

**Bo**

Exodus 10:1-13:16

Ceaser

- **The last three of the Ten Plagues are visited on Egypt: a swarm of locusts devours all the crops and greenery; a thick, palpable darkness envelops the land; and all the firstborn of Egypt are killed at the stroke of midnight of the 15th of the month of Nissan.**
- **G-d commands the first mitzvah to be given to the people of Israel: to establish a calendar based on the monthly rebirth of the moon. The Israelites are also instructed to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d: a lamb or kid is to be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that G-d should pass over these homes when He comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The roasted meat of the offering is to be eaten that night together with matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs.**
- **The death of the firstborn finally breaks Pharaoh's resistance and he literally drives the Children of Israel from his land. So hastily do they depart, there is no time for their dough to rise, and the only provisions they take along are unleavened. Before they go, they ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold, silver and garments, draining Egypt of its wealth.**
- **The Children of Israel are commanded to consecrate all firstborn and to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year by removing all leaven from their possession for seven days, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption to their children. They are also commanded to wear tefillin on the arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and their resultant commitment to G-d.**

**"Come in to Pharaoh," says G-d to Moses in the opening verse of *Bo* ("come"), "for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I might place these my signs in his midst." Seven plagues have failed to convince Pharaoh to accede to Moses' demand in G-d's name, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Time and again, while in the throes of a devastating plague, Pharaoh has promised to let the Hebrews go, only to renege the moment the affliction has been removed.**

### **Locusts**

**The eighth plague with which Moses threatens the Egyptians is the plague of locusts. "They will cover the face of the earth," warns Moses, "and they will eat the residue of that which remains to you from the hail."**

**You say that you want to go serve your G-d? says Pharaoh. I'll let the men go, as long as the women and children stay behind. No, says Moses,**

***We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters; with our flocks and with our herds will we go.***

**Pharaoh warns Moses that his efforts will only bring tragedy upon his people, and orders him from the palace.**

**All that night, a strong east wind blows; in the morning,**

***The locusts went up over all the land of Egypt... And they covered the surface of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they ate every plant of the land... and there remained no green thing through all the land of Egypt...***

**Once again, Pharaoh begs Moses to pray to G-d that the plague be removed; once again, he promises to let them go; and once again, no sooner did the plague end, than "G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the children of Israel go."**

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- ***And G-d said to Moses: "Come in to Pharaoh" (10:1)  
Rabbi Simeon [bar Yochai] continued: It is now fitting to reveal mysteries connected with that which is above and that which is below. Why is it written, "Come in to Pharaoh"? Ought it not rather to have said, "Go to Pharaoh"? It is to indicate that G-d brought Moses into a chamber within a chamber, into the abode of the supernal mighty serpent that is the soul of Egypt, from whom many lesser serpents emanate. Moses was afraid to approach him, because his roots are in supernal regions, and he only approached his subsidiary streams. When G-d saw that Moses feared the serpent, He said, "Come in to Pharaoh."***
- ***(Zohar)***
- ***For I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants (10:1)***
- ***When Pharaoh would soften, his servants and ministers would harden themselves; when they would soften, Pharaoh would harden; when both would soften, G-d would harden their hearts.***
- ***(Midrash HaGadol)***
- ***Moses was distressed to see the forces of evil capable of such resolution and determination. So G-d said to him: they, on their own, do not possess such power. It is only because I have hardened their hearts...***
- ***(The Chassidic Masters)***



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- *We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters (10:9)*
- *Pharaoh was willing to let the menfolk go, as long as the children remain behind; for as long as the younger generation remains "in Egypt," there would be no future for the people of Israel.*
- *The "Pharaohs" of our day have the same attitude. If the older folk wish to cling to Jewish tradition, that is perfectly acceptable; but the youth should be raised in "the spirit of the times" ...*
- *(Maayanah Shel Torah)*
  
