

BO – A D'VAR  
January 15, 2005  
Arthur Rosenberg

Bo is one of those Torah portions where so much happens that just listing the events could take up all my time without even looking at plain meaning no less what it means to us in our time. Let me quickly bring you up to date in the plot outline, which we will all recognize as half of the story of Passover.

Background: Israel is enslaved in Egypt under a new Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph. Moses has come along and has said the famous Let My People Go, unsuccessfully to Pharaoh who refused to comply. Egypt has therefore suffered under the first seven plagues. Our parasha BO opens with God hardening Pharaoh's heart which leads to the last three plagues: locusts, darkness and the death of the firstborns.

God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to put lamb's blood on their doors. We also learn through Moses about the feast of unleavened bread and the redemption of the firstborn: (bikkur and pidyon ha ben). Finally, God tells Moses that Abib will become the first month of the New Year...Abib later becomes known as Nisan.

When his own child dies, Pharaoh relents and lets the people go; they cross the Sea of Reeds, don't really meet Charleton Heston and sing Mi Chamocha Ba'lim Adonay. Pharaoh's men give chase, the sea swallows them up. Bnei Yisroel enter into the wilderness. There you have it, the Evelyn Woods speed reading version of Bo. Fortunately you are all experts on the story of Passover, so we have a good beginning.

I want to take three themes which intrigue me the most and share them with you. And while Bo is being chanted, do follow along in the Plaut and you will spot some marvelous ideas we just don't have time to discuss today.

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First: At Passover we talk a lot about freedom, ours and others (Zeman Cheruteinu). We talk about slavery and the bitter hard life in Egyptian bondage. We symbolically eat bricks – charoseth. Remind me again, is that why God set us free? Because slavery is wrong and Pharaoh was a cruel task master? That is the usual theme we all accept: people are meant to be free. Our God cares about our freedom.

A quick look at what the text actually says might surprise you -  
Exodus 10:1-3:

10:1 God reminds Moses that it was God who made Pharaoh's heart heavy or hard. It was God who would not allow Pharaoh to relent. Pharaoh has five chances to show compassion but after that, as Resh Lakish reminds us, God just took over. So much for freedom and free will. 10:2 In God's own words we read the purpose of the Exodus....to manifest that Adonai IS God, The ONLY God, the powerful God. That Egypt's idols are not God and their Gods are not God. 10:3 and this motivation is restated: Let My People go so they MAY SERVE ME. HOW do we serve God? By Telling the story – not of slavery – but OF GOD'S POWER OF DELIVERANCE - how God overcame the Egyptians and their Gods.

The words of Mi Chamocha don't say "oh we were slaves and that was wrong and bad", they say : who is like you, Adonai among all the Gods who are worshipped (one translation). The issue of slavery never comes up. God is concerned with God's greatness becoming known. Perhaps we forget when we observe Pesach that the original meaning of telling the story is *not* so that we don't forget that we are slaves, perhaps the true meaning of the story is that without God's greatness there is no freedom, there is only slavery, idolatry and darkness. But that's for another drosch.

Second, let's look at the word Bo itself. "Vayomer adonai ayl Moshe Bo ayl Pharoah....And God said to Moses, come to Pharoah." Bo means come. Why didn't God tell Moses to Go or go back to Pharoah? Why Come to Pharoah? (JTS translates Bo as "Go" and sidesteps the whole issue). A plain meaning way to look at it is God is saying to Moses come back with me to Pharoah.. You will not be alone.

To interpret we need to see where else in Torah God gives a direct command to a person to get in motion.

Remember Lech Lecha? Abraham....That was God saying "Go...Go Yourself"; meaning alone. Unlike Moses, Abraham's journey was a singular one. He left his family, his father's house and everything familiar to make a spiritual journey.

But in Bo the journey is not singular, it is collective. In this portion we have for the first time in Torah, a new phrase – a new concept: Bnei Yisroel...the birth of the children of Israel...in a sense the first born of Israel. Because it is not until Moses leads them that they have someone to follow and thus become a nation, a people...bnei yisroal.

Genesis begins with the words of one - God. Torah ends with the phrase: "before the eyes of Bnei Yisroel." A collective noun, as if it were one set of eyes. One God, One people. And so the come in Bo, I think, refers to Come Together...the children of Israel will come together as a nation.

Last and my favorite: Why does this portion begin with the last three plagues? Why does the Torah not include them as an unbroken group....we don't say there were seven and three plagues (although that would make a great drosh too), we say the ten plagues. The Torah divides them in mid-parashah which begs the

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question: is there a connection between locust, darkness and slaying of the firstborn? You know I think there is.

Locusts not only eat up what is left standing after the other plagues (hail and fire), but their sheer numbers darken “Ayin Kol Ha Aretz”...the eyes of the earth. The locusts swarm and blot out the sun.

Next comes Darkness itself - the absence of light...choshech

Then, the slaying of the firstborns, God says it will occur, “B'laila Hazei”, this night, in the dark.

So these three plagues are all about darkness. Darkness of locusts destroy the rest of the crops: the past. Darkness itself, choshech, doesn't allow anyone to see anything in the here and now: the present. And killing the children turns the light out on the future – no children, no future. But let's look from one other angle.

A Kabbalistic view might go like this: Locusts blot out the heavens, darkness covers the earth and death of the children darkens the world to be. But God, according to Zohar, is light. Pharaoh's actions lead to plagues – darkness. Adonai, God, restores light: as above, so below as the Kabbalists say. Exodus 10:23 cryptically tells us that during the plague of darkness, “the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings”. If the world was dark what light would Bnei Yisroel have had if not faith, God?

So to put all this in a modern context: If God is within us, as some modern philosophies suggest or if all evil as well as all good comes from God, as Kabbalah tells us, then the story told in BO urges each of us to come and confront the darkness that holds us back from doing those things which will make us and the world better,

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freer and healthier. And those very acts of repair will shine the light of creation wherever eyes can see.

May that be so. Shabbat Shalom.