PARASHAT BO
Exodus 10:1–13:16

Parashat Bo takes its name from the first word of God's command to Moses, "Go (*Bo*) to Pharaoh." Moses and Aaron continue to plead with Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free. Because he refuses, the Egyptians are punished with plagues of locusts, darkness, and, finally, the death of their firstborn. Pharaoh tells Moses, "Be gone from me!" God then tells Moses that, after the last plague, Pharaoh will let the Israelites leave. That midnight Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt and proclaims that each year on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month a festival lasting seven days will be celebrated in order to recall their liberation from Egypt. *Matzah,* or "unleavened bread," shall be eaten during the seven days, and on the first night of the festival the children will be told how God freed their people from the house of bondage.

OUR TARGUM

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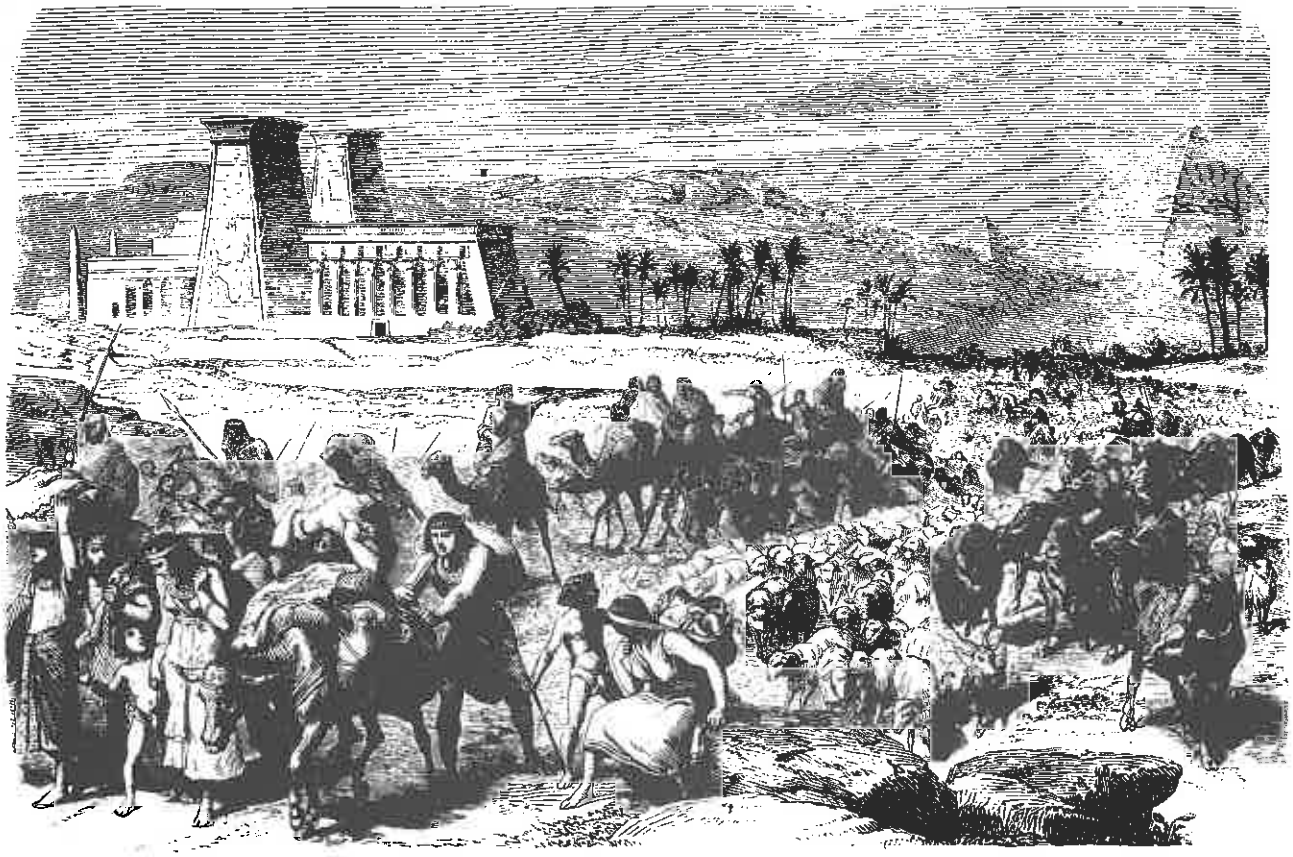
After sending seven plagues upon Egypt (blood in the Nile River, frogs, swarms of insects, flies, cattle disease, hail, and boils), God, once again, sends Moses and his brother, Aaron, to Pharaoh. Standing before the Egyptian ruler, they ask him, "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before God?" They warn him that, if he does not free their people, God will bring a plague of locusts upon Egypt.

