

TIMELESS∞TORAH

PARSHAT BO - First Moments of An Eternal People

A Message for the Generations

The three final plagues recorded in Parshat Bo expose a certain shift in perspective both on the part of the Egyptians as well as the Jewish people. For the first time since the plagues began, Pharaoh's servants implored him to concede to Moshe's demands before Egypt would become ruined. Pharaoh's servants used the unusual word '*mokesh*—stumbling-block' to describe Moshe, and Rabbi Shmuel Salant (Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, d. 1909) finds in this word the key to understanding their change in attitude. Although a stumbling-block causes no damage when it is placed, the ensuing damage can be enormous. So too, throughout the first seven plagues, the Egyptians felt that they could weather the temporary discomfort. They realised, however, that a plague of locusts following so soon after a devastating hailstorm would mean nothing for them to eat for the foreseeable future. Faced with months of famine, they capitulated.

Among the Jewish people too, the plague of locusts brought with it a change in attitude. An intriguing aspect of this plague is that we find no specific instruction from Hashem to Moshe that the eighth plague would be locusts. Instead, Hashem told Moshe that there would be another plague visited upon the Egyptians, the purpose of which would be that the Jewish people would be able to retell — *l'maan tesaper* — these wonders to future generations. The Ba'alei Tosfot (12th-13th century) suggest that this expression was the hint from which Moshe understood the nature of the plague. When a country is beleaguered by

a swarm of locusts, this event is spoken about for years after.

Fascinatingly, '*l'maan tesaper*' is also an initial source for the mitzvah to tell our children and grandchildren the story of the Exodus. As the Ramban explains in a lengthy essay at the end of the parsha, *Yetziat Mirayim* (the Exodus from Egypt) was the eternal demonstration of Hashem's omnipotence. Open miracles will not be wrought freely in every generation, and it is incumbent on us to contemplate upon and educate others about the miracles that Hashem brought on the Egyptians. Possibly, this cryptic allusion to the plague of locusts hints to the idea that knowledge of the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* is not something that can be taken for granted. We have to actively involve ourselves in attaining new depths of understanding of these events and their significance.

As Jews, we live our lives in constant replay of the Exodus, with so many of the mitzvot being a remembrance for *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. It is mentioned in *kiddush* every Shabbat and it is the underlying reason for the mitzvot of Pesach, sitting in the sukkah, *pidyon haben* and so on. In the Ramban's famous illustration, one who affixes a mezuzah to his or her doorpost demonstrates subservience to Hashem and affirms their belief in the words they contain. With one simple action, a Jew can entrench within themselves the principles of Hashem's supremacy demonstrated at *Yetziat Mitzrayim*.

To Own Time

The very first mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a nation was the mitzvah of Rosh



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Chodesh, to sanctify the new moon and calculate the correct times to observe the *chagim*. The Seforno (d.1549, Bologna, Italy) comments on an interesting phrase used in the context of this mitzvah. The Torah says, 'This month shall be for you the first month of the year'. What is meant by describing this month as your month? The Seforno explains that until now, time did not belong to the Jewish people. In slavery, they were bound to the whims and desires of their masters. From now on, however, the months would be theirs to do with them as they wished. This month, according to this interpretation, was the beginning of the existence of the free will of the Jewish nation, something which sits at the very core of our humanity.

With this insight, we can shed light on why this mitzvah is placed as the introduction to the mitzvah of the Korban Pesach, the unique Pesach offering. In a masterful piece, Rav Hirsch (d.1888), expounds on how the Korban Pesach is designed to be a gathering of family groups and close neighbours. These, presumably, would have been concepts far removed from the slave psyche of the Jewish people in Egypt. A slave exists only for himself, fighting for his survival from day to day. He does not make decisions for himself and does not have time to reach out to others.

In his famous memoir of his experiences in the concentration camps, 'If This is a Man' (1947), Primo Levi describes the moment the survivors became truly free following the liberation. This occurred when they were able to give away a piece of bread to someone else. The simple act of sharing their bread was, 'the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that

moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed....to men again'.

Redemption of Haste; Redemption of Tranquillity

One of the central themes of the mitzvah of Korban Pesach is the idea of *chipazon* — haste. The Korban is to be eaten hastily and within a strict timeframe. Moreover, this haste was to be reflected in the very attire of the Jewish people. They were commanded to eat it with 'girded loins, shoes on their feet and their staffs in their hands' (Shemot 12:11). According to the Kli Yakar (d.1619, Prague), this haste was an echo of the nature of the redemption, which took place, as the verse states, 'with Hashem before them' (Shemot 13:21). Egypt was a place of idolatry, and the Jewish people were to leave with their eyes on Hashem in front of them, fleeing from the negativity of Egypt and all it stood for.

In contrast, the prophet Yeshayah (42:12) says that in the future redemption, 'you will not leave in haste'. Then, the Divine presence will envelop us both from in front and behind and there will no longer be a need to run. Throughout our long history, the Jewish people have been running after Hashem's presence, yet all too often fleeing persecution and oppression from behind. One day, however, the time will come when we will be free to sit in peace and tranquillity, 'every person under his vine and under his fig tree' (Micah 4:4). May we merit to see that tranquillity for our people in the very near future.

**Next Week: Parshat Beshalach:
To Survive & To Thrive**