- *And [Pharaoh] said to them: "...See, there is evil before you" (10:10)*
- *Pharaoh said to them; "By my astrological art I see the star 'evil' rising towards you in the wilderness; it is a sign of blood and slaughter."*
- *Consequently, when Israel sinned by worshiping the Golden Calf and G-d threatened to slay them, Moses said in his prayer (Exodus 32:12): "Why should the Egyptians speak and say: He brought them forth in evil." The Egyptians will say: Indeed, we have already said, "See, there is evil before you." Hence, "G-d bethought Himself concerning the evil" (ibid., v. 14).*
- *G-d then changed the blood, of which this star was an emblem, to the blood of the circumcision. Thus, when Joshua circumcised the people of Israel in the desert (before they entered the Holy Land), he said (Joshua 5:9): "This day have I removed from you the reproach of the Egyptians" -- that which the Egyptian said to you, "We see blood impending over you in the wilderness."*
- *(Rashi)*



- ***And G-d turned a very strong west wind, which took away the locusts, and cast them into the Sea of Reeds; there remained not one locust in all the borders of Egypt (10:19)***
- ***When the locusts first came, the Egyptians rejoiced and said: "Let us gather them and fill barrels with them." Then did G-d say: "Wretches! Will you rejoice with the plagues I have brought upon you?" Immediately, "G-d turned a very strong west wind... there remained not one locust in all the borders of Egypt" -- even those that had been pickled in their pots and barrels took wing and fled.***
- ***(Midrash Rabbah)***



## **Darkness**

**For the ninth plague to strike Egypt,**

**G-d said to Moses: "Stretch out your hand towards heaven, that there shall be darkness over the land of Egypt -- palpable darkness."**

**And Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. A man saw not his fellow, neither rose any from his place for three days.**

**But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.**

**By now, Pharaoh has agreed to let even the young children go; "only let your flocks and your herds stay behind." Moses refuses: "There shall not a hoof be left behind; for of them must we take to serve G-d."**

**"Go out from my presence," says Pharaoh to Moses. "Take heed to see my face no more; for on the day you see my face again, you shall die."**

**Says Moses: "You have spoken well; I will see your face again no more."**

**G-d speaks to Moses: "One more plague I will bring upon Egypt, after which he will let you go from here" -- a plague in which all the firstborn of Egypt shall die. Moses relays G-d's words to Pharaoh.**

**G-d also tells Moses to instruct the children of Israel that "every man ask of his neighbor, and every woman of her neighbor, articles of silver, and articles of gold" before they depart from Egypt.**

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Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***Stretch out your hand towards heaven, that there shall be darkness over the land of Egypt (10:21)***
- ***Why did G-d... bring darkness upon the Egyptians? Because there were transgressors in Israel who had Egyptian patrons and lived in affluence and honor, and were unwilling to leave. So G-d said: "If I bring upon them publicly a plague from which they will die, the Egyptians will say: 'Just as it has passed over us, so has it passed over them.'" Therefore He brought darkness upon the Egyptians for three days, so that the [Israelites] should bury their dead without their enemies seeing them.***
- ***(Midrash Rabbah)***





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## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***A man saw not his fellow, neither rose any from his place for three days (10:23)***
- ***There were six days of darkness... during the first three, "a man saw not his fellow"; during the last three days, he who sat could not stand up, he who stood could not sit down, and he who was lying down could not raise himself upright.***
- ***(Midrash Rabbah)***
- ***There is no greater darkness than one in which "a man saw not his fellow" -- in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of his fellow man. When that happens, a person becomes stymied in his personal development as well -- "neither rose any from his place."***
- ***(Chidushei HaRim)***



Bo

## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***And G-d said to Moses: "Yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh..." (11:1)***
- ***Ordinarily, G-d spoke with Moses only outside of the city, which was full of idols and impurities. On this occasion, however, He spoke to him in the throne-room of Pharaoh's palace. For Moses had said to Pharaoh, "You have spoken well; I will see your face again no more"; yet in the following verses, he conveys this new message from G-d to Pharaoh! This means that G-d appeared to Moses in the very epicenter of the idolatry and depravity of Egypt.***
- ***(Nachmanides)***
  
- ***And G-d spoke to Moses... "Please, speak into the ears of the people, that every man ask of his neighbor, and every woman of her neighbor, articles of silver, and articles of gold..." (11:2)***
- ***To what is this comparable? To a man who is locked up in prison and is told: "Tomorrow you shall be freed from prison and given a lot of money." Says he: "I beg you, free me today, and I ask for nothing more..."***
- ***[But G-d had said to Abraham at the "Covenant Between the