

Parshat Bo & Sisterhood Shabbat  
January 28, 2023 | ו' שבט תשפ"ג  
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B'nai Israel

### **Everyone Comes Along**

Today we honor and recognize the many different ways in which our B'nai Israel Sisterhood contributes to the vibrancy of our congregation. Our B'nai Israel Sisterhood is part of an international organization known today as Women's League for Conservative Judaism, an essential and impactful branch of our movement. But before we consider the significance of today, I wish to turn to the past. The Women's Religious Union of the United Synagogue was founded in 1918 by Mathilde Roth Schechter in partnership with 100 other women. Their goal was to "perpetuate traditional Judaism in their homes, synagogues and communities, a task for American Jewish women."<sup>1</sup> The organization flourished throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adding a full-scale program department by 1930, and working to form United Synagogue Youth in 1952. It continued to thrive in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has pivoted in significant ways to address the needs and the realities of our movement now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here at B'nai Israel, our Sisterhood may be comprised of the women of our congregation, but they serve the needs of our entire synagogue-community. From camp scholarships, to Shabbat Twizzlers, to cultural and educational programming, to *hamantaschen*, and so much more, our B'nai Israel Sisterhood not only believes that they have an obligation to carry on the vision of Mathilde Schechter, to perpetuate traditional Judaism in all of our spaces, but they also act on this obligation and seek to engage everyone in our congregational family.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wlci.org/about/about-womens-league/history/>.

Looking closely at Parshat Bo, we see two models emerge for how communities should aspire to function. One of these models is presented by Moses and Aaron, and the other is presented by Pharaoh. The juxtaposition of these two models reveals to us why God was on the side of the Israelites, and why it is we who are still here today celebrating our heritage, while the rites and religion of ancient Egypt are confined to the annals of history.

Last week's *parsha* included the first seven plagues wrought against Egypt by God. This week we read of the final three: locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn. After Moses and Aaron are rebuffed by Pharaoh yet again, it is Pharaoh's courtiers who speak up and rebuke him, "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let a delegation go to worship their God Adonai! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?"<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, Pharaoh hears them and has a change of heart. He calls upon Moses and Aaron and tells them to go worship God. But before they depart he asks, מִי וְהֵלֶכְיוּ, "Who exactly is going?"<sup>3</sup> You can tell that he is already having doubts about giving them permission to leave. It is like the perennial question that parents ask their teenagers who are about to depart for a night out with friends, "Who exactly is going?" There is suspicion in the question, a sense of concern, and even a measure of regret. Perhaps I should not let you go after all. And this is exactly how Pharaoh ultimately responds! Moses tells him that everyone is going, and he lists the categories so as to emphasize that he means *everyone*:

בְּנֵעָרֵינוּ וּבְזִקְנֵינוּ יֵלְכוּ

Our young ones and our elders are going,

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 10:7.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 10:8.

בְּרֵאֵינוּ וּבְבָנוֹתֵינוּ

Our sons and our daughters

בְּצֹאֲנֵנוּ וּבְבָקָרֵנוּ נֵלֵךְ

Our flocks and our herds are going,

כִּי חַג ה' לָנוּ

For we must observe Adonai's festival.<sup>4</sup>

Moses makes it explicitly clear to Pharaoh that they are *all* leaving to worship God. This is not an event to be missed; nobody is left behind; everyone comes along. And as we already know from the mere question that has been asked, this is unacceptable to Pharaoh. He will only permit the men to leave; everyone else stays behind. This, of course, is unacceptable for us.

Herein we see the emergence of two models for religious community. In Moses' model, everyone participates, whereas in Pharaoh's model, only some are needed. The Ramban, Nachmanides, notes in his commentary that Pharaoh knows that children do not participate in Israelite offerings to God, and so Moses' demands enrage him for he was asking for too much. Pharaoh has still not accepted that, in time, he will have to let all of the Israelites go. He tries to use his strict understanding of the law to keep the majority of the community back in Egypt. But Moses refuses to back down. We all go. Everyone comes along. In Pharaoh's Egypt, only the few elite are endowed with the capacity to engage directly in their rituals and access their gods. Not so for Moses, not in this case. Everyone must depart from Egypt. Everyone must come along. Everyone will stand together at the foot of Mount Sinai.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 10:9.

We see here a significant shift in Moses' approach to dealing with Pharaoh's obstinance. Moses no longer questions God's role in all of this. The modern scholar Robert Alter writes,

In a reversal of their initial speech postures, it is now Pharaoh who speaks in brief, unadorned sentences, and it is Moses who deploys quasipoetic parallelism—lads and old men, sons and daughters, sheep and cattle—in a rhetorical flourish that makes it plain he will yield in nothing.<sup>5</sup>

Moses is now the unrelenting one, the one who will not back down and will demand the freedom of his people, all of his people, despite any challenges that Pharaoh attempts to set before him. Moses knows that the people can only truly be free, and can only truly worship God, when they are all together. In his commentary on these passages, the Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, writes,

וידוע שאין שמחת האדם שלימה כי אם בזמן שאשתו ובניו וכל קניניו עמו

“It is well known that a person can only be truly happy when their spouse, their children, and all of their possessions are with them.”

Moses' model for the community aims to be both inclusive and joyous—everyone must be free to leave Egypt together, and in doing so everyone will enjoy the delight and satisfaction that come from being with family and friends.

This, of course, is what our Sisterhood is all about. They are but one segment of our congregation, but their mission seeks to engage us all in meaningful ways. It is through their tireless efforts, their financial support, and their commitment to B'nai Israel that our congregation is one in which everyone has a role, everyone is given an opportunity to thrive,

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p. 367-368.

and in which our aim is to bring joy and meaning to everything that we do. Women's League affirms on its website that it "is as dedicated as it was in 1918 to creating a vibrant American Jewish community, one which nurtures the family and community with the values of Jewish tradition." That sense of responsibility for building and sustaining Jewish community emanates from the top and spreads out to all of our movement's congregations, especially our own. This is what we celebrate on this day, and this is why we honor our Sisterhood. We aspire to be a congregation where everyone comes along, where there is something for everyone.

In Pharaoh's Egypt, it is the many who provide for the comfort of the few—the enslaved Israelites and the general population serve to please Pharaoh and his royal officials. But in our community, in Moses' and God's vision for Israel, it is the few who serve the needs of the many. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam served the needs of all their people—legal, ritual, and spiritual needs. The small group of *kohanim* and *levi'im* served as intermediaries to bring the majority closer to God. When we juxtapose these models, we are reminded of the wisdom of our tradition, and the value of our heritage. The Women's League logo includes the Hebrew phrase "*mah yafah yerushataynu*," how precious is our heritage. This is a heritage that we must share with everyone in our community. Parshat Bo reminds us all that Judaism is our precious heritage because it seeks to include us all, and Sisterhood serves as a *dugma*, as a model for us all to follow. Shabbat shalom.