Pharaoh's advisors counsel him: "Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?" So the ruler invites Moses and Aaron back to his palace. "Whom do you wish to take with you?" he asks them. Moses tells him: "We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the Lord's festival." Pharaoh denies the request and expels Moses and Aaron from the palace.

God then brings a plague of locusts upon Egypt. The whole land is covered with them. When Pharaoh sees what has happened, he calls for Moses. "Forgive me," he cries. Moses pleads for him, and God ends the plague, but Pharaoh's heart hardens once again.



This time God punishes Egypt with a plague of darkness. For three days there is blackness in the land except in the locations where the Israelites are living. Again, Pharaoh calls Moses. He offers him a deal. "Go, worship the Lord! Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind; even your children may go with you." Moses refuses, and Pharaoh's heart stiffens again. "Be gone from me!" he tells Moses.

God informs Moses that one more plague will be sent upon Egypt. God also instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to borrow objects of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors. The Egyptians willingly give the Israelites the objects they request.

God sends the tenth plague upon Egypt. Every firstborn son and every firstborn of the cattle dies. Having lost his own son, and seeing the disaster that has come upon his people and land, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron. Broken by God's power, he tells them, "Go, worship the Lord . . . and may you bring a blessing upon me also!" The other Egyptians urge the Israelites to leave in haste. So they take their dough before it has leavened and the gold and silver that they had requested from their Egyptian neighbors. At midnight, on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year, after living in Eygpt for 430 years, Moses leads the people out of Egypt.

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On that evening of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses declares that God has commanded the people to recall their liberation each year with a special commemoration ceremony. Every household is to take a lamb on the tenth day of the month and slaughter it at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month. Its blood is to be painted on the doorposts of each family house, and its meat is to be roasted and eaten with unleavened bread (*matzah*) and bitter herbs during the night so that it is consumed by morning. Anything left by morning is to be burned.

As the meal is eaten, Israelite men are to dress

with a belt around their waists and sandals on their feet. Each is to hold a staff in his hand and to eat the lamb quickly. When the children see this strange ritual and ask "What do you mean by this ceremony?" they are to answer: "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when God killed the Egyptians, but saved our houses."

Moses also informs the Israelites that God has commanded them to recall their liberation from Egypt each year by eating only unleavened bread for seven days. All leaven is to be removed from their homes; none is to be found in all their lands during the seven days of the festival. Furthermore, the first day and the seventh day are to be set aside for a solemn gathering of the community. As with the Sabbath, no work is to be done on them.

THEMES

Parashat Bo contains two important themes:

1. Taking the gold and silver from the Egyptians.
2. The creation of the Pesach celebration.

PEREK ALEF: *Were the Israelites Justified in Taking Gold and Silver from the Egyptians?*

Just before the tenth and final plague is brought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians, Moses is commanded by God to tell the Israelites "to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold." The Torah informs us that the Egyptians willingly gave the Israelites what they requested and that "thus they stripped the Egyptians."

The description raises many troubling questions. Does the Torah justify robbery from the Egyptians? Why were the Egyptians willing to hand over their wealth to the Israelites? Did the Israelites take advantage of the Egyptians when they "stripped" them of their gold and silver?

The Hebrew word for "borrow" is *sha'al*. It can also mean "ask" or "demand." Which is the most accurate translation for this incident? Did the Israelites "borrow," "ask for," or "demand" riches from the Egyptians? Were the gold and silver gifts, or were they the "spoils" of victory?

Among all Jewish interpreters of this significant Torah story, none suggests that the Israelites deliberately set out to rob the Egyptians of their wealth. Nearly all are agreed that the Egyptians willingly presented their gold and silver to the departing Israelites.

Rabbi Ishmael says that the response on the part of the Egyptians was immediate and without qualification.

Zugot

Rabbi Jose agrees, explaining that there was a high level of trust and respect between the Egyptian people and the Israelites. For three days the Egyptians were living in a plague of "black darkness" while the Israelites had light in their dwellings. The Israelites could have taken advantage of them and robbed them, but they did not. For that reason, Rabbi Jose maintains, the Egyptians trusted the Israelites and graciously rewarded them with silver and gold. (*Mechilta* on Exodus 12:36)

Hirsch

Jewish honesty

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments that the Israelites "proved their sterling moral quality" during the three days of darkness. "For three

> *days long their oppressors . . . were completely helpless in their power; for three days long all their treasures lay open in their houses, and no Jew took the opportunity to take the slightest advantage either against their persons or their possessions."* (*Comment on Exodus 11:2–3,* The Pentateuch, *p. 119*)

Josephus agrees. He claims that the Israelites did not steal anything. Instead, the Egyptians offered them gifts, insisting on honoring them out of friendship and neighborliness.

