

Parashat Bo

Can you believe it? Pesach is just over two months away and of course, once Purim is out of the way, that means we begin the annual kashering of our homes and especially our kitchens! I think I need to sit down at the thought of all that cleaning! And yet for all the special work that goes in to preparing for Pesach, the big pay off is that the festival promises to connect us more than ever (at least for those that make the effort) to the story of our people's deliverance from Egypt. And you know, that this should be so is vitally important for us because this story is *the* model by which we are to understand Hashem's acts of deliverance throughout the Scriptures. To put it simply, if you don't put the effort in to connect with Pesach, you know, by actually doing it and doing it well, then you won't understand the rest of the Bible. As the Hagadah demands, "In every generation every person must see themselves as if they themselves were personally freed from Egyptian bondage." Apart from connecting with the story by kashering our homes, as the ancient Israelites had to do, "[because] During those seven days, no leaven is to be found in your houses. Whoever eats food with hametz in it is to be cut off from the community of Isra'el — it doesn't matter whether he is a foreigner or a citizen of the land," the structure of the seder itself is geared toward sucking us in to the Pesach experience and thus enabling us to make connection. The foods that we eat aid us in this respect - the matzah, for instance, reminds us that our ancestors had no time to let their bread rise in the usual manner - bring the experience alive. Indeed, the four glasses of wine that punctuate the ceremony remind us of the promises that Hashem made to our people and which were fulfilled in the ensuing act of deliverance. As we read in Shemot 6:1-8, "ADONAI said to Moshe, "Now you will see what I am going to do to Pharaoh. ...I have heard the groaning of the people of Isra'el, whom the Egyptians are keeping in slavery; and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the people of Isra'el: 'I am ADONAI. I will free you from the forced labor of the Egyptians, rescue you from their oppression, and redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am ADONAI, who freed you from the forced labor of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitz'chak and Ya'akov — I will give it to you as your inheritance. I am ADONAI.'"" According to the Hagadah we drink the first cup of wine in remembrance of Hashem's promise to "free" us from the forced labour of the Egyptians. This cup has become known as the Cup of Sanctification. The second cup is drunk in remembrance of Hashem's promise to "rescue" our people from the Egyptian's oppression. This cup has become known as the Cup of Recitation of the Plagues. The third cup, the one drunk immediately after the meal, is drunk in memory of Hashem's promise to "redeem you with an outstretched arm" and is known as the Cup of Redemption. The fourth and final cup is drunk in remembrance of Hashem's promise to "take you as my people" and is known as the Cup of Praise and Intimacy.

What do you think of when you hear these promises and as you drink from each cup? The first two and the last one I believe are readily understood from the story in which Hashem is portrayed as acting with sovereign power against the Egyptian state - smashing it to pieces

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with demonstration after demonstration of His divine might. Thus by means of the plagues, bit by bit, Hashem visited His mighty judgements against the Egyptians and their gods. The Nile River, central to Egyptian civilisation and thus worshipped as a god, was thus turned into blood, making it a stinking, putrefying mess, a source of death rather than life. In the second plague God brought forth a plague of frogs against Egypt. This was a reptile which, hailing from the Nile, was also worshipped and yet Heket, the Egyptian frog god, was utterly powerless to halt the invasion. In the next plague Hashem made lice come forth from the Egyptian soil, which was worshipped as Geb, so that every Egyptian, man and beast, became infested with them. There was no relief from the vermin which bit continually, causing sores and incessant scratching which led to profuse bleeding. In the fourth plague a veritable army of insects invaded the land. The late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan believed these to be the Egyptian A'ov, scarabs - a classic ancient Egyptian image if there ever was one. But the land not only swarmed with scarabs, it swarmed with other insects too. Thousands of people must thus have been stung or bitten to death. This plague struck against a host of gods in the Egyptian pantheon. In the next plague Hashem struck against Egypt's livestock. This not only damaged her prosperity and food stocks, but once again struck a blow at her deities since the Egyptians worshipped Hathor, a cow-faced goddess. The next plague saw Hashem bring on the Egyptians a plague of excruciating boils. Nothing that the Egyptians did could rid them of the rashes, running blisters and boils covering their flesh and they must have despaired that their prayers of Imhotep, their god of medicine, healing and the sciences, went unheeded. However, if at this stage the Egyptians thought that things couldn't get any worse then they were sadly mistaken for in the next plague Hashem caused huge, deadly hailstones to rain down on Egypt, killing every man and beast that dared to venture out into the open. Nut, the Egyptian god of the sky, and Set, god of storms, were both apparently powerless to halt the devastation. While Egypt had already been attacked by swarms of insects, in Hashem's next plague a further devastating invasion, this time of locusts, was sent against her. The sight must have been both awe-inspiring and frightening since clouds of locusts arrived, literally, in one fell swoop. Indeed, "the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt and settled throughout Egypt's territory. It was an invasion more severe than there had ever been before or will ever be again. They completely covered the ground, so that the ground looked black." With this incredible invasion of locusts anything green that was left in Egypt from the previous plagues was finally removed. Egypt was thus left barren and desolate, with Osiris (known to the Greeks as Osiris), who was supposed to be the protector of crops, being humbled in the process. In the penultimate plague, the plague of darkness, Hashem extinguished the light of the sun in Egypt for three whole days. As you can imagine this must have completely terrified the Egyptians since it patently demonstrated that their chief god, Ra, the Egyptian god of the Sun, was utterly impotent before the God of Israel. For the Egyptians, the sun most basically represented light, warmth, and therefore growth. This made Ra very important to Egyptians, and it is probably therefore no coincidence that he came to be seen as the ruler of all. The sun was either seen as the body or eye of Ra and it was thought to travel in a boat through the underworld during the night. Ra travelled in the sunboat with various deities, including Ma'at, who guided the boat's course, and Set and Mehen, who defended against monsters in

