

Parshas Bo

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The purpose of it all? To make a dwelling place down here...

This week's parsha, Bo, is the third parsha of the sefer Shemot, it is also the parsha that has in it the last 3 plagues. This is indicated in the numeration of the name of the parsha. Bo, comprised of the letters Beis, and Aleph, amounting to 2 and 1- which equals 3.

The first interesting thing about the parsha which Rashi and other mepharshim explain is the language of "Bo el Paroh" i.e., come to Pharaoh, is indicating that Hashem is in the palace of Pharaoh such that he is protecting Moshe, and is directing the outcomes of the meetings between Moshe and Pharaoh (i.e., I will harden his heart etc.). Hashem is calling Moshe to come to Him, in Pharaoh's palace (as opposed to what would have contextually made sense as well, where Hashem tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh's palace.

This is important as it is a defining characteristic of Hashem telling us He is here with us wherever we go. The Lubavitcher Rebbe in his first Mamer as Rebbe, 70 years ago (which we will celebrate on Shabbos- the 10th of Shevat), after taking the mantle of leadership over the Chabad dynasty of Rebbe's stated the first Mamer of Basi Legani Achosi Kalla, "come to my garden, my sister my bride..." In this Mamer, the Rebbe, and in subsequent iterations of the Mamer establishes the order of the foundation of how he views the world up to that point, and therefore what his role as Rebbe would be. The language of Basi Legani, i.e., come to my garden, is rooted in a similar linguistic choice, that the holiness, and Hashem is in this place, much like Bo el paroh is the linguistic choice of Hashem telling Moshe to come to Him in the palace.

Much like the Rebbe throughout the mamer shows how we draw Gdliness into this world, and how the purpose of everything we do is to draw Hashem's light into this world, in order to establish and make for Him a dwelling place in this abode.

As mentioned, the plagues were specifically chosen as a lesson to the Egyptians, but to us in the Torah forever about how to specifically combat an element in our lives that may be antithetical to being servants of Hashem

with a clear mind and a clear heart. (This is indicated in the beginning the parsha with the words:

וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנִי בְנֵךְ וּבְנוֹ בְנֵךְ אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֵתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־
אֶתְחִי אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי בָּם וַיִּדְעֻם כִּי־אֲנִי ה'.

"and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am the LORD."

If the plagues were plagues for the sake of punishment, I would think that the word Makotai מכותי would be used, instead of אתחתי. The use of the word "sign" is intentional, as these are meant to be signs, i.e. lessons. (There is a similar connection to later in the parsha

וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאוֹת עַל־יָדְךָ וְלִזְכוּרֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹכַחַת יְהוָה בְּכַפֶּיךָ
כִּי בְנֵד חֲזָקָה הוֹצֵאתָ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם:

"And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead—in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt.

When Hashem tells us to put on tefillin, He is saying it is a sign, of the lessons to be learned, and how we are supposed to act as servants of Hashem.

For the reasons Hashem sent us to exile in the first place, this language being used of exodus, and the fact that we are reminded at the giving of the Torah, and on Kiddush of every holiday that, Hashem took us out of Egypt. It is a tenet of our faith to believe that Hashem redeemed us, and that we dig deeper into the history and lessons the Torah teaches us about the chronology of the creation of the world up to this point of the Jews leaving Egypt as part of the history and lessons we imbue in our daily lives to be better people and better servants of Hashem.

To name the last two specifically, the plague of darkness, where the Jews looted the Egyptians for their money, it is specifically for the reason of uplifting the mundane and that which could be used to adorn the tabernacle and later for the temple establishment; as well it is part of the fulfilment of Hashem's covenant with Avraham that the Jews would leave Egypt "b'rchus Gadol" i.e. with great material wealth.

For the last plague the death of the first borns, Hashem tells Moshe that at exactly midnight the plague will hit, whereas when Moshe warns Pharaoh, he states it as

“k’chatzos Halayal” at around midnight, Moshe changes the precise language to a vaguer time, in order so that Pharaoh cannot claim that the plague is anything but Hashem’s doing, and that it is by chance that the first-born people are being punished, as opposed to it being a plague intentionally set by Hashem.

