



Jami MHS Parshat Bo-31 January 2025 Shabbat times start 4:32 finishes 5:43

Rabbi Sacks

It is no accident that parshat Bo, the section that deals with the culminating plagues and the exodus, should turn three times to the subject of children and the duty of parents to educate them. As Jews we believe that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilization you need education. Freedom is lost when it is taken for granted. Unless parents hand on their memories and ideals to the next generation – the story of how they won their freedom and the battles they had to fight along the way – the long journey falters and we lose our way.

What is fascinating, though, is the way the Torah emphasizes the fact that children must ask questions. Two of the three passages in our parsha speak of this:

And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the L-rd, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.’¹

In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the L-rd brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’²

There is another passage later in the **Torah** that also speaks of question asked by a child:

In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the L-rd our G-d has commanded you?’ tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the L-rd brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’³

The other passage in today’s **parsha**, the only one that does not mention a question, is:

On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the L-rd did for me when I came out of Egypt.’⁴

These four passages have become famous because of their appearance in the Haggadah on Pesach. They are the four children: one wise, one wicked or rebellious, one simple and “one who does not know how to ask.” Reading them together the sages came to the conclusion that [1] children should ask questions, [2] the **Pesach** narrative must be constructed in response to, and begin with, questions asked by a child, [3] it is the duty of a parent to encourage his or her children to ask questions, and the child who does not yet know how to ask should be taught to ask.

There is nothing natural about this at all. To the contrary, it goes dramatically against the grain of history. Most traditional cultures see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide or command. The task of the child is to obey. “Children should be seen, not heard,” goes the old English proverb. “Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the L-rd,” says a famous Christian text.

THE NECESSITY OF ASKING QUESTIONS

Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. In Judaism the opposite is the case. It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow. Judaism is the rarest of phenomena: a faith based on asking questions, sometimes deep and difficult ones that seem to shake the very foundations of faith itself. “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” asked Abraham. “Why, L-rd, why have you brought trouble on this people?” asked Moses. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” asked Jeremiah. The book of Job is largely constructed out of questions, and G-d’s answer consists of four chapters of yet deeper questions: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? ... Can you catch Leviathan with a hook? ... Will it make an agreement with you and let you take it as your slave for life?”

In yeshiva the highest accolade is to ask a good question: Du fregst a gutte kashe. Rabbi Abraham Twersky, a deeply religious psychiatrist, tells of how when he was young, his teacher would relish challenges to his arguments. In his broken English, he would say, “You right! You 100 prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong.”

Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, “My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to ask: ‘Izzy, did you ask a good question today?’ That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist.”

Judaism is not a religion of blind obedience. Indeed, astonishingly in a religion of 613 commandments, there is no Hebrew word that means “to obey”. When Hebrew was revived as a living language in the nineteenth century, and there was need for a verb meaning “to obey,” it had to be borrowed from the Aramaic: *letsayet*. Instead of a word meaning “to obey,” the Torah uses the verb *shema*, untranslatable into English because it means [1] to listen, [2] to hear, [3] to understand, [4] to internalize, and [5] to respond. Written into the very structure of Hebraic consciousness is the idea that our highest duty is to seek to understand the will of G-d, not just to obey blindly. Tennyson’s verse, “Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die,” is as far from a Jewish mindset as it is possible to be.

Why? Because we believe that intelligence is G-d’s greatest gift to humanity. Rashi understands the phrase that G-d made man “in His image, after His likeness

,” to mean that G-d gave us the ability “to understand and discern.” The very first of our requests in the weekday Amidah is for “knowledge, understanding and discernment.” One of the most breathtakingly bold of the rabbis’ institutions was to coin a blessing to be said on seeing a great non-Jewish scholar. Not only did they see wisdom in cultures other than their own. They thanked G-d for it. How far this is from the narrow-mindedness than has so often demeaned and diminished religions, past and present.

The historian Paul Johnson once wrote that rabbinic Judaism was “an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.” Much of that had, and still has, to do with the absolute priority Jews have always placed on education, schools, the *beit midrash*, religious study as an act even higher than prayer, learning as a lifelong engagement, and teaching as the highest vocation of the religious life.

But much too has to do with how one studies and how we teach our children. The Torah indicates this at the most powerful and poignant juncture in Jewish history – just as the Israelites are about to leave Egypt and begin their life as a free people under the sovereignty of G-d. Hand on the memory of this moment to your children, says Moses. But do not do so in an authoritarian way. Encourage your children to ask, question, probe, investigate, analyze, explore. Liberty means freedom of the mind, not just of the body. Those who are confident of their faith need fear no question. It is only those who lack confidence, who have secret and suppressed doubts, who are afraid.

The one essential, though, is to know and to teach this to our children, that not every question has an answer we can immediately understand. There are ideas we will only fully comprehend through age and experience, others that take great intellectual preparation, yet others that may be beyond our collective comprehension at this stage of the human quest. Darwin never knew what a gene was. Even the great Newton, founder of modern science, understood how little he understood, and put it beautifully: “I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

In teaching its children to ask and keep asking, Judaism honored what Maimonides called the “active intellect” and saw it as the gift of G-d. No faith has honored human intelligence more.

Trust transcends hope, as the sky above transcends the earth below.

A thread of hope is an anchor to the ground, a narrow path you've set for destiny to lead you.

The thread snaps and your eyes look up to see nothing more than the open sky. Hope is gone. All you can do now is trust the One who has no bounds.

That is Trust: When you stop suggesting to your Maker how He could rescue you. When you are prepared to be surprised by wonders and open to miracles.

