart remains hardened to the warnings. The eighth plague, locusts, descends on Egypt, followed by the plague of darkness. The final plague, death of the first-born (Egyptian males) mirrors that inflicted by Pharaoh on first-born Jewish males.

Immediately preceding this final plague, Moses and Aaron instruct the Israelites about the laws of Passover. Only after this terrible punishment does Pharaoh finally relent, telling Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt, into the desert. What took Pharaoh so long? Why did he “hang tough” in the face of all the negative events thrown at him and his people?

This most interesting and provocative of parshiyot can be approached from several vantage points. Is it simply a historical document, recounting the steps to our liberation from Pharaoh in Egypt? Does it serve as an educational text, to teach us the ritual observances of Pesach? Or perhaps it challenges us to look at Pharaoh’s ill-fated decision-making and compare how and why WE make decisions.

Finally, can it be seen as a way to understand the multiple names of the holiday which commemorate the Exodus?

- Feast of Unleavened Bread **חג המצות**
- Time of our Liberation **זמן חירותינו**
- Pesach- to pass over **חג הפסח**
- Holiday of Spring **חג האביב**

Think about these issues as you delve into Parasha Bo.

Questions for your Family's Discussion

1. What do you think it means to “harden one’s heart?”
2. Does Pharaoh’s resistance seem logical to you?
3. Have you ever felt that you should relent in an argument, but still stubbornly refuse to budge?
4. Have you ever been in the midst of a crisis and resolved to change your behavior only to revert to old patterns once the immediate danger has passed?

Texts to Wrestle With

The book of Exodus refers twenty times to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. The initial 10 references occur after the first 5 plagues: “Pharaoh hardened his heart.”

The last 10 references to hardening refer to the final 5 plagues and state that, “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”

Read the following examples which include the different ways in which the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is mentioned:

From Va’era: Exodus 7:22; 8:1,15, 28; 9:7,12

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

1. What is the difference between Pharaoh hardening his own heart and God hardening Pharaoh’s heart?
2. What explanation does the Torah provide for God’s behavior? What explanation would you give?



Towards an Action Agenda

1) In parashat Bo, the law requiring eating unleavened bread during Pesach is given. To help poor Jews obtain matzah and other Passover foods, a special fund was established. *Ma'ot Chitim* is a Jewish community fund which provides Passover foods to needy Jews. Try fund-raising for the fund, packing boxes of Passover foods, and/or helping distribute the food boxes to selected households in your community. Contact your synagogue for ideas of how to best do this.

2) Parashat Bo, which recounts the Jews' quest for freedom, meshes perfectly with the celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday. Monday, January 19th is the day we honor the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On this day, we can commemorate the strides our country has made in the ongoing struggle for civil rights; we can pause and remember all of those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of equality; we can pray for a world to come that is truly "free at last." Genesis teaches us that we are all created *B'Tselem Elohim*, "in the Image of God." Dr. King's faith was also guided by this principle.

MLK, Jr. was a Christian minister and much of his inspiration for the Civil Rights movement came from the Bible. Christians and Jews share a common vision, grounded in the Godliness of each and every human life and committed to the pursuit of a more just society. Inextricably, we are partners in this struggle. Scores of synagogues, communities and college campuses have held Black/Jewish seders during the Passover season using *A Common Road to Freedom*, edited by Leonard Fein and Rabbi David Saperstein.

- Read *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community*, by Rabbi Marc Schneier. You can find it at your many public libraries and at many synagogue libraries.
- Get involved in interfaith activities- develop a mentoring or homework help program. Share musical traditions, services, social events with a congregation of a different faith.
- For examples of congregational programs for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, visit [Religious Action Center](#)
- Take time to examine your lives with inspiration from MLK (and, of course, Moses):
 - 1) Are you tolerant of other people?
 - 2) Do you speak out against the injustices you see?
 - 3) Do you take real action to promote justice and equality?
 - 4) Are you willing to speak the truth even when those in our community disagree?

5) In what ways are the missions of MLK and Moses similar, different?



*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

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. 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: www.bjeny.org

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