

## **HAVURAH SHALOM Adult B'nei Mitzvah 5780**

### **Torah Service and Reflections**

#### **Selections from Torah Service**

KATE

This Shabbat, we read from Parashat Bo. This is the third weekly reading in the book of Exodus, or Shemot as we call it in Hebrew. These first chapters of Shemot are densely packed. The narratives lay the foundation for the transformation of the children of Israel from a tribe to a people. And from slaves to Pharaoh to those in service to Adonai, the divine. The story of Yetziat Mitzrayim, being redeemed from Egypt and slavery, is at the core of Jewish identity, theology, and practice. “Because you were slaves in Mitzrayim/Egypt,” is a refrain that appears hundreds of times in our Torah. Some would even call ours an Exodus religion.

CHARLES

Here is some context for the section of Torah that we will be reading today, and to help locate how our learning of our words and sentences fits into the big picture. Exodus starts with the 70 people descended from the patriarch Jacob who came down to Egypt because of famine some 400 years earlier. And then over time the Israelites multiplied and increased greatly. The 2 pharaohs mentioned are threatened by the Israelites and seek to limit their growth through drastic measures, babykilling, oppression, enslavement.

A variety of human acts of conscience, form the basis for our most core story of Judaism, the Exodus from slavery and Egypt with divine help.

When the Pharaoh decrees that all baby boys must be killed the midwives to the Hebrews quietly refuse and do not do as commanded. They help the baby boys live. Pharaoh's daughter, who we assume must have known about the ban on Israelite growth, defies her father's orders and saves an Israelite baby, Moses, from death, adopting him into her own home. The young man Moses grows up in Pharaoh's palace sees a slavemaster beating one of his kinsman, a Hebrew, and strikes him down. Moses runs off to the desert where he has a powerful vision and calling – despite his great ambivalence and protest - to go to Pharaoh to request that the Israelites are allowed to go out of Egypt, Mitzrayim, Laavod et Adonai, to serve their God. There is, of course, great resistance and this sets up the conditions for a series of plagues that befall the entire Egyptian people.

BETH

We begin our Torah reading, today, with Exodus 12:1, page 135. Nine plagues have been wrought upon the Egyptians and yet Pharaoh continues to resist letting the Israelites go. The verses we will be chanting today weave three pieces together:

RACHEL

- Adonai gives Moses and Aaron detailed instructions for how the Israelites must prepare for the 10<sup>th</sup> and final plague and for their leaving of Mitzrayim, which will result from this plague. Some of these instructions are to be immediately and urgently carried out by those enslaved. Some are for future generations to carry out; these commandments are

deemed a law for all generations.

CURTIS

- There is a version of the divine instructions as transmitted by Moses and Aaron to the children of Israel, which echoes but is not exactly the same as those given by Adonai.

NANCY

- And we also have the description of what the children of Israel did that night, as they awaited the 10<sup>th</sup> plague.

BEN

It is this weaving of past, present, and future – of narrative and instructions - that manifests today, thousands of years later, in the ways we practice the holiday of Pesach, Passover.

LAUREL

We studied these Torah verses for many months, looking deeply at each word, its shorash, or root, and all its possible meanings. Today, we will give you some context for our learning by sharing with you a few of the essential shorashim, root words, and the concepts that emerge from them. We will also share some of the questions and interpretations that arose from our collective study and personal reflection over the last 2.5 years.

We hope that you will follow along in the reading so that you can catch a glimpse of this sacred text that we have been living with. Page 135 in this Jewish Publication Tanach (HOLD IT UP), Chapter 12, verse 1.

(Section 1  
Exodus 12:1-13)

ROCKY

In the first set of readings, beginning with Exodus 12:1, page 136, Adonai assigns the new moon which will be the new beginning of time for the Israelites. Their calendar will change upon their redemption from slavery. Moses and Aaron receive instructions for the selecting, bringing into the home, slaying and complete consumption of a Pesach, a sacrificial lamb. They are to use the blood of the lamb on the doorways of their homes as a sign for Adonai to pass-over their houses - as Adonai will strike down every first born of all the unmarked homes in Egypt. They are to hurriedly eat this sacrificial meal in the middle of the night, with sandals on, staff in hand, ready to go - even though they won't go until the next day. Moses and Aaron are to share these instructions with the children of Israel in that moment, and they are to be remembered throughout the ages, to be memorialized and celebrated as the festival of matzot.

