



The Blessing of Remembering – Parashat Bo

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In 1947, David Ben Gurion, the man who would go on to become founding prime minister of the State of Israel, appeared before the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine. Ben Gurion spoke, amongst other things, about the difference between Jews and non-Jews and he illustrated his message with the following poignant example. Ben Gurion explained that the average American is, of course, well aware that in the year 1492 Christopher Columbus set sail to discover the New World. If you were to ask most Americans, however, during which month Columbus left harbor or what his sailors were eating on the journey or what their leave-taking was like, the majority of us would be unable to answer. In contrast, said Ben Gurion, it has been over 3300 years since our people left Egypt. And most any Jew can tell you that this happened in the month of Nisan. And that the Jews were eating *matzah*. And that the community left *b'hipazon* – quickly, out of fear and trepidation. This is the nature of the Jewish people. We are a people of memory.

Indeed, Ben Gurion's observations about the Jewish people are incontrovertibly true. We break a glass at weddings and fast on *Tisha B'Av* (9th of Av) to remember the destruction of the Temple, an event that happened thousands of years ago. We mark both birthdays and *yahrtzeits* to remember those who are dear to us, some now departed. Many of our holidays are not simple celebrations but rather historical reenactments – dwelling in booths on Sukkot, eating *matzah* on Pesach, playing dreidel like the Maccabees on Chanukah. Our people are a people of memory, a nation whose identity is shaped by the events of our past. We display an ongoing commitment to build upon the experiences of those who came before us in order to leave a legacy for those who will come next.

Perhaps there is no better example of our people's commitment to memory than our treatment of the Exodus from Egypt, the narrative recounted in this morning's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo*. More than any other incident in the history of our people, the story of the Exodus stands at the heart of our national consciousness, in a position of singular importance in our liturgy, holiday cycle, and calendar. The Exodus is recounted daily in our worship services when we recite the third paragraph of the Sh'ma and the blessing that follows it, a fulfillment of Deuteronomy 16:3, "*Tizkor et yom tzetcha me'eretz mitzrayim kol y'mei hayecha* – you shall remember the Exodus from Egypt all the days of your life." It is mentioned in the *Kiddush* (the blessing over wine) that we say on Shabbat and festivals and in the *Rosh Chodesh* prayer that we recite at the start of each new month; it is inscribed in the *t'fillin* that we wrap on our arms and head each morning. Indeed, *Parashat Bo* itself mandates institutions to ensure that the Exodus from Egypt will not soon be forgotten – through the command of *higadta l'bincha* (teaching our children), through the institution of *pidyon haben* (redeeming the first born), through ridding our houses of leaven each Pesach and eating only *matzah*. Reading the story of the Exodus once a year is not enough. Rather the Torah ordains that we ritualize this narrative each and every day in order that it should never be forgotten.

Perhaps the 13th century Spanish commentator Ramban put it best when he explained that the commandment that we receive in this week's *parasha*, that of placing Aviv – the month we later come to call Nisan, the month of the Exodus – as the first month of the Jewish calendar was given to assure that the miracle of our deliverance from Egypt would be at the center of our collective consciousness always. Writes Ramban, "Israel is to count this as the first of the months, and from it they are to count all months in order that there be through this enumeration a remembrance of the great miracle." For

Ramban, the fact that Jewish time begins with Aviv is absolutely paramount – it means that the central experience around which we organize our calendars, and by extension our lives, is the Exodus. What a powerful notion – the idea that this *mitzvah* (commandment), the first national one, in fact, in all of Torah, does not privilege law but rather narrative, not revelation but rather redemption. The first commandment is not given at Sinai or in Israel but rather in Egypt; it has us count time not from Shavuot, the festival of receiving Torah, or from Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, but rather from Pesach. We are a people of memory. And so our calendar begins not with law nor with creation. Our calendar begins with sacred history.

Some number of years ago there was an article in Newsweek magazine entitled "The Curse of the Past: An Indifference to History Can Be a Blessing." The article first demonstrated that the average American high-school student knows shockingly little about the history of the United States. The article next argued that this is a wonderful thing! Unlike the Serbs who killed Bosnian Muslims as revenge for their defeat at a battle that took place 600 years prior (or I would argue the Israelis and Palestinians who remain mired in age-old rivalries), the article argued that Americans are able to put our often painful past behind us and move on without bearing a grudge. The blessing of indifference is that it wipes the slate clean; if we don't remember the past, it can't hurt us. It is an argument for forgetting.

My teacher Rabbi David Golinkin, who first pointed me towards the Newsweek article, emphatically rejects this premise, arguing that historical memory is neither intrinsically good or bad – rather it can lead to either productive or destructive ends depending on how it is used. We as Jews, argues Golinkin, are known for using history constructively – to promote justice and humane treatment of others rather than justifying retaliation and revenge. The Torah could easily have allowed mistreatment of the

Egyptians on the basis of their mistreatment of us; rather it instructs “*Lo titaev mitzri ci ger hayita be'artzo* - You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land” (Deuteronomy 23:7). As the Babylonian Talmud Bava Mezia 59b tells us, laws concerning the proper treatment of the *ger* (stranger) are mentioned 36 times in Torah – significantly more than any other kind of law. Our people are a people of memory, just as Ben Gurion claimed. And we strive to use that memory in order to bring goodness and justice into the world rather than dwelling on the suffering of our past.

It is with this insight, I believe, that we can start to appreciate why the Exodus narrative is so very central to our people – why, as Ramban explains, it forms the centerpiece of Jewish time and dominates Jewish consciousness. Because we are to be ever mindful of our period of enslavement, because we are to transmit this experience to our children in such a way that *b'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo c'ilo hu yatza mimitzrayim*, in such a way that in every generation each person should see themselves as if they personally escaped from Egypt – we can never forget how terribly painful it is to be oppressed, to be the stranger, to be other. Because we live with the sting of slavery on a daily basis, because it is at the center of our communal consciousness, reinforced in the prayers we say, the *t'fillin* we bind to our bodies, the calendar by which we rule our lives, we are constantly reminded of our responsibility towards bringing redemption into the world, towards preventing others from experiencing the suffering that we ourselves have known. Living with a consciousness of *yetziat Mitzrayim* (leaving Egypt) means working to support those who are in need – feeling their pain as if it were our own. That is ultimately the message of *Parashat Bo* and what it means to be a Jew.

I'd like to conclude this morning with a beautiful midrash from Tanhuma which explores the words from our *parasha* “*hahodesh hazeh lachem* – this month belongs to you.” Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "To

what may this be compared?" To a king who had a timepiece and when he looked at it, he knew what time of day it was. What did the king do? As soon as his son became of age, he said to him: "My son, until now this time piece has been in my hands. From now on it is transferred to you." Similarly, the Holy One had sanctified new moons and leap years. As soon as Israel arose, however, God said to them: "Until now the reckoning of moons and leap years has been in my hands. See here, from now on they are being transferred to you."

God did not simply transfer responsibility for reckoning moons and leap years when the Divine commanded us "*hahodesh hazeh lachem*, this month belongs to you;" rather God also transferred responsibility for making these moons and leap years times of reckoning, for making our actions in these months count for the good. God conferred upon us responsibility for making each month – beginning with the month of Aviv, the month of the Exodus – truly ours, for taking our experience of Egypt and turning it into a cause for loving the other, thereby bringing healing and repair into the world.

On this morning of *Parashat Bo* may we all be inspired by the stirring words of our Torah calling us to always remember for the good.

Shabbat Shalom!