

Parsha Bo

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Parsha Bo has so many possible areas of discussion that it is not easy to pick one that would not emphasize a major take home message which, as we have suggested many times since the Rabbi has left, is our goal.

One could discuss the significance of the Ten Plagues, each of which could theoretically debunk Egypt's gods. At many of the plagues, God states that "because I am the Lord, thy God." Indicating that he is not only in nature but above nature, unlike the Egyptian gods, or one could focus on the significance of locusts literally wiping out the economy of Egypt, which depended on an agrarian economy. Or the plague of darkness which may be considered the death of the greatest Egyptian god Re, the god of light, or is this a spiritual darkness for both the Egyptians and the Israelites. God eliminated many Israelites who had assimilated or lost their relation to Judaism during the plague of Darkness.

And finally the last plague in which God would have destroyed the Jews as well if they went out of the house on the night that the Angel of Death was present at or about midnight, the only time when Moses told Pharaoh that the final plague was to begin.

But the commentaries that I have reviewed and would like to discuss concerns the incredible importance of not only teaching our children ethical and moral behavior but encouraging them to ask questions.

At the beginning of the *Parsha*, we are told that one of God's goals in the exodus from Egypt was to ensure that we tell that story to our progeny: "And so that you may relate it to the ears of your sons and your son's sons what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My signs which I have placed among them that you know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 10:2)

It was the moment for which the Israelites had been waiting for more than 200 years. The Israelites, slaves in Egypt, were about to go free. Ten plagues had struck the country. The people were the first to understand; Pharaoh was the last. God was on the side of freedom and human dignity. You cannot build a nation, however strong your police and army, by enslaving some for the benefit of others. History will turn against you, as it has against every tyranny known to mankind.

And now the time had arrived. The Israelites were on the brink of their release. Moses, their leader, gathered them together and prepared to address them. What would he speak about at this fateful juncture, the birth of a people? He could have spoken about many things. He might have talked about liberty, the breaking of their chains, and the end of slavery. He might have talked about the destination to which they were about to travel, the "land flowing with milk and honey". Or he might have chosen a more somber theme: the dangers they would face: what Nelson Mandela called "the long walk to freedom." Any of these would have been the speech of a great leader sensing an historic moment in the destiny of Israel.

Moses did none of these things. Instead he spoke about children, and the distant future, and the obligation to pass on memory to distant generations yet unborn. Three times in this week's *sedra* he turns to this theme:

And when your children ask you "what do you mean by this rite?" You shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because he passed over the house of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses." (Exodus 12:26-27).

And you shall explain to your child on that day, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt" (Exodus 13:8).

And when, in time to come, your child shall ask you saying, “What does this mean? You shall say to him, “It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exodus 13:14). Sounds familiar, doesn’t it. They are 3 of the 4 questions asked by the children in the Passover Seder. The 4th question by the wise son is found in Deuteronomy, chapter 6:20-23.

About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told they had to become a nation of educators (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks).

That is what made Moses not just a great leader but a unique one. The Torah is telling us is that freedom is won, not on the battlefield, nor in the political area, nor in the courts, national or international, but in the human imagination and will (Judge Learned Hand, 1944).

To defend a country you need an army. But to defend a society, you need schools. You need families and an educational system in which ideals are passed from one generation to the next, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. So Jews became the people whose passion was education, whose citadels were schools and whose heroes were teachers.

The result was that by the time the Second Temple was destroyed, Jews had constructed the world’s first system of universal compulsory education, paid for by public funds.

The name of Joshua ben Gamla (circa 70 AD) must not be forgotten here. Joshua ben Gamla, according to Josephus, was singled out for praise for his establishing a universal system of education. He evolved a system whereby “teachers of young children be appointed in each district and each town,” where previously they were found only in Jerusalem. In addition he laid down sound pedagogical principles. Because of this, it was said of him; “Truly, the name of that man is blessed... since but for him the Torah would have been forgotten in Israel”, (Baba Batra 21a). According to the Talmud, then, children started learning Torah at ages 6-7, rather than 16-17.

From the very outset, then, an important message from Parsha Bo is not only the education of children but the need of children to ask questions.

No other faith has attached a higher value to study. None has given it a higher position in the scale of communal priorities.

Rabbi Sacks states, “without accepting voluntarily a code of moral and ethical restraints, liberty becomes license and society itself a battleground of warring instincts and desires.”

This idea, fateful in its implications, was first articulated by Moses in this week’s sedra, in his words to the assembled Israelites. He was telling them that freedom is more than a moment of political triumph. It is a constant endeavor, throughout the ages, to teach those who come after us the battles our ancestors fought, and why, so that my freedom is never sacrificed to yours, or purchased at the cost of someone else’s. That is why, to this day, on Passover, we eat *matzah*, the unleavened bread of affliction, and taste *maror*, the bitter herbs of slavery, to remember the sharp taste of affliction and never be tempted to afflict others. (Rabbi Sacks)

What, thanks to Torah, Jews never forgot is that freedom is a never-ending effort of education in which parents, teachers, homes and schools are all partners in the dialogue between generations.

We have survived the centuries because this commandment to tell the story to our children and our children’s children, is at the heart of our faith. No matter where destiny may have taken us, we continued to relate that tale and shall continue to do so until the end of time.

And that is why, when tradition conferred on Moses the greatest honor, it did not call him “our hero”, “our prophet”, “our king”. It simply called him “*Moshe Rabbenu*” Moses, our teacher.