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the underworld. These monsters included Apep, the serpent who tried to stop the sunboat's journey every day by consuming it. So, the Egyptians saw the sunrise as the rebirth of the sun through Nut, the sky, and thus attributed the concept of rebirth and renewal to Ra, strengthening his role as a creator god. The fact that the sun failed to rise for three whole days at Moshe's command must have shaken the Egyptians to their very core for they must have thought that their central deity had been subdued, perhaps even killed by the Hebrew God. Then came the tenth and most devastating plague of all, the death of the first born, the pride and excellence of Egypt, who who held the key social and religious positions in Egyptian society.

According to the story, by the time that Hashem had finished judging Egypt it was utterly shattered. Already, by the time of the eighth plague Pharaoh's servants had been pleading with him: "Let the people go and worship Adonai their God. Don't you understand yet that Egypt is being destroyed?" And yet, such was Pharaoh's pride, not to mention his utter lack of compassion for his own people, that it took two further devastating plagues before he uttered those final words of release: "Up and leave my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve Adonai as you said. Take both your flocks and your herds, as you said; and get out of here!" It is recorded, moreover, that "the Egyptians pressed to send the people out of the land quickly, because they said, 'Otherwise we'll all be dead!' "All the people of Israel," it is added, "did just as Adonai had ordered Moshe and Aharon. On that very day, Adonai brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their divisions." Naturally, the Torah's perspective on this destruction was that it was just recompense for all that the Egyptians had done to the Jewish people. As Bomber Harris would later say of Nazi Germany, "The Nazis entered this war under the rather childish delusion that they were going to bomb everybody else, and nobody was going to bomb them. At Rotterdam, London, Warsaw, and half a hundred other places, they put that rather naive theory into operation. They sowed the wind, and now, they are going to reap the whirlwind." Indeed, you may not be aware of this but these final words about the whirlwind are a direct quotation from Hoshea 8:7. Similarly, Pharaoh sowed the wind but reaped the whirlwind. Like Nazi Germany, Egypt ended up being utterly smashed.

Indeed, surely all of this must have been what Hashem was alluding to when he promised to "free," "rescue" and "take" our people to Himself. As we read in Devarim 4:34, "Or has God ever tried to go and take for himself a nation from the very bowels of another nation, by means of ordeals, signs, wonders, war, a mighty hand, an outstretched arm and great terrors — like all that Adonai your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" But what about that third promise of redemption? Hashem said, "וְגִאֲלֶתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּרִוּעַ נְטוּיָה" 'and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.' How does this promise work itself out in the story? A quick glance at the dictionary reveals that the word G'al - to redeem - means to "gain or regain possession of (something) in exchange for payment." Another more lengthy dictionary definition explains to redeem as: "To buy or pay off; clear by payment. To buy back, as after a tax sale or a mortgage foreclosure. To recover (something pledged or mortgaged) by

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payment or other satisfaction: to redeem a pawned watch. To obtain the release or restoration of, as from captivity, by paying a ransom. To deliver from sin and its consequences by means of a sacrifice offered for the sinner." The idea that Hashem would retake possession of Israel is part and parcel of the Exodus story. After all, the Jews were slaves and as such were in Pharaoh's possession, subject to his will and whim. But along comes the God of the Hebrews and by means of plagues he wrestles possession away from Pharaoh. We get that. And yet, as the dictionary indicates, this re-possession is fundamentally based upon payment. Thus the devastating plagues cannot be the means by which our people were redeemed. If not the plagues then by what means were our people redeemed? What payment was made for their repossession or purchase? The answer to these questions is actually hinted at in the text of our parashah. For as we read, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm." When we read about this 'outstretched arm' in relation to the Exodus story we naturally think of the plagues themselves and of how God's mighty power was extended over Egypt to destroy her - and there's nothing fundamentally wrong with this reading. After all, didn't Moshe say, that Hashem took Israel to Himself "by means of ordeals, signs, wonders, war, a mighty hand, an outstretched arm and great terrors?" And yet, even so this still leaves us wondering what payment was made so as to 'redeem' Israel? Actually the answer to this question has been staring us in the face all the time - literally from the centre of our seder plates. The lamb's shankbone is, in Hebrew, the *zeroa*. According to the Hagadah therefore it was not the plagues which served as the purchase price of our people so that we could belong to God, it was the deaths of the spotless lambs which God commanded our people to slaughter at dusk, roast and eat, and whose blood they were to be brush onto the doorposts of our homes with the boughs of hyssop. As Hashem said, "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and there shall no plague be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt." This JPS Tanakh translation accurately communicates that the fact that the lamb's blood was to act as a sign, both to our people and to God Himself, that the Israelites, as opposed to the Egyptians, were God's people. Thus they were to be spared destruction on that night. Much to our surprise then, it was not by means of the mighty plagues and wonders that God performed for our ancestors in Egypt that our people were redeemed and by which Israel became God's possession, it was by means of the slaughter of those fragile, defenceless, and sinless little lambs, for these lambs were also to be "without blemish."

