



Rhythms and Religious Rituals: Torah Reflections on Parashat Bo

Exodus 10:1 – 13:16

In this week's Torah section, life in Egypt is deteriorating. With what is becoming a pattern of predictability, the plagues keep coming. Last week we encountered the first seven blows, beginning with the bloody Nile, and moving on to frogs, lice and so on. Now in Exodus chapters ten and eleven, we have locusts followed by darkness. There also will be the painful promise of the final plague.

Then the narrative changes direction and addresses a new subject. The first twenty-eight verses of chapter twelve turn from the disasters raining down on Egypt and focus instead on matters of religious ritual.

God instructs Moses and Aaron about details concerned with what will become the Festival of Passover/Unleavened Bread. Moses shares this information with the elders of the community.

This is followed by thirteen verses (Exodus 12:29-42) which relate the events of the tenth plague, which will bring death to the first born of Egypt. Then the final eight verses of chapter twelve, and all of chapter thirteen take up, once again, matters of religious ritual.

How are we to understand these unexpected changes in the narrative of Exodus, from the escalating catastrophe in Egypt, suddenly turning to laws dealing with Passover and other matters?

For the most part, we are creatures of habit. We establish certain patterns of behavior. We set up rhythms that we follow on a daily basis. Broadly speaking, this is necessary for us. It allows our lives to proceed in an orderly and expected way. It would be psychically and physically draining if we had to think about each step we took throughout the day. Yet, in the narrative of our own lives, it is easy to get into a pattern where all we think about is the physical realm: our bodies, our jobs, and the real life practical responsibilities of being somewhere and doing something specific. Even when we are experiencing illness, often there is a kind of pattern to our lives, a routine that we follow day by day.

We are, however, more than just a physical being. We possess an eternal soul, a *neshama*. As our bodies require nourishment, so do our souls.

In Exodus chapter twelve, there is a conscious change in the subject from the previous chapters. The Bible is telling us, life should be more than our patterns of physical behavior. We also need to care for our souls.

Consciously changing direction, turning from the day-to-day demands to make time for ritual in our lives can enrich us enormously. For some people it may mean taking a break in the workday and going for a walk outdoors, seeing trees or flowers, or admiring some

vista. For someone else it may be going to a quiet place or space, or setting certain moments aside in our minds, and taking the time for private prayer, meditation, or study. Someone else may find refreshment of soul through some minutes spent in physical exercise, sharing a blessing with a companion, or the wonder of simply breathing. Any of these – or other ways – can enrich our lives by making and taking moments away from our daily routine. Any of these ritual moments, religiously followed, can be ways to nurture our *neshama*.

When we were slaves in Egypt we could hardly choose how to use our time. Now that we are free, let us not enslave ourselves emotionally or psychically by binding our lives solely to the treadmill of our daily demands and duties.

God tells Moses and Aaron that these rituals mark the “beginning” of a new way of living (Exodus 12:1), and that they are to tell the people to “celebrate” this special occasion “for all time.”

When we begin to make and take the time in our daily lives to nurture our soul, our *neshama*, by whatever means, a walk, a time to pray, meditate, or study, perhaps to exercise, or some other method, these moments will change our lives for the better. As we incorporate these rituals into the rhythm our lives, we may celebrate this experience as a new way of living.

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