

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

negotiation with Pharaoh. The identity described here is that of possession. Israel is a *"b'chor"* - a chosen *belonging* of HaShem, and the role of the *b'chor* is to serve HaShem. At least, that is how HaShem sees Israel. At this stage Israel is being defined from the outside and acted upon.

It is also not entirely clear whether God relates to ALL of Israel this way. Pharaoh might well assume that only Israel's firstborn sons have this status. So in our parashah, Moses pushes for an increasingly expansive definition of who is included in the group Israel, the group that is to go serve HaShem. In Exodus 10:9, Moses explains: "With our young and with our old we will go. With our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our cattle we will go, for it is a festival of HaShem for us." In short, this firstborn of HaShem is EVERYONE who belongs to his group, regardless of age, gender, or birth order. Bnei Yisrael is no longer just the name of a patriarch and his sons; it is the name of a nation.

But the patriarchal DNA of this nation is ever present. In Exodus 12, we are told triumphantly of the six hundred thousand men who journeyed out of Egypt, never mind the number of women and children. What is counted tends to communicate what counts. Furthermore, although a great multitude of people leaves with them, these people are not numbered among the Israelites.

But these "uncounted" non-Israelites may nevertheless partake of the Passover sacrifice if they have been circumcised and live among the Israelites. Exodus 12:49 begins to delineate when these national differences matter and when they can be transcended, advocating "one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns with you." Ultimately, the Israelite nation is transformed by its laws, and the shared observance of those laws, into a single people. This is an Israel that acts, and thereby defines itself.

Our parashah closes with a return to the now transformed idea of Israel as HaShem's firstborn. Israel has left Raamses. When firstborns are described in Exodus 13, they are described as a *"peter rechem"* - those who break the womb. And they must be dedicated back to HaShem. There could not be a greater contrast with their identity at the beginning of Exodus. No longer the passive orphaned babies enslaved or murdered unrightfully by Pharaoh and needing the protection of HaShem, these firstborns are womb-breakers and it is up to empowered Israelites to bring them back to HaShem in remembrance of HaShem's rightful murdering of Pharaoh's babies. Though the formation of Israelite identity is far from complete, here they become empowered to define their own identities through their own actions.

As we reflect on our own lives, may we be blessed to take identities given to us by others and transform them, via individual and collective action, into expansive identities we can proudly own.



# TORAH SPARKS

## Parashat Bo

January 12, 2019 | 6 Shevat 5779

Annual | Exodus 10:1-13:16 (Etz Hayim p. 374-394; Hertz p. 248-262)  
 Triennial | Exodus 12:29-13:16 (Etz Hayim p. 387-394; Hertz p. 258-262)  
 Haftarah | Jeremiah 46:13-28 (Etz Hayim p. 395-398; Hertz p. 263-264)

## D'var Torah: Who are Bnei Yisrael?

*Bex Stern Rosenblatt, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

Parashat Bo continues the story of the exodus from Egypt, a profound story of identity transformation. The opening of book of Exodus (or in Hebrew, *Shemot*, "Names"), presents Israelite identity as it existed when Yaakov and sons entered Egypt, that is to say, a single family consisting of a patriarch, his sons, and their households. Out of gratitude for Yosef's contribution to Egypt, his small family has been invited to dwell with Pharaoh's much larger family.

But immediately after listing their names, we are told that there arose a new king in Egypt who did not know Yosef. The identities and relationships that had been painstakingly established in Genesis have been erased. Bnei Yisrael - the sons of Israel, have, in Pharaoh's eyes, been orphaned. And in Pharaoh's Egypt, foreign orphans are at best a source of cheap labor, and at worst an existential threat. Exodus opens with Pharaoh's attempt to rid himself of this threat by murdering all male Hebrew newborns.