RASHBAM

Rashbam also believes that the Egyptians willingly turned over their wealth to the departing Israelites. "They merely asked for it, and the Egyptians responded by giving them gifts." Rashbam implies that there was no force, no persuasion.

Sarna

Modern commentator Nahum Sarna disagrees. He explains that the silver and gold were not just neighborly gifts but rather spoils of a justified Jewish victory over the Egyptians. For years the Egyptians had treated the Israelites cruelly, insulting their dignity and intelligence as human beings. Taking "gifts" from the Egyptians was a means of restoring Jewish pride. It proved that Jews were equal in every way to their oppressors. The Israelites, Sarna writes, "escaped from Egypt with their dignity intact."

Sarna's explanation, however, differs from early Egyptian interpretations of the story. During the time that Alexander the Great ruled over Egypt (332–323 B.C.E.), many Egyptians complained to him that the Israelites had stolen riches from their ancestors. As proof they cited the Torah report of Jews taking silver and gold from the Egyptians. Hearing what some Egyptians were claiming, Gaviha ben Pasisa, a well-known Jewish leader, asked for a public debate. Alexander agreed.

After listening to the Egyptian argument from the Torah, Gaviha answered: "I will also use a proof from the Torah. We are told that Israel 'lived in Egypt four hundred and thirty-six years.' Do you Egyptians not owe the Israelites payment for all their years of slavery?" After hearing Gaviha's argument, Alexander gave the Egyptians three days to formulate an answer. They considered the matter but could not find one. (*Sanhedrin* 91a)

Gaviha's argument that what the Israelites had taken was neither a gift nor stolen property but rather "reparations" or repayment for years of slave labor is also one that other commentators have raised. For instance, the philosopher Philo Judaeus, who lived in Alexandria during the first century, believed that the silver and gold taken from the Egyptians was a just payment to the Israelites for all their suffering and for the wages they had never been paid. The gifts were owed to the Israelites by the Egyptians.

> ***A just payment***
> *The Hebrew slaves had worked for their masters . . . they were entitled to their freedom and, therefore, at the same time, to a just farewell payment. Justice demanded it.* (*Umberto Cassuto on Deuteronomy 23:8*)

In 1951 the government of Israel debated the question of whether or not to seek "reparations" from Germany. Six million Jews had been killed by the Nazis. Jewish-owned businesses and properties worth millions of dollars had been confiscated or destroyed. Careers were ruined; hundreds of thousands were left sick, homeless, and orphaned. David Ben-Gurion, then prime minister of Israel, argued that, while the losses could never be fully calculated, the State of Israel was justified in seeking $1.5 billion from Germany as "material reparations." The money would be used "to secure compensation (indemnification) for the heirs of the victims and rehabilitation of the survivors."

By January 1952, Jews throughout the world, but especially in Israel, were locked in heated debate as to whether such reparations should be either requested or accepted. Ben-Gurion ex-

plained that the amount of $1.5 billion had been chosen because it was "the minimal sum required for the absorption and rehabilitation of half a million immigrants from the countries subjected to the Nazi regime." Menachem Begin, then head of the opposition Herut party, objected, claiming that the acceptance of reparations would mean "a surrender of political independence" and would represent "the ultimate abomination" of those who had been murdered by the Nazis. After a month of protests against the government proposal, the Knesset voted (61–50) to accept reparations. The payments were spread over a twelve-year period. (David Ben-Gurion, *Israel, a Personal History,* Funk and Wagnalls, Inc., and Sabra Books, New York, 1971 pp. 399–400)

Were these "reparations" from Germany to the Jewish people after the Holocaust a parallel to the gifts of silver and gold that the Israelites took from the Egyptians? Should victims, or their children, accept "payment" for such cruelty? Can a price be placed on a human life—or on six million human lives?

Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides suggests that the gold and silver that the Egyptians gave to the Israelites represented "atonement," a payment of regret, for the damages they had inflicted upon the Jewish people. The Egyptians sought forgiveness with their gifts. It is as if the Egyptians were saying, "We are the wicked ones. There is violence in our hands, and you merit God's mercy." Their gifts were an admission of guilt, a confession of all the wrongs they had done, and a request for pardon. (Comment on Exodus 11:3)

On forgiving others

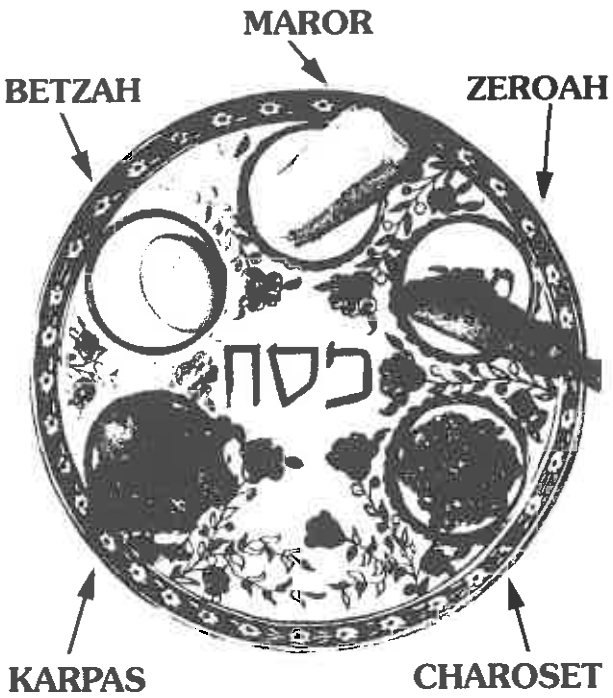
Each night, before retiring, forgive those who offended you during the day. (Asher ben Yehiel, 14th century)

Since I myself stand in need of God's pity, I have granted an amnesty to all my enemies. (Heinrich Heine, 1797–1856)

In requesting and accepting Egyptian "gifts," perhaps the Israelites were also expressing their readiness to forgive their oppressors. They were liberating themselves from all the suffering of the past. Reparations would help build a foundation for a strong future. Forgiving their enemies did not mean forgetting the past; it meant rising above it to create new opportunities. Instead of becoming fixed in anger and resentment against those who had caused them so much pain and had reduced them to poverty and slavery, the Israelites accepted the Egyptian gifts and left Egypt to fashion their future as a proud and independent people.

PEREK BET: *Origins of the Pesach Celebration*

Pesach is one of the most popular celebrations of the Jewish year. On the evening of the fourteenth day of Nisan, families and friends gather for the *seder*. The table is festively decorated with holiday symbols including the *pesach* (*zeroah*), a roasted shankbone or chicken neck; the *matzah,* unleavened bread; the *maror,* bitter herb; the *charoset,* a mixture of apples, nuts, honey, cinnamon, and wine; the *chagigah* (*betzah*) roasted egg; the *kar-*



pas, parsley; the cups of wine; and one cup of wine set aside for Elijah. At each place is a *haggadah,* a book containing the *seder,* or "order," of the evening's service and the story of the Jewish people's liberation from Egypt.

Those celebrating the *seder* will drink four cups of wine, invite a child to recite four questions, and read about four different children representing four attitudes to the Pesach festival. Near the beginning of the banquet, a *matzah* will be broken, and half of it will be set aside as the *afikoman,* or "dessert." Holding a piece of *matzah,* sometimes at an open door, the leader of the *seder* will say, "Let all who are hungry come and eat. . . ."

The retelling of the Exodus from Egypt will include songs and discussion and a reminder from the rabbis of the *Mishnah* who said, "In every generation a Jew is to see himself or herself as though he or she were escaping from Egypt." The *haggadah* also contains the story of five famous rabbis who extended their celebration from early evening until the break of dawn the next morning. The festive meal concludes with the words, *Le-shanah ha-ba'ah bi-Yerushalayim,* "Next year in Jerusalem!"

What modern Jews celebrate as a *seder* actually evolved over thousands of years. Each generation added important elements to the ceremony while abandoning others. Within our Torah portion we find important descriptions of the first Pesach rituals observed by the people of Israel.

At springtime in ancient times, before the enslavement of Hebrews in Egypt, shepherds set aside a year-old lamb for each household. At twilight on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, when the moon was full and bright, the lamb was slaughtered. Its blood was smeared on the doorposts of the houses where it would be eaten, and it was then roasted for the festival feast. When the meat was ready, it was eaten with *matzah* and *maror.*

Early Hebrew farmers also observed a spring festival. Their custom included removing all leavened products from their houses and eating only *matzah* for seven days, from the fourteenth day until the twenty-first day of the month of Nisan.

