

Parachat Bo
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Shabbat Shalom! *Parashat Bo* contains the last three plagues: *Arbeh* - Locusts, *Choshech*- Darkness, and *Macat Bechorot*- Slaying of the first born. In addition, it gives the instructions for *Pesach*, Passover. *Pesach* is the oldest Jewish festival; it is the first of the three Pilgrimage festivals. In the Torah's calendar, *Pesach* marks the beginning of the year.

I think Bo is a good Parasha for me because it is the Parasha of my first Shabbat when I was born. Also, because I really enjoy celebrating *Pesach*.

Bo begins with the eighth plague. Moshe and Aharon forewarned Pharaoh about the plague of locusts. Pharaoh argued with Moshe and Aharon. He said he would let them take the adults out of *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), but leave the children. When they refused his offer, all arguments stopped and Pharaoh sent Moshe and Aharon away.

At this point Pharaoh's servants recognize and warn Pharaoh that each plague has brought on additional destruction of *Mitzrayim*. And in fact, the locusts destroyed what was left of *Mitzrayim*.

While the locusts were still upon the land, Pharaoh summons Moshe and Aharon. Pharaoh admits that he has sinned to their G-d and to them. He asks for forgiveness and asks Moshe to plead to *Hashem* to take away of this plague. After Moshe pleads to *Hashem*, *Hashem* sends a strong wind to carry away the locusts into the Reed Sea. *Hashem* hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let the Israelites go.

I want to take a moment to talk about the concept of "hardening Pharaoh's heart." What does this mean?

According to the *Etz Chaim Chumash* this concept appears 20 times in the book of *Sh'mot*, Exodus. Half of the times it is a description of Pharaoh's character – He hardens his own heart. Half are attributed to *Hashem* causing the hardening. *Etz Chaim* points out, that, in biblical stories, human behavior is determined in the heart, which is viewed as the central place of a person's intellectual, moral and spiritual life.

Hardening the heart means to do something in a very imposing way. When Pharaoh refuses to let *B'nei Yisrael* leave *Mitzrayim* his "NO" is with every part of his being – from his thoughts, his behavior and his spirit. It is a very strong and powerful "NO".

This seemed reminiscent to my mother and me of how we are told to love Hashem totally with all our HEART, with all our SOUL and with all our MIGHT!

Do these words sound familiar to anyone? We say them twice a day in the Shacharit and Maariv| service| when we recite the *Shema* and *Veahavta*.
Veahavta et Hashem elokecha, bechol L'avvacha, uv'chol nafshecha, uv'chol meodecha.

We love the Lord our G-d, with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might. In this case it is also a very strong statement -- we take our Judaism SO seriously that we believe in it with every part of our being. Only this time it is not a *hardening* of the heart towards evil intent but an *opening* of our heart to love and goodness.

Let me give you a personal example of the opposite of hardening the heart. This is a more personal illustration.

I attend the Bess and Paul Sigel Hebrew Academy, a modern orthodox day school and I belong to a Conservative Synagogue. I have celebrated a few *B'not Mitzvah* with school friends who attend Orthodox shuls. The culmination of each Bat Mitzvah has been to deliver a *D'var Torah*, as I am doing now.

As I began my study, I felt conflict within myself because although I knew I had the capabilities to read Torah and lead the service, I was nervous about how my school friends and the staff and faculty would view my actions. At first my concerns affected my ability to put all my efforts into my studies.

This past summer, I attended Camp Ramah of New England in Palmer, Massachusetts, a Jewish Camp run by the Conservative movement. My camp friends and I would often talk about the coming year and our preparation for our *B'not Mitzvah*, including our expectations. This gave me a different perspective about my Bat Mitzvah and more comfort with my decision to read and lead the davening.

The story of my bat mitzvah study is the opposite of hardening the heart because the comfort I developed through my camp experience, enabled me to put all my effort into my Bat Mitzvah studies with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might.