This paradigm of redemption and possession by God by means of the sacrificial lamb is therefore at very the heart of Israel's national story and if we are to keep the Pesach as the Hagadah instructs us we need to engage with it. Indeed, we find that this paradigm is naturally developed in the ensuing Scriptural narrative. As our people lurched from one sinfully induced crisis to the next through the period of the forty year wandering in the wilderness, through the period of the Judges and Kings, and then during the exilic period and on into the second commonwealth up to the Second Temple, the idea that our people needed *another* redemption in order to transform our behaviour, leading to a change of

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heart toward God and each other, developed. The yearning among tzaddikim was that we shouldn't be Jews in just name only, but also in deed - so that our daily intentions and actions should accurately reflect our claimed state of chosenness. It was in the context of this deep yearning for spiritual redemption that in the first century CE many Jews saw a parallel between the events of the exodus and that of the redeeming *zeroa*, and the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Yeshua. As Yochanan the Immerser declared upon seeing Yeshua, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." While many Jews, suffering under Roman occupation, hoped that Hashem would extend His hand to smash the Romans, as He had once smashed the Egyptians, many others saw that God's act of redemption was one again accomplished through the weakness of an exceptional tzaddik, who suffered and died on behalf of the nation. Therefore Rav Shaul declared, "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace". (Ephesians 1:7). Furthermore, "By God's grace, without earning it, all are granted the status of being considered righteous before him, through the act redeeming us from our enslavement to sin that was accomplished by the Messiah Yeshua. God put Yeshua forward as the kapparah for sin through his faithfulness in respect to his bloody sacrificial death." (Romans 3:22–25). While it may be true that for many contemporary Jews (perhaps as a reaction to Christianity), redemption is no longer an active subject and finds no place in their theology, this is not what we find in the Tanakh. For the Tanakh places the question of redemption at the centre of Jewish national and individual consciousness. For Messianic Jews Yeshua fulfils this very role, his sacrificial suffering, actually affirming and cementing Israel's national calling rather than overturning it. If this belief has become a point of controversy between Jews then at the very least it should be acknowledged that it is a very Jewish controversy. For as the prophet Yeshayahu once wrote:

Who believes our report?
 To whom is the arm of Adonai revealed?
 For before him he grew up like a young plant,
 like a root out of dry ground.
 He was not well-formed or especially handsome;
 we saw him, but his appearance did not attract us.
 People despised and avoided him,
 a man of pains, well acquainted with illness.
 Like someone from whom people turn their faces,
 he was despised; we did not value him.
 In fact, it was our diseases he bore,
 our pains from which he suffered;
 yet we regarded him as punished,
 stricken and afflicted by God.
 But he was wounded because of our crimes,
 crushed because of our sins;
 the disciplining that makes us whole fell on him,

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and by his bruises we are healed.
We all, like sheep, went astray;
we turned, each one, to his own way;
yet Adonai laid on him
the guilt of all of us.
Though mistreated, he was submissive —
he did not open his mouth.
Like a lamb led to be slaughtered,
like a sheep silent before its shearers,
he did not open his mouth.
After forcible arrest and sentencing,
he was taken away;
and none of his generation protested
his being cut off from the land of the living
for the crimes of my people,
who deserved the punishment themselves;
He was given a grave among the wicked;
in his death he was with a rich man.
Although he had done no violence
and had said nothing deceptive,
yet it pleased Adonai to crush him with illness,
to see if he would present himself as a guilt offering.
If he does, he will see his offspring;
and he will prolong his days;
and at his hand Adonai's desire
will be accomplished.
After this ordeal, he will see satisfaction.
"By his knowing [pain and sacrifice],
my righteous servant makes many righteous;
it is for their sins that he suffers.
Therefore I will assign him a share with the great,
he will divide the spoil with the mighty,
for having exposed himself to death
and being counted among the sinners,
while actually bearing the sin of many
and interceding for the offenders."