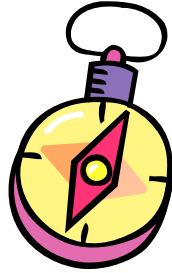


## A Year of Encompassing Torah



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### Parashat Bo

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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### **An Added Blessing For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi  
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth  
and **the thoughts of my heart**  
find favor before You, G-d,  
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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### Parashat Bo

#### Will the Real Nachson Please Step Forward...

Who Is the First To Cross the Sea of Reeds?

When I think about the Passover story, I sometimes wonder what is the defining moment in history.

Is it the moment that the Angel of Death passes through Egypt and the subsequent death to the first born of Egypt that convinces the Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to go free? It is on this night that we are introduced to the custom of placing a Mezuzah on the doorposts of our homes as a sign not only for safety and for protection, but as a symbol of what it means to be a Jew.

Is it the moment that God speaks to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai to reveal to them the covenant that will bind them to God with a new set of laws to guide their behavior? Each year on Shavuot we study all night long to commemorate the role of Torah in our lives and how it provides us with moral and ethical direction.

Or perhaps it is another moment somewhere in the middle that "defines" us as Jews?

For the sages who constructed the *siddur*, the prayer book, it is evident to them that the most significant moment of Jewish history is the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, for this is the passage that is lifted from the Torah and recited in its entirety as a part of the morning liturgy. No day goes by without our remembering what happened on that fateful morning when Pharaoh had a change of heart and the Egyptians pursued our ancestors to the shores of the sea.

What gives this passage from the bible even greater significance is the play that goes on related to the word "*Mitzrayim*," the word for

Egypt. It also means “*narrow passage*.” So, these words take upon themselves a universal quality. When we read these words each morning, we do not limit ourselves to just one event in history; rather, we open up ourselves to all the times when we find ourselves trapped and in a narrow place. From Psalm 118 and King David we read: “*Min hameitzar karati Yah – From out of the depths (narrow places) I called out to God...*” We, too, cry out from the depths of our own beings whenever we are in trouble. When we do so, we place ourselves at the shores of the Sea of Reeds, wondering what to do next to relieve our pain and our sorrow.

In turning back to the story from the bible, how could the Israelites know that the Sea would part for them? They didn’t know! What they did know, however, is that the Egyptian chariots were pressing forward as they stood and complained by the raging waters before them.

In one midrash the Israelites argued amongst themselves about the difference between the clay that they made into bricks for the cities of the Pharaoh and the clay at the sea that would surely impede their progress forward to freedom. Was one death better than another?

In another midrash the Israelite leaders squabbled amongst themselves as to who would be the first to jump into the water, or was it who would be voted by the others to go first? Needless to say, it was Nachshon ben Aminadav from the tribe of Judah who jumped into the fray, or was it the spray, that earned him some distinction as a brave soul!?!

Centuries later we still argue over the merits of his jumping into the water as we ponder our own predicaments and how we ought to act in dangerous times. There is a risk that we pay by our actions as well as our inactions. In another place in the Book of Psalms we read that “by Judah God is known.” From this we infer that God becomes familiar to us because of the courage and bravery exhibited by Nachshon. Not only did he wade into the waters of the Sea of Reeds. According to the midrash he continued walking in the muck beneath his feet until the water was about to cover his nose. It was at that point that the Sea began to split.

God was made known, not through prayer, but through the courageous act of humans. In the meantime we find Moses calling out to God and

giving directions. God says to Moses, “What are you *praying* for? A miracle? It ain’t gonna happen without you doing something first. I will be with you, Moses, but don’t depend on Me in that way. To believe in Me is to act without fear as if everything depends upon you – because it does!” AS Rabbi Sandy Sasso points out in her book on *midrashim*, *God’s Echo*, “Prayer has its place, but it is not a substitute for courage and responsible action.”

To act in the midst of fear is to have hope and to have faith... What a lesson Nachshon ben Aminadav teaches us all. To forge ahead despite it all is an act of bravery and a challenge that we all shall face at some point in our lives. Let us compare his actions with those who were members of the tribes of Reuben and Simeon. They saw pretty much things in a literal fashion. The sea may have split, but all that they were able to recognize was the mud that caked onto their leather sandals and the hems of their cloaks. They saw no difference between the clay at the bottom of the sea and the clay that they used to form the bricks of the Pharaoh. As accurate as they were in their assumptions, they had little regard for the journey ahead. As Rabbi Sasso comments, “Even though they may not have had all that much to take with them, whatever they brought had to weigh heavily on their shoulders so that their backs ached...”

