

Parashat Bo Second Triennial

Exodus 11:4 – 12:28

The story of the Exodus from Egypt continues in this week's reading. The second triennial section begins with Moses warning Pharaoh that the last plague will soon be upon Egypt: the slaying of the first born. Moses tells Pharaoh that halfway through the night every first born son in Egypt will die, from the first born child of Pharaoh down to the first born of non-Israelite slave women, and also every first born animal. But the Israelites will be spared. Having warned Pharaoh, Moses leaves in burning anger.

The scene then shifts to G-d telling Moses and Aaron how the people are to escape this plague. They are instructed to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts so that the Destroyer will pass over their houses. The instructions for how to perform the sacrifice and how to eat it (with loins girded, shoes on feet, staff in hand, and quickly – i.e. ready to run) are given as well as many of the rules for celebrating Passover, including eating *matza* and not having *hametz* in one's home. The chronology is confusing. Instructions for the first Passover – blood on lintels, getting ready to run – are mixed with instructions for a weeklong festival commemorating the Exodus.

The holiday we call Pesach/Passover was likely a combined festival taking elements from two previous holidays that were celebrated at this time of year by different groups who joined to become the Israelites. Many scholars believe that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was an agricultural holiday celebrating the grain harvest and the Feast of the Paschal Lamb was a holiday of thanksgiving in which livestock were sacrificed. The story of the Exodus ties the two together into one festival.

Rashi questions why the blood is needed on the doorposts to signify that the home is an Israelite one. G-d, of course, knows without the sign. He concludes that the blood was smeared on the inside of the doorpost, as a sign to the residents within that G-d will protect them, rather than on the outside to tell G-d or G-d's mysterious agent, "the Destroyer", to skip that house. G-d, presumably, passed on the divine knowledge of which houses to skip on the Destroyer's route. However, the Israelites are warned to not go out of the house all night long, so it seems the Destroyer would not have spared them if they left.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer says that marking their homes was a way for the Israelite slaves to take action in their own liberation, to claim the identity of a soon to be free people. She sees a message for all generations in this action, saying "an essential first step on any journey towards liberation is a willingness to identify oneself: to step up, to speak out, to mark oneself simultaneously as oppressed and as ready to break the bonds of oppression."

Haftarah Jeremiah 46:13-28

This week's *haftarah* reading comes from the book of Jeremiah, generally thought to have been written by a prophet of the priestly class named Jeremiah ben Hilkiah. Jeremiah was active as a prophet from the reign of King Josiah in the 7th Century BCE until sometime after the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE. Sometimes known as the gloomy prophet, his work is characterized by its negative tone. In addition to the book of Jeremiah, he is said to have written the book of Lamentations. It is no wonder that his name is the source of the word "jeremiad" – meaning a long and bitterly, angry poem. Like last week's *haftarah* from Ezekiel, this week's piece from Jeremiah is a polemic against Egypt, predicting that Babylon will conquer Egypt. As is the case for Moses' dire prediction to Pharaoh in the *parasha*, this one will come true.

The *haftarah* ends with a promise from G-d that the Israelite people will be preserved. "I am with you," G-d says to them, promising that the nations to which the Israelites have been banished will end, but not the Israelite nation. Indeed, the ancient Egyptian Pharaonic dynasty and civilization ended, as did ancient Babylonia, and we're still here.