The establishment of a new Israelite identity begins in Exodus 4:22-23. HaShem says to Moses, "And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus said HaShem, "My son, my firstborn, is Israel. And I say to you, let my son go so that he may serve me, but you refuse to let him go. Behold I am killing your son, your firstborn." God is saying to Pharaoh, that you may have looked at the Israelites as orphans, but they are in fact MY children - my FIRSTBORN and most valued children. They have a status at least equal to the that of Egypt's firstborn. This new identity is ascribed

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from the outside. Its function is to raise Israel's standing to facilitate communication and

## D'var Haftarah: Fulfilling the Vision

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Rabbinic Judaism celebrates the idea that the texts of the Tanakh (Bible) have multiple layers of meaning. The “*p’shat*” or plain meaning of the text attempts to capture the meaning of the text as it would have been understood by reading it within its normative literary and historical context. “*Drash*” or the interpretive meaning removes the text from this context by reading the text in creative ways reflecting the interpreter’s imagination and context. Jeremiah, in his “original” message, seeks to portray the inevitability of Egypt’s conquest at the hands of the Babylonians during the period preceding the destruction of the First Temple. This inescapability is expressed using metaphor: “As I live, declares the King, whose name is the Lord of Hosts: ‘As surely as Tabor is among the mountains and Carmel is by the sea, so shall this thing come to pass.’” (46:18 NJPS translation)

This “*p’shat*” translation does not directly reflect the “literal” Hebrew text which is expressed figuratively. The super-literal translation of this verse might be “as surely as Tabor among the mountains and Carmel by the sea will come (*yavo*).” This translation raises the colorful possibility of mountains moving from one place to another to fulfill God’s will. One midrash from the period of the Mishnah, based on “this” translation, takes this verse out of its original context to reflect the idea that these mountains came running to Mount Sinai to participate in God’s revealing the Torah. (See Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael Parshat Bahodesh chapter 6)

The Babylonian Talmud records another teaching from the period of the Mishnah which takes this idea one step further to describe an idyllic future event: “It has been taught [in a Baraita]: Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar says: The synagogues and houses of learning in Babylon will in the time-to-come be planted in Eretz Israel, as it says: ‘For as Tabor among the mountains and as Carmel by the sea came.’ Now can we not draw an inference here: Just as Carmel and Tabor which came only on a single occasion to learn the Torah are implanted in Eretz Israel, how much more so will be the case that the synagogues (Batei Kneset) and houses of learning (Batei Midrash) where the Torah is read and expounded [will also come and plant themselves in land of Israel]!” (adapted from Megillah 29a)

It is clearly time for those in power to make it possible for **all** Jews who desire to worship God and to study the Torah to establish their synagogues and *batei midrash* in Eretz Israel so that this midrash can be turned from a dream into a reality.

## Parashat Bo Self-Study

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We continue with the last 3 plagues, the preparation for the night when God will sweep across Egypt, and for the Exodus itself. The parashah ends with commandments commemorating this formative event.

- 1) The discussion of the first plague in this Parasha (locust) opens with the stated purpose that we should tell our children what God did to Pharaoh (10:1-2). Why is this an important aspect of the plagues, and do you think that it has been a consideration in the previous plagues?
- 2) The locust plague is started by Moshe who points his staff on the land. But we are also told that God brings the locust by an easterly wind (10:12-13). Why do you think that the Torah tells us this detail?
- 3) The plague of darkness lasts for 3 days (10:21-23). Why do you think that this length of time is chosen?
- 4) In preparation to leave Egypt, the people of Israel have to take a sheep for a meal, keep it for 4 days, the blood will be placed on the doorposts, and the meat has to be prepared in a certain way (12:3-11). Why do you think that such elaborate preparations are needed? Why is a meal ordered? Is this connected in any way to the Israelite demand to go to sacrifice to God?
- 5) As the people of Israel are leaving, the Torah tells us that they dwelled in Egypt for 430 years (12:40-41). Why do you think that the Torah thought that this is an important detail? Why do you think that this number is not a “round” or typological number?

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