No one knows when the two traditions of the shepherds and the farmers were combined. That may have occurred at the time Moses liberated the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage—or later. All accounts of the festival within the Torah link it to the historic moment of the Exodus. For instance, we are told that the lamb is to be called "the Pesach sacrifice, because God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when the Egyptians were killed." (Exodus 12:27) The Torah also contains instructions about eating the lamb. It is to be eaten quickly while each male stands with a staff in his hand, sandals on his feet, and a girdle around his waist. The dress and dramatic posture are of those escaping danger, fleeing for their lives.

All these strange customs were meant to capture the attention of young people. When they saw the lamb killed; its blood painted on the doorposts; their fathers dressed as if they were about to leave on a journey, standing with a staff in their hands and quickly eating the roasted meat, it was hoped that they would ask, "What are you doing? What is the meaning of this strange ceremony?" In answer, fathers were to tell their children how God liberated them from Egyptian slavery.

This early ceremony was known as *Seder Mitzrayim,* or "the *Seder* of Egypt" because it records the early history and rituals of Pesach. The rabbis named the celebration that evolved over the centuries *Seder Dorot,* or "the *Seder* of the Generations." *Seder Dorot* includes many of the old traditions, though they have been changed to meet new circumstances.

For instance, emphasis is still placed upon the festive family meal and upon the importance of eating *matzah* for seven days. *Maror* is still eaten as a reminder of the bitterness of slavery. All that is left of the *pesach* lamb, however, is a roasted shankbone, placed on the *seder* plate and, at the appropriate moment in the ceremony, held up by the leader who explains that it is a reminder of God's saving the Israelite firstborn on the night when all of the Egyptian firstborn were killed.

Each according to his or her ability
The rabbis point out that four times the Torah mentions the questions that children will ask on the evening of Pesach. Three of the questions are found in the Torah portion Bo, *Exodus 12:26–27; 13:8,14, and one is found in Deuteronomy 2:20–21.*

One explanation of the four different questions is that they represent four different kinds of human abilities to listen and to learn. "When God spoke to Israel," the rabbis teach, "each person heard according to his or her ability. The elders, the children, the babies, the young, even Moses—each understood what God was saying according to his or her capacity to listen." (Tanchuma *on Exodus 19:19*)

The difference between the "wicked" child and the "wise" child

The "wise" child asks, "What do the laws and traditions that God has commanded you mean?" The "wicked" child asks, "What does this ritual service mean to you?"

What is the difference between them? It has been suggested that the "wise" children ask the reason for the various types of rituals while the "wicked" children do not care about the meanings of the ceremony. For them the festival is merely a burden God has imposed upon the Jewish people year after year.

Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz points out that the real difference between the "wise" and "wicked" children is not in their words but in the introductions to their questions within the haggadah. *We are told that "the 'wise child'* will ask you" *and that "the 'wicked child'* will say to you." *It is the attitude of each that makes the difference. "So long as a child asks, no matter how difficult the questions are, it is a sign that he expects an answer. . . . He is far from being malicious but is a student thirsty for knowledge. The wicked one, however, does not ask and desires no reply. . . . His attitude is fixed and predetermined. He is not interested in your answers but only in what he "will say to you."* (Studies in Shemot, *pp. 207–208*)

At the *seder,* Jewish fathers no longer dress as if they were about to leave on a long journey, but the *haggadah* created by the rabbis does include four questions to be asked by children at the festive meal. There is also a section about four types of children, each representing different attitudes and learning abilities. The emphasis of the *seder* remains the same as it was in ancient times. It is a unique banquet in which Jews are to relive the historic experience of being liberated from Egyptian oppression and are to pass on that story from generation to generation.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Many commentators argue that the Hebrews were justified in taking gold and silver from the Egyptians when they escaped from bondage because they had been exploited for so many years. Do you agree? Is there a parallel here to the "reparations" paid by Germany to Israel and to Jews who suffered during the Holocaust? What about the payment to Japanese-Americans who were placed in concentration camps in the United States during the Second World War? How should the amounts for such reparations be determined? What about affirmative action that guarantees a percentage of student and job oppportunities for those minorities that may have been exploited in the past and whose levels of education and employment may not provide them with openings enjoyed by others within society?
2. Using a *haggadah,* make an outline of the *seder.* Compare it with Exodus 12:1–27, 43–49. What has been added since biblical times by the rabbis who created the *haggadah*? In what dramatic ways is the history of the Exodus from Egypt passed on from generation to generation at the *seder* meal?