The ninth plague of darkness came to *Mitzrayim* for three days. We may not think of darkness as being a big deal, but the plague of darkness was darkness like none we have ever seen. The *Midrash*, in *Sh'mot Rabbah*, calls the plague of darkness "the darkness of *Geihinnom*" and likens it to the darkness before *Hashem* said "Let there be light" when he created the world. It continues saying that just as the light of Shabbat is a foretaste of the world to come, the reward that awaits those people who are righteous, the darkness of the ninth plague is a foretaste of *Geihinnom*, the punishment that awaits those who cannot truly see

their neighbors, who cannot feel the pain and recognize the dignity of their afflicted neighbors.

Finally, Pharaoh told Moshe "Go and worship Hashem but leave all your animals behind". Moshe refused because they would need the animals for their worship of Hashem. At this point Pharaoh again refused to let the people go and told Moshe that he would never see his face again.

Then *Hashem* commands Moshe and Aharon with the first mitzvah to be given to B'nai Israel the *Korban Pesach*, the Pesach offering.

Hashem had said to Moshe that he will bring the last plague to *Mitzrayim*, a really bad one, death of the first born. He said that at midnight every first born child of the country will die, from the first born of Pharaoh, himself, to the first born of the poorest slave to the first born of the cattle in the fields. But, the first born of B'nai Yisrael will remain alive. And from this time forward the day must be kept holy.

Now I know *Tu B' Shevat* falls next Shabbat and Purim is still more than a month away, but I am going to spend the next few minutes talking about Pesach.

There are 4 key pieces of information about the holiday of Pesach that come directly from my *Parasha*.

The first is, we are told to relate the story of the Exodus from Egypt. In my *Parasha* it says, "This day will be a day of remembrance. People will celebrate it as a festival to Hashem throughout the generations."

Retelling the story is a large part of the Passover Seder we each hold in our homes every year.

The second is that we are told to eat unleavened bread. It says in *Parashat Bo* "For seven days you shall eat unleavened cakes, but on the preceding day you shall clear away all leaven from your houses for whoever eats leaven from the first day until the seventh day that soul shall be cut off from Israel." This means that we prepare our homes for the holiday by removing the unleavened items. Also, we need to eat Matzoh, unleavened cakes, and no *Chametz* during all of the holiday of Passover.

The third is connected to the 10th plague. As I mentioned a moment ago, only the first born of *B'nai Yisrael* remained alive when the first born were killed. How did this occur? The *B'nai Yisrael* households were instructed by *Hashem* through Moshe to kill a lamb. *B'nai Yisrael* were commanded to put the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. This was a sign to the Angel of Death to "pass over" their homes.

Parashat Bo states, "*B'nai Yisrael* was also told to cook the *Korban Pesach* (the lamb) roasted over fire and eat it with Matzot and bitter herbs." These are the three main symbols we are told to specifically mention during our Passover Seder.

The fourth is something we mention at the Seder when we talk about the Four Sons.

Our Haggadah states; "The young one, not yet able to inquire, is to be told the story, of Passover in accordance with the Biblical Command: "And thou shall tell your son in that day saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt."

Can you guess where the "Biblical Command" came from - That's right, *Parashat Bo* -- Chapter 13 verse 8.

In *Parashat Bo*, we are told that the first day and the last days should be holy days. On these days no work shall be done except for the preparation of food that will be eaten by every person. We should guard the Matzos making sure that it does not get mixed with Chametz. And we are reminded that on this day in history Hashem brought our ancestors out of Egypt.

As you can see, my *Parasha* has some important information that is relevant today. My parents and I have prepared centerpieces for the Kiddush tables using six different themes relating to *Parashat Bo*.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the people who have assisted me through my studies.

I would like to acknowledge the Bess and Paul Sigel Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford where I have been a student since I was in preschool. I would like to thank all my teachers who have taught me diligently throughout my years at the academy. It made the process of preparing for my Bat Mitzvah so much easier.

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Haftarah, all 8 of my *aliyot*, *Shacharit*, and *Pezukai Dezimra*. I thank my mom for studying, helping, and assisting me with writing my *D'var Torah* and thank both of them for caring and putting together the "little" details for today. *Todah Rabah!*

I would like to thank all my family and friends who travelled from faraway places to share my simcha with me.

Last but not least I would like to thank my brother Aaron for listening and behaving while I was studying for my bat mitzvah and for trying to learn everything too!

Shabbat Shalom