What makes the crossing of the Sea of Reeds such a pivotal event, and what distinguishes the tribes of Reuben and Simeon for being so short-sighted is their inability to see the miracle before them, the miracle that comes whenever we exhibit our ability to believe in ourselves. Nachshon recognized “it” when he leapt into the waters of the sea. And Miriam saw it as well, when she picked up her tambourine and danced. Looking beyond the drudgery of our day to day lives, by seeing the miracles that are before our eyes gives us courage in knowing, despite the danger that may lie ahead, there is a sense of peace in clinging to the idea that the presence of God is with us, helping us to find the courage and the joy that was a part of our ancestral past.

I now know why I have a deep attraction for the ocean, one that goes beyond my interest in sailing. Even when I was younger, I loved to jump into the waves. (Don’t ask me to make that same plunge in February for the Polar Plunge for tzedakah – that brave I am not

anymore.) What I enjoyed most about being in the ocean was the wonderful feeling that I experienced being carried by the waves as though I was being lifted up and buoyed along, embraced by the security of the water. I learned to trust that feeling, in the same way that I learned to have faith in my wife picking me up when I was down, holding me when I am insecure, and prodding me to move forward when the need arises, encouraging me to accomplish more than I myself can imagine.

On this Shabbat, let us all imagine from where do our deepest lessons of faith come.



### Sermon – Parashat Bo 5768a

Is this week's Torah reading a tale about endings or is it one about beginnings? As we begin our reading of the portion we discover that the plagues are about to come to an auspicious end when the angel of death spreads throughout Egypt, taking with it the lives of the first born of this mighty nation. Just as Pharaoh had decreed that the lives of the first born of Israel should die in the waters of the Nile, blood for blood, a strange disease attacks the eldest of this powerful nation, attacking both human and animals indiscriminately. The Israelites, however, are protected by the blood that they smeared on the lintels of their homes, as they sat inside eating the paschal offering with family and friends, waiting for the signal from Moses to come out of hiding.

Yet, this is not how the Torah sees itself. Parashat Bo is not about endings. Rather it is firmly established in creating new beginnings, for we are told in Exodus 12:2 that "this month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you." In short, what this means is that Rosh Hashanah may be the beginning of the New Year from the perspective of counting the years since creation, in the Biblical world, the month of Nisan is the first

month of the calendar year. It is a time when the earth springs to life and the animals give birth to a new generation. What distinguishes this verse of the bible is the fact that it is the first commandment that is directed to the nation of Israel as a whole rather than to a single individual. It is probably not coincidental that we read about the beginning of the nation of Israel on the same weekend when we begin the new month of Shevat, when we celebrate the birthday of the trees.

In his d'var torah for Parashat Bo, Rabbi Boaz Marmon (from AJR) tells the story that highlights the beginning of the Torah itself. According to the sages the Torah begins with the letter "beit" rather than the letter "alef" to show that "Bereisheet" – the beginning of Creation itself – is for a "berachah" (a blessing) rather than for an "arirah" (a curse). Bo, however, the name given to this week's Torah portion, contains both letters. My colleague concludes that more often than not the things that happen to us in this world contain both the curse and the blessing that life offers us. The plagues that mark the final stages of the Exodus story are two sides to the same coin. At our seder tables we recognize this fact when we spill a drop of wine, a symbol of our joy to account for the suffering that our enemies had to endure. Pharaoh's obstinacy and God's justice are invariably linked together, forever.

Bo is where we find many of the rituals that are a part of the Passover seder. We recognize several passages from the Haggadah as well. We learn about the first paschal offering in Bo, along with the custom of eating matzah with bitter herbs, that becomes a part of Hillel sandwich. Later on, we are introduced for the first time to the custom of wearing "tefillin" as a reminder to observe God's commandments.

The Torah calls this night of transition, when slavery ends and freedom begins, as a night of watching, "leil shimurim." The text is unclear as to who is doing the watching. Is it God watching over Israel or is it Israel watching out for God? Or is it both, simultaneously, done out of mutual respect and admiration for the other?

May this Shabbat when we celebrate Tu b'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees, be the beginning to a fruitful year in which our hearts watch out for one another as we search our world for new beginnings to grow in our

relationships, whether it be our own souls, with a loved one, with a friend or even with God.