In their world, Pharaoh constantly tried to one up Moshe and the plagues, by using his “Chartumim” to perform the same ‘miracle’ and show that there wasn’t greatness by Hashem rather it is magic, or human illusion. That would defeat the purpose of the signs which Hashem was showing that He is in power and He is in this world (language of Bo), and it is not in the domain of human manipulation, rather, it is because of Hashem that human manipulation and control can even occur. This is what we ought to recognize.

One of the most important events in the Torah takes place in this week’s parsha. That is chapter 12, which is Hashem’s first commandment to the newly formed Jewish nation, which is to establish the month’s and with it the calendar, and with that the holiness of the days in the calendar. If you remember, Rashi on Bereishis 1:1 asks why the Torah doesn’t begin with this chapter, which if the Torah is about the laws, and isn’t a story or history book, would render all the early history from creation until this point superfluous, or mistakenly misinterpreted as some sort of history book, which the Torah is patently not. Rashi isn’t heaven forbid suggesting this, rather through his question and answer in Bereishis, Rashi is telling us the importance of every word in the Torah, and that the entire sefer Bereishis and early Shemot establishes the foundations of G-d’s reign and power of this Earth and the universe around, to arrive at this point, in which Hashem gives us control of the physical processes of this world. It is a top-down gift to us.

The importance of control over the calendar is paramount. As the mitzvahs of the days of the year have certain laws, and with-it certain punishments, for example the issur of eating chometz on pesach applies up to the last second of the holiday, until we are granted permission to make Havdala. From 1 minute to the next there is a monumental shift in the importance of a rule on the day, and with it the reward of the day. For example, if I decided to make a seder today, and not eat chometz, there is no value, (in fact it is impermissible).

If the rules of the day are so important, this means that a very specific day or set of days has a very specific set of actions for the day, and therefore cannot be messed around with. Those days, in Hashem’s calendar are as precise as His warning Pharaoh when the final plague

will hit. Yet, Moshe says “k’Chatzos Halayla” that time in our world is interpreted differently.

Hashem vests the power of the mitzvot and the establishment of the holiness of the days in our hands, as our subservience to Hashem is in our hands. Like the story told of the boy who asks his father for an apple, and the father says no, so the boy says a bracha on the apple. In order for the bracha not to be said in vain, the father is forced to give the boy the apple. The Rebbe’s stated this story as it relates to Rosh Hashana, where we pray for Hashem’s reestablishment and rebirth of the Earth- as Rosh Hashana is the new year for the rebirth of the Earth, whereas Nissan and exodus represents the establishment of the counting of the months- which is a nod to our modern use of fiscal versus calendar years- Ein Melech B’lo Am, that we have the power on Rosh Hashana to cajole Hashem into recreating the Earth- a power perhaps rooted in this parsha with Hachodesh Hazelech.

A final point shared with me by Rabbi Yossi Holzberg from the Markham Street Shul, on Shemos 13:9-10

וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאוֹת עַל־יָדְךָ וּלְזִכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת יְהוָה בְּפִיךָ
כִּי בְּיָד חֲזָקָה הוֹצֵאתָ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרָיִם:

“And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead—in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt.

וְשָׁמַרְתָּ אֶת־הַתִּקְוָה הַזֹּאת לְמוֹעֲדָהּ מִיָּמִים יְמִימָה: (ט)

You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year.

Posuk 9 tells us that tefillin is a sign of the exodus from Egypt. In posuk 10 the word לְמוֹעֲדָהּ is spelled with an additional vov. This vov hints to the 6 days of the week we are required to put tefillin on, and 6 times a year we don’t put on tefillin (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana).

All this to culminate that the purpose of it all is to serve Hashem, and to establish a dwelling place here in this world, which culminates with the coming of Mashiach Bimheila Byomaihu.

Good Shabbos