

Parashat Bo 5781

This Shabbat's Parasha is so packed with things to discuss that it's a real challenge to narrow it down. Parashat Bo which means "Come" (to Pharaoh) takes place at the very threshold of the Jewish people becoming a people. One of the formative experiences in our Collective memory is the Exodus from Egypt. It is so central that it comes up at almost every occasion: We invoke its memory when we recite the *Sh'ma* (specifically in the 3rd Paragraph – the *Tzitzit* paragraph), it is obviously critical to Pesakh (Passover- whose origin is central to this Shabbat's Parashah), it's central to Sukkot, we mention it in the Kiddush every Friday night – it is a constant presence. If you took a survey of which holiday more Jews celebrate than any other – the winner would be Passover. There are so many different kinds of Haggadot (Haggadahs) – because Jews of all different beliefs have wanted to celebrate this holiday.

What does the word Haggadah mean? It means Telling. The naming of this booklet that we read and discuss at the Seder comes from a verse in this Torah portion. Three times during this Parasha, it talks about when our children ask us why we are doing this Pesach ritual what we should say. In one of the responses it says: 13:8 . והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמור בעבור זה עשה ה' לי . בצאתי ממצרים . You shall tell your child on that day saying because of this that the Eternal One did for me when I left Egypt.

When I was in my late teens or early twenties, living in Israel for four of those years, and I was thinking about where my Jewish identity came from I often saw the Passover Seder as a pivotal experience. For whatever reason it always meant a great deal to me. I remember when I first started Hebrew school, I was eight and three quarters and had just come back from spending five weeks in Israel with my family: aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, and cousins – this was the closest family I had – much more than in the United States – I had also learned some Hebrew words – I was ready to go to Hebrew school. I have a memory from the spring a couple days before Pesach. My father often took me when he went on house-calls – this is when doctors regularly made house calls after office hours – he'd leave me in the car when he went in to the patient's apartment or to the hospital – I remember sitting in the car memorizing the four questions – I really wanted to get them right. Forever after, the seders (sedarim in Hebrew) always meant an enormous amount to me. Even when I was very young and they could seem

very long, I still mostly loved them. I loved the songs, the foods, the discussion – everything about it.

The seder is observed and celebrated in numerous ways. For some people it's a meal with matzah, on one end of the spectrum, for others it's a life-changing experience. In my family we always read the Haggadah, actually always only in Hebrew. We sang many songs throughout the Haggadah. One of the things that affected me most was my mother's participation. My father led the seder, and he could read Hebrew very well, though I don't think he understood that many words besides the ones that were also Yiddish, but my mother was more fluent than my father was, understood more Hebrew, and had a beautiful voice while my father did not. Since we went to an orthodox synagogue, I never sat close enough to my mother to hear her, but at the seder I heard her very well. The entire experience was a strong connection to my family that perished in the Holocaust, which was most of my family – because the customs that people tend to bring to a seder are the customs they grew up with.

When I went for my junior year of college to Hebrew University in Jerusalem I began to really learn Hebrew. One of the things in the Haggadah that always struck me was the story, early in the Haggadah about five rabbis: Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon who were having a seder in Bene Brak and discussed the Exodus from Egypt all night long until their students came and told them it was time for the recitation of the Shma of the morning prayers i.e. it was daylight. First the fact that I had spent some time in Bene Brak, which is now a small city close to Tel Aviv and had become an ultra-orthodox area (a story for another time) – so Bene Brak, the location of this story, was a real location to me – that was striking – second and more important, was the fact that the people in the story were among the most Jewishly knowledgeable people of their time – didn't they know the story of the Exodus really well already? Of course they did, but they found so much to discuss anyway and to experience in the seder.

The central part of the Seder comes right before the meal - and the best songs, of which there are many, come after the meal. The central part is where it says that it is our obligation in every generation to see ourselves as if we have just gone out of Egypt, that we have just been freed from slavery like our ancestors. Then we eat the ritual foods after reciting a short passage explaining each one. What is so characteristically Jewish about this is that though we talk about it and its significance, we do something physical with the experience. It's not meant to be merely

a cerebral experience – it’s meant to be embodied. We need to eat matzah, not only talk about how our ancestors had to leave Egypt in a hurry and there was no time for the bread to rise. We need to taste the bitter herbs, not merely talk about the bitterness of slavery. We need to drink the wine or grape juice. This entire orientation is what we call in Hebrew Avodah B’gashmiyut” Embodied spirituality. You see that throughout our tradition. Most holidays have specific physical acts attached to them. We try to absorb a physical memory attached to our keeping of the holidays. Each one throughout the year has something special attached to it. An experience probably touches us in deeper places that a mere belief does.

