Bo: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?

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God strikes Egypt with the last three of the Ten Plagues. First, a swarm of locusts descends and consumes all of Egypt's crops. Then, a thick and tactile darkness covers all of the land. And, finally, at midnight on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Nissan, **all of Egypt's firstborns are struck dead.**

God then delivers to the Israelites the very first mitzvah: to establish a monthly calendar based on the moon's rebirth. **The Israelites are also commanded to bring a Passover offering to HaShem**, and to sprinkle blood on the doorposts of their homes so that God will pass over those homes when he slays the Egyptians. The offering, roasted meat, is to be eaten with matzah and bitter herbs.

The tenth plague finally convinces Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, and he drives them away from Egypt. They leave in such a hurry that their dough has no time to rise, and so they take only unleavened bread. They also ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold, gems, and precious garments, fulfilling the ancient divine promise that they will leave Egypt as wealthy people.

The Israelites are commanded to consecrate their firstborns to God, and to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year by ridding themselves of anything leavened, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption. They are also commanded to wear tefillin on their arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and proof of their dedication to HaShem.

"Please speak to the people and let them ask to borrow – each man from his friend and every woman from her friend – items of silver and gold."

Take a deeper dive

There are many spectacular events unfurling in this week's parsha — the last three plagues! The Exodus! — but, for millennia, the rabbis pondered a seemingly minor detail: Why were the Israelites required, before embarking on a very long journey, to borrow their Egyptian neighbors' gold, silver, and fineries? **We, after all, are often taught that the Exodus is a spiritual struggle for redemption, so why the emphasis on extremely material things?**

Rabbeinu Chananel, the 10th century Tunisian Talmudist, answered this question literally: the gold and the gems, he said, were reparations for so many years of slavery. Justice, he taught us, must be meted here on earth in clear and simple and obvious ways, and the freed slaves deserved payment for their suffering.

But others, like Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, weren't so sure. The gold and silver, Rav Kook argued, must've been a crucial part of the divine plan, which is why our parsha mentions them four times. Because the task that lay ahead for the Israelites wasn't merely personal or spiritual, it was a real act of bringing about redemption to the world in the strangest way imaginable, not by speaking lofty words but by walking to one specific and promised land and setting up concrete laws and showing everyone else that it was possible to repair the world in very real, physical, palpable ways.

To do that, the Israelites needed to get used to thinking materialistically; and because they'd spent centuries as slaves, they needed a stark and flashy transition, from the house of bondage to bling, to assuage their smallness of spirit and show them that **the divine promise isn't just a metaphor but a bounty that can be fulfilled here on earth in our time.**

And so, armed with gold and silver, the Israelites prepare for the final departure. It's a real revolution: Moses overtakes Pharaoh, HaShem subdues the idolaters, the slaves are liberated. Usually, revolutions like these are practiced out in the open, in the town square, in the streets. **But we are given the opposite command, which we still observe every year: stay indoors, have a festive meal, and tell each other the story of the Exodus. Why?**

Rav Moshe Zvi Neria, the 20th century Israeli rabbi, had a beautiful teaching: "It is the way of the world," he taught us, "that in times of revolutions and grand, sweeping changes, everyone is swept outside, and personal matters are pushed to the wayside and family life gets no attention because no one believes this is the right time to invest in the home."

But the Exodus, he continued, is the opposite, because it begins with a calling to congregate indoors, with your own family, a calling that applies to the leaders as well as their followers for "this first family feast of liberation and regeneration. For the entire nation to be stable, we must first bring stability to the private, familial sphere."

Unlike the radicals who march in the streets demanding change, **our ancestors understood that for revolution not to curdle into violence or melt into oblivion — for it to be a story that still inspires and still forces us to live up the same values — it must be first and foremost a radically private and meaningful matter.**

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