Joke

Moshe Schwartz has just spent his first night at the swanky W hotel in Manhattan. As soon as he awakes, he phones the hotel's reception desk.

"So how are you on this morning, Mr. Schwartz?" asks the receptionist.

"If you must know," replies Moshe, "I'm fuming. In fact I'm fuming so much that I'm ready to plotz,"

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that," says the receptionist. "So how can I help you?"

"I'm sure you've heard of the straw that broke the camel's back," replies Moshe.

"Of course I have," replies the receptionist.

"Well I've just spent the night sleeping on it!" says Moshe.

Story time

Gutman Locks who lives in Jerusalem was at the western wall asked an elderly man to put on tefillin. He strongly refused.

I asked him, "When was the last time you put on tefillin?"

He smiled and proudly said, "72 years ago!"

"Two hundred and sixty-seven synagogues were burned down in one night. They burned down our synagogue, too. My tefillin were burnt up, and I have never put them on again," he said.

"I have a friend who was in the camps, too," I quickly said, "and he not only puts on tefillin today, but he even put them onto others inside the camp! Do you want to hear how he got tefillin into the camp?"

"Yes," he said strongly. "How did he get them in there?"

His name is Laibel. Whenever he comes to Israel, he prays with our minyan at sunrise. He also has numbers tattooed on his arm. When we first met, he asked me, 'What do you do around here?' and I responded, 'I put tefillin on people here at the Western Wall.'

"'Oh yeah?' he said, 'Well, I put tefillin on people in the death camp.'

"I stared at him. There was nothing I could say. I was dumbfounded. I asked him, 'How did you get the tefillin in there?'"

"He began his story. The Nazis had come to the ghetto and grabbed 137 young boys. He told me that only five of them survived. Only five.

"He was thirteen and a half years old. He was wearing the high boots that his father had bought him, and when he saw them coming, he stuffed his tefillin into one boot and his prayerbook in the other.

"They pushed the boys into a cattle car and drove them to the death camp, not far from the ghetto. When the train stopped, they slid open the side of the cattle car and immediately began pushing them toward the open door of the gas chamber. The boys were frightened and cried out. They asked Laibel, 'What should we do?' He told them, 'We're going to stand in rows five across, and we're going to march right into that gas chamber singing a song of faith, the "Ani Maamin.'"

And they did just that. They stood in rows five across, and started singing and marching right into the chamber.

"The guards became so confused that they did not know what to do. They screamed, 'You can't do that! No one has ever done such a thing before. Stop it! Stop it at once! Here! Go over there to the showers instead!'"

"They pushed them over to the showers, and forced them to undress and throw their clothing into a pile in the middle of the floor. They made them empty their shoes, and the tefillin and prayerbook fell out onto the pile.

"After the shower, when they were dressed in camp clothes and were being pushed out, past the pile of their clothes, Laibel saw his tefillin and prayerbook lying there. He wanted so badly to run and pick them up, but terrifying guards were watching. He said to the boys, 'I did something for you, so now you do something for me.'

"'Whatever you want,' they said. 'You saved our lives.'

He said, 'When I give the signal, start a fight and scream out loud. Okay... now!' The boys started to fight and scream. The guards ran over and tried to pull them apart, but they wouldn't stop fighting. In the confusion, he ran over and grabbed his tefillin and prayerbook, and hid them under his arms.

"Later, he was in the barracks, and wanted to put on the tefillin. He was able to put the arm-tefillin on without anyone seeing, by pulling his sleeve over it, but how could he put on the head-tefillin? There were guards all over. He opened the window and stuck his head outside so he could put on the head-tefillin. A guard came by and screamed, 'Who said you could open that window?' He told him that he was sick and throwing up, and if he made him close the window he would throw up inside, too. The guard left him. And he looked me in the eye and said, 'And I put tefillin on other men, too.' I started to cry, and I kissed him on his yarmulke.

"The day after Laibel told me his story, there was a soldier at the Western Wall who wouldn't put on tefillin. No matter what I said, he simply refused. Then I told him Laibel's story, and he quickly said, 'Okay, I'll do it.'

"And you can do it, too," I said to the elderly gentleman who hadn't donned tefillin in 72 years, as I gently slid the tefillin I was holding onto his arm. He said the blessing and started to cry. We said the Shema, and he prayed for his family. He began to smile even while the tears were streaming down his face. A crowd gathered around and congratulated him on overcoming all those years of rejection.

You do not always succeed, but you always have to try.

Parsha Summary

The name of the Parshah, "Bo," means "Come [to Pharaoh]" and it is found in Exodus 10:1.

The last three of the Ten Plagues are visited on Egypt: a swarm of locusts devours all the crops and greenery; a thick, palpable darkness envelops the land; and all the firstborn of Egypt are killed at the stroke of midnight of the 15th of the month of Nissan.

G-d commands the first mitzvah to be given to the people of Israel: to establish a calendar based on the monthly rebirth of the moon. The Israelites are also instructed to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d: a lamb or kid goat is to be slaughtered, and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that G-d should pass over these homes when He comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The roasted meat of the offering is to be eaten that night together with matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs.

The death of the firstborn finally breaks Pharaoh's resistance, and he literally drives the children of Israel from his land. So hastily do they depart that there is no time for their dough to rise, and the only provisions they take along are unleavened. Before they go, they ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold, silver and garments—fulfilling the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt with great wealth.

The children of Israel are commanded to consecrate all firstborn, and to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year by removing all leaven from their possession for seven days, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption to their children. They are also commanded to wear tefillin on the arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and their resultant commitment to G-d.