Those of us who have had powerful seder experiences are probably attached to the seders of our past and how they were done: did they use parsley or celery or both for the greens they dipped in the salt water, did they use horseradish root for the maror, the bitter herbs, or ground horseradish from a jar. What melodies did they use for the various songs?

It’s interesting to note that in this Torah portion, the question of passing this knowledge and identity on to the next generation comes three times. Altogether it comes four times in the Torah in relation to Pesach – that’s why we have the four questions and the story of the four children. Elie Wiesel raised a very interesting point – that there’s actually a fifth child that isn’t mentioned in the Haggadah. That’s the child who doesn’t go to a Seder, that no longer identifies as a Jew, that no longer cares. There’s a growing number of Jews that fit in that category. I’m sure there are various reasons why that number is growing, but that’s a discussion for another time.

I know that I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating – Judaism is a religion/a civilization with canonical texts. The first canonical text, of course, is the Bible. Nevertheless, despite the fact that these texts were canonized maybe 2,300 years ago, Judaism has evolved over the millennia. If it didn’t evolve it would not have survived. Of the various sects of Judaism of which we are aware that existed in Ancient Israel during the time of the Beit HaMikdash / The Ancient Temple – only one of them survived – the Pharisees – and that is because the Oral Tradition – what has come to be known as the Talmud - enabled the Jewish people to adapt to changing times – to an Israel without a Temple and to the Jewish people without a homeland.

The way in which Judaism has evolved over the centuries has been in finding new meanings in the Ancient canonical writings. An enormous amount of intelligence and creativity

has gone into the interpretation of our Ancient texts. What does that achieve? It achieves two major things – it enables Judaism to evolve while still revering our traditional roots – still finding great beauty, power, and inspiration in them.

Judaism and the Jewish people continue to be changing – whether we want them to or not. For example – in our own back yard – we see how the Jewish demographics of Fall River have changed dramatically over the last 50 years. We no longer have 600 students in the Hebrew school – not by a long shot. I’m probably repeating myself, but I think the issue is so central to the health of our community and of Judaism itself that I feel compelled to repeat this. Society (and consequently the Jewish community and Judaism itself) is evolving – no matter how nostalgic we might be about the Judaism of our grandparents or of the shtetl or of what we grew up with – that will no longer be the Judaism of tomorrow. That does not mean that there will be nothing in common – it means that it won’t be the same.

There’s one verse in this Shabbat’s Torah portion that directly expresses this. It’s Exodus 10:26. Va’anakhnu lo nedah ma na’avod et Hashem ad bo’aynu shama. (We won’t know how we will worship the Eternal One until we get there.) Notice – Moshe (Moses) is still concerned with worshipping the Eternal One – but he recognizes that they won’t know how they will do it until they arrive at their new situation. That’s our condition today. Personally I’m a very nostalgic person – but I recognize that the past can **inspire** the future, but it can’t **be** the future. Reb Zalman used to characterize the kind of Judaism that only wanted to reproduce the past as akin to driving only by looking in the rear view mirror. We **need** to look at the rear view mirror – but more importantly, we have to look ahead. We can’t know what Judaism will look like in 50 years, or what the Jewish community in Fall River will look like. Fall River’s Jewish community has a glorious past, but we need to think and plan for how it will also have a glorious future – and we have to recognize that that glorious future will look different from its glorious past. It won’t reproduce it. The historical and cultural circumstances that made us the way we were 50 years ago don’t exist anymore. The future of Fall River’s Jewish community will look different – we can’t expect to build it in our own image – but rather may our past inspire our future while recognizing that it won’t replicate it. As Moshe said: Lo Nedah mah na’avod et Hashem ad bo’aynu shama: We won’t know how we will worship the Eternal One until we get there.

I would like to conclude with one more thought. Judaism and Jewishness has to be vibrant, inspiring, and evolving in consonance with the way people's lives change. It has to continue to speak to the major issues of our lives. I think that is the basis of Conservative Judaism – conserving the essential elements of our tradition, drawing nourishment from them, while not ignoring how society changes. We cannot know what Judaism will look like in 50 or 100 years if we're lucky enough to have survived. As the verse says: "We cannot know how we will worship the Eternal One until we get there." But at the same time, without a deep connection with our Tradition we will not be able to be nourished by the wisdom accumulated over thousands of years which cannot but help to guide us if we let it.

Shabbat Shalom.