BETH

Shorashim means “roots” in ancient and modern Hebrew, as in the roots of a tree. A shorash

(singular) is the base of a Hebrew word, usually a sequence of three consonants. Shoreshim are not themselves words until we add vowels and/or other consonants, creating nouns, verbs, or adjectives according to specific patterns. When we look at the actual Hebrew - and the shorashim - we get a much deeper sense of meaning. We see that sometimes there are a range of possible meanings. We see that translation is by its very nature interpretation. With our own growing knowledge, we have both the privilege and the responsibility to be part of the process of interpretation and making meaning of our ancient text.

The word Chodesh means New-Moon OR Month

Chodashim are the New-Moons OR Months

The shoresh of chodesh is made of the letters: chet, dalet, shin means “to be new” and leads to the words to restore, and renew

The fact that the word for **month** is, at its root, **new** and **renewal** gives us the sense that cycles of time can be a fundamental renewing force in the lives of individuals and in the formation of a people.

When we see the word Mitzrayim, it is usually translated as Egypt. The word Mitzrayim comes from the shoresh made up of the 3 letters: tzadi, resh, resh. This shoresh means “to oppress” or “show hostility toward.” Another form means “to make narrow” or “cause distress.” Clearly, this land of bondage is understood as a place or a condition where one is unable to move or maneuver, having few choices. This is the epitome of oppression – squeezing people into a very tight spot.

#### PATRICIA AND CHARLES ALTERNATE QUESTIONS

- Why command a new way of marking time BEFORE this last plague, before the exodus from slavery? What is the significance of changing ones’ total relationship to time?
- What were they, the Israelites, to each other before this moment?
- Why the need to be ready to go when eating the sacrificial lamb? How was performing this elaborate series of very specific behaviors meant to affect the Israelites in this moment?
- How much ritual is enough - to be Jewish?
- Why all the conditions when celebrating a holiday of freedom?

Please turn to Exodus 12:1, page 136.

1] Aliyah: Family and Friends of Marsha, Charles, Nancy, Rachel, Curtis, Amy, David Laurel  
12:1-3.           ROCKY  
12:4-6           CURTIS

2] Aliyah: Family and Friends of Beth, David, Rocky, Patricia, Ben, Kate

12:7-10 LAUREL

12:11-13 BETH

## Section 2 Exodus 12:23 - 42

LAUREL

We resume our reading in Chapter 12, verse 23, PAGE 137.

We now reach the narrative. Moshe (Moses) tells the elders what will happen to the Israelites and the Egyptians. He also gives them the instructions, which they must immediately implement.

BETH

Time collapses and there are instruction for the future, when your children will surely say to you: Mah Haavodah Hazot lachem? What are you doing? What is this labor/action/worship/service that you do with the Pesach?

RACHEL

Then, in verse 29, the third person narrative describes what happened in the middle of the night; how there was a “Great Cry” in Egypt as Pharoah and all of Egypt woke to find that every first born male had been slain, from the houses of royalty to the prisons. And every firstborn animal, too.

CURTIS

Pharoah finally calls Moses and Aaron and tells them to leave Egypt, to go serve their God as they have requested, and take everything with them – immediately ! Objects of silver and gold and clothing are given by the Egyptians to the Israelites in a somewhat ambiguous transfer.

NANCY

600,000 men, plus children, sheep, oxen and the ‘erev rav’, a “mixed multitude,” leave. We are unsure of where the women are counted.

BEN

They bring the unleavened/unfermented dough with them to become matzot as they journey through the desert. The section closes with a reminder that the Israelites had been dwelling in Egypt for 430 years, to the day, when they finally left their bondage. And we hear that this is a night of keeping watch, for Adonai, who is guarding the children of Israel throughout their generations.

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PATRICIA

One of the core shorashim in this narrative and in the entirety of the book of Exodus – and a

favorite of our group!- is made of the three letters ayin, vet, dalet, which means “to work” or “to serve”.

- We hear Moses and Aaron requesting that the Israelites be permitted to “La’avod et Adonai”, to worship or serve their God.
- We hear about Pharaoh imposing avodah kashah, harsh labor.
- Avadim Chayinu, Ata Bnei Chorin is a song we sing at Passover drawn from this narrative. “We were slaves and now we are the children of freedom.”

Clearly, to work or to serve can elevate one and become service, even service to the divine. And the same effort, in service to human power or greed, or just unchecked, can become enslavement.

This people we call the Israelites, the Hebrews, and later the Jews. In Torah we are often called Bnei Yisrael, the children of Israel. This comes from an earlier section in Genesis chapter 35, verse 10 when Jacob is ‘blessed’ by Adonai with a new name – Yisrael. El is a name for the divine. The sin, resh, hey letters are a shresh meaning to contend with or struggle with. Hence, we are the Godwrestling people. Then and now!

#### KATE AND ROCKY ALTERNATE QUESTIONS

- Who were the erev rav. “the mixed multitude”?
- Should all of the Egyptians have suffered the plagues because they benefited from Israelite slavery or just those who led the oppression? And how can we tell the difference?
- How is serving Adonoi different from serving pharaoh?
- What is owed to an enslaved people by those who benefitted from their labors?
- Can social change happen without violence? How much suffering is needed for us to be uncomfortable enough to actually make changes?
- What is our obligation today as Jews to help others find the freedom that was granted to us?
- How has this sacred story about enslavement and liberation impacted our Jewish communal identity over the millennia?

Please turn to Exodus 12:23, PAGE 137

3] Aliyah: Open invite to those who seek to reconnect with tradition

12:23-25 NANCY

12:26-28 PATRICIA

4] Aliyah: Open invite to those coming from a narrow place

12:29-31 DAVID

12:32-36 AMY

5] Aliyah: Open invite to those bending toward hope, (“ark of history bends toward justice”); see hope in this story

12:37-39 BEN

12:40-42 KEN

**Misheberach for Healing - Nancy (gives Kavannah) and sings with Barbara - page 86 at the bottom, for those who have it, it will be a sticker on the page added in.**

### Section 3 Exodus 13:8 - 16

DAVID

We skip some verses and resume with this final, shorter set of readings, Exodus 13:8, bottom of page 139. Moses instructs the people on a variety of ways for future remembrance and celebration of Yetziat Mitzrayim, the divine redemption from slavery and Egypt. Special note is made of the time when the children of Israel have finally made it to the land of the Canaanite, as promised by Adonai.

CHARLES

We are commanded, in these verses, to remember and reconnect by each Jew taking the story personally and through the way we speak with our children: It is because of what Adonai did for me, when I went out of Mitzrayim.”

LAUREL

There shall be a sign, a reminder, on our hands and between our eyes. We are to remember that Adonai’s mighty hand drew the Israelites from Mitzrayim. And that the same mighty hand also slew each first born Egyptian to enable the Israelites to leave Mitzrayim. Thus, all first-born Israelites (human or beast) which are male, are to be for Adonai.

ROCKY

Yad chazakah.

Yad is a hand or arm, like this (lift up your own?) or like this (hold up the Torah pointer), Torah pointer that we use to read from the Torah, with a tiny little hand on the end.

Chazakah comes from the shorash with the three letters chet, zayin, koof, with the meaning “to be or grow strong, or to hold fast.” It has this neutral base meaning. Then it can grow into words meaning: to reinforce or encourage, to take courage, to seize, to take hold of, to cling to.

In our upcoming reading we hear repeatedly about the yad chazakah, the mighty hand, with which Adonai freed us. Even if this doesn't fit our theology, what does it do to us to imagine the possibility of being redeemed from Mitzrayim, the narrow place of bondage, though the extended and strong arm of divine compassion???

This same shoresht is one of the three used to describe how Pharaoh's heart calcifies over time, making him refuse over and over again to let the Israelites serve their God or leave. In this case, chazak is about rigidifying, becoming too "strong" in one's outlook or actions.

What wisdom does it take to know the difference?

#### NANCY, CURTIS, AND RACHEL TRADE OFF

- What does it mean that the first born Israelites shall be for Adonai? Who or who can be traded or sacrificed for what? What equals or justifies what?
- Why the land of the Canaanites? Why not somewhere where they weren't displacing people?
- 430 years is over 10 generations. And for most of that time, they were not oppressed. How much were the Israelites part of Egypt? And how Egyptian were the Israelites?
- This image of God – one who hardens Pharaoh's heart at some points and causes the Egyptians to look favorably upon the Israelites at another point, who brings about 10 plagues... what if that is not my God?
- WE are instructed to tell our children that the re-enactment ritual each year is because of what God did for me personally, not only for us as a community. What can this mean about our spiritual relationship with Adonai?
- How has the way we understand this story or the way we celebrate been affected by the conditions and politics of our time? Are there changes in Passover traditions that need to be made in order to keep this narrative of the Exodus deeply personal and alive?
- What do we owe to future generations?

Please turn to Exodus 13:8, bottom of PAGE 139

6] Aliyah: teachers- Barbara, Ken, Deborah, and Benjamin and others  
13:8-10 CHARLES

7] Aliyah: Adult Bnai Mitzvah group

13:11-13 RACHEL

13:14-16 KATE

5780 ADULT BNAI MITZVAH TORAH SERVICE AND DRASH

KATE

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CHARLES (TO READ AND EDIT DOWN TO ONE PARAGRAPH)

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Exodus starts with the 70 people descended from the patriarch Jacob who came down to Egypt because of famine some 400 years earlier. And then over time the Israelites multiplied and increased greatly. The 2 pharaohs mentioned are threatened by the Israelites and seek to limit their growth through drastic measures, babykilling, oppression, enslavement.

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- And we also have the description of what the children of Israel did that night, as they awaited the 10<sup>th</sup> plague.

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## Section 1 Exodus 12:1-13

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(Rocky, Curtis, Laurel, Beth read)

#### Section 2 Exodus 12:23 - 42

LAUREL

We resume our reading in Chapter 12, verse 23, PAGE 137.

We now reach the narrative. Moshe (Moses) tells the elders what will happen to the Israelites and the Egyptians. He also gives them the instructions, which they must immediately implement.

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Time collapses and there are instruction for the future, when your children will surely say to you: Mah Haavodah Hazot lachem? What are you doing? What is this labor/action/worship/service that you do with the Pesach?

RACHEL

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CURTIS

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600,000 men, plus children, sheep, oxen and the ‘erev rav’, a “mixed multitude,” leave. We are unsure of where the women are counted.

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Please turn to Exodus 12:23, PAGE 137

**(Nancy, Patricia, David, Amy, Ben, Ken read)**

#### **Section 3** **Exodus 13:8 - 16**

DAVID

We skip some verses and resume with this final, shorter set of readings, Exodus 18:8, bottom of page 139. Moses instructs the people on a variety of ways for future remembrance and celebration of Yetziat Mitzrayim, the divine redemption from slavery and Egypt. Special note is

made of the time when the children of Israel have finally made it to the land of the Canaanite, as promised by Adonai.

#### CHARLES

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- What do we owe to future generations?

Please turn to Exodus 13:8, bottom of PAGE 139?

**(Charles, Rachel, Kate read Torah)**

## 5780 Adult B'nei Mitzvah Personal Reflections

ROCKY

Throughout our learning process we have been asking some form of the question that literally appears in Chapter 12, Verse 26:

מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם

What is this avodah to you?

What is this labor/action/worship/service to you?

NANCY

I recently read that each of us is expected to add to the Torah. This is an amazing statement. It means that learning is never completed.

As a member of Havurah Shalom for forty years, this process combined the goals of the congregation. It encouraged member participation, sharing experiences with each other, and inclusion of all age groups.

This experience is more than I expected, and will be deeply rooted in my whole being.

AMY

I vacillate between 2 thoughts on having a strong religious community. On one hand our cultural and religious similarities foster growth and deepen bonds & on the other hand it can be isolating and insular to those on the outside or to those that do not understand the detailed and intricate bit's & pieces, of which I was one. I have experienced complete openness and warmth w/honest guidance in my learning process here at Havurah which fed my commitment and ultimately deepened my spiritual & Jewish connection. I am inspired to continue as a part of this colorful, committed and verbose group, rich w/tradition & I see the importance of protecting it.

Yet, I understand that this is just one way, not to the exclusion of any other. It is equally as important to hold value and interest in those UNlike us, (to have NO slaves.) We canNOT hold our own beliefs and rituals higher than anyone else's, and we canNOT let OUR beliefs isolate devotion.

To me this is critical & takes us from a "narrow place".

**All together:**

מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם

**What is this avodah to you?**

DAVID

## Chapter 12, Verse 30

וְתָהִי צְעָקָה גְדֹלָה בְּמִצְרָיִם

“There was a loud / great cry in Egypt” for there was not a house in which there was not a dead man.

I am often weary from too many words, but I know what I feel when I read these. Poignant, painful and repeated over and over in history. A Haiku:

Do we hear great cries?  
Righteous stories - endless war.  
Torah captures all.

## CURTIS AND/OR RACHEL

The Exodus is one of the most important stories to us because it describes how we became Jews. Yet little archaeological evidence supports the Exodus as it is described in the Torah. Many things commanded fall inl between the nonsensical and the horrific. For example: Why would an omniscient god need indications of which houses to pass over? And why use something as macabre as smearing sacrificial blood on the doorposts and lintels?

Perhaps the value of the story is not its face value. Maybe it is better to use it as a mirror in which to see a reflection of who we are as a people and as Jews, and to understand our current culture because that is the lense through which we interpret its meaning.

It is a story that can be read from different perspectives. It can be a story of hope in times of oppression. It can be a call to action in times of safety. It can be a warning in times of privilege of the dangers of becoming an oppressor.

## LAUREL -

While I have always felt a deep pride at being Jewish, I have only been marginally connected with the Jewish community. In fact, in order to fit into the small Midwest town where I grew up, I had to downplay my Jewish identity and keep it private. In the torah passage I chanted, God instructs the Israelites to slather their entire doorpost with the bright red blood of a freshly slaughtered lamb as protection from the angel of death. In other words, survival and liberation as a people depended on individual willingness to publicly mark one's identity. Today, I believe that my spiritual freedom and survival requires this same action, to move closer to my community and act publicly to stand up as a Jew.



PATRICIA

מֶה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם

**What is this avodah to you?**

Why are the children asking? Those who fled Egypt surely know. Those who have been brought up to celebrate Pesach every year must have a clue.

Maybe this is about the parents. How do we "re-live" the experience so that we can be models of commitment, community, and honor curiosity? Is it enough just to answer a question? How will the answer lead to the religious commitment to the community especially in the modern world? Are questions our way to build a relationship with Adonai?

ROCKY

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רִאשׁ חֲדָשִׁים

Let this New-Moon be for **you** the beginning of New-Moons. Chapter 12, Verse 1

This month shall be for you..... in Hebrew and English

When I read my verses I wonder how Hashem sounded to Moses and Aaron. Did they hear a loud booming voice from the sky, or a small, quiet voice from within? I wonder why this month here, in particular. Could it be any month, any time of day or year that we can begin again?

For most of my life, my Jewishness was a small, quiet voice hidden deep within. A longing kept captive by fear. I was disconnected and confused, groping randomly for connection and meaning. I didn't believe that I was really Jewish. Within every community or place, I felt like an observer, and in personal relationships like I couldn't be my authentic self.

Entering into Jewish community, trepidatiously at first, was painful and brought old grief to the surface. I was the new kid again, like so many times in my childhood, but this time I wasn't the only Jew. I was welcomed warmly by each congregation and individual, held closely by the melodies of the songs, and surrounded by gentle, warm people who gave me the space to connect at my own pace. As I learned the language, tradition, customs, wisdom and prayers of our beautiful heritage, with the calm guidance of elders, peers, and teachers, I moved into a deeper acceptance and celebration of myself. Now, connected in community to the natural cycles of the earth, I see how I have become more compassionate, self-aware, and patient with my own healing process, and therefore with others. I finally feel a stable sense of belonging. I finally feel whole.

**All together:**

מֶה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם

**What is this avodah to you?**

## CHARLES

When I lay tefillin, what I am most aware of are the marks left on the arm, which linger for hours. When I'm out in the world, I see these marks on my hand and arm, a reminder that, with a mighty hand, I was redeemed from Egypt. And so many times in Torah, we are enjoined to behave in certain ways, because of that redemption.

We were strangers in Egypt, and we are commanded repeatedly not to oppress the stranger.

When I see the tefillin marks, they **are** an 'ot' a sign, an outward signifier of an inward state that I strive to cultivate. The people I interact with are *b'tzelem HaShem*, made in the image of Adonai, and they deserve my love as fellow beings.

## KATE

The label on my Pellegrino water bottle says that if I take it down the street to New Seasons and redeem it, I'll get 5 cents. But it also says that if I took it down the street in Connecticut, my home state, I'd get a dime.

What does this mean? Is the value of the exchange five cents, or ten cents, or something else?

In Bo, Chapter 13 verses 11-15, it's easy to get caught up in deciphering the minutia of the proposed exchanges: All first born "clean" animals to be sacrificed; but a donkey's life may be saved in exchange for a sheep. A male Jewish first born to be BOTH sacrificed, and redeemed—for a price elsewhere determined to be five silver coins.

I struggle even more with the expressly stated "debt" that underlies the exchanges in Bo 13:15: The slaying in the night of all the first born Egyptians, both man and beast by the Lord, to overcome Pharaoh's resistance to letting the Jews leave.

What I take away from Bo is that the underlying "price" of a plastic bottle is not 5 cents, or ten cents. The underlying "price or value" of the redemption of the Jewish first-born is not five silver coins. What I take away from my verses is that I must work to be aware of the true costs of my actions, or inactions, in my daily life.

## All together:

מִהָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם

**What is this avodah to you?**

## BEN

Exodus Chapter 12, verse 38 : וְגַם-עָרַב רַב עִלָּה אִתָּם :

Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them.

*Erev* shares roots with the word describing the evening times. Both are based in the shresh *ayin, resh, vet* which refers to “mixed”. “*Rav*” means “many” or “great,” thus “multitude.”

In first reading *erev rav*, my spirit leapt in joy at a precursor to my Jewish conversion. But then I encountered commentaries disparaging the mixed multitude as riff-raff or rabble. Reading further, I found interpretations that the multitude included Egyptians who joined the Israelites in leaving *Mitzrayim* – former oppressors finding common cause with the persecuted, and renouncing association with tyrants.

Accordingly the multitude going up from the narrow place, pursuing freedom, would have been multicultural and diverse. Does liberation arise in the fertile context of a mixed multitude, willing to undertake a shared journey; companions whose minds are unlike each other and whose faces are unlike each other? When undertaking to repair the world, maybe the intertwining of believing and belonging is the imperative.

## BETH

For a long time I felt like I wrestled with being ‘Jewish enough’ and doing it right. I have been chewing on the question of what it means to be a Jew through this b’nei mitzvah process. I have come to the realization that I am not a religious person, I am spiritual. Yes, there is value in knowing the religious rituals of my ancestry. However, I believe Judaism runs deeper than knowing the correctness of prayers and trope. The ancient Hebrew scroll leaves room for interpretation, similar to the experience of music and its corresponding written notes. This process has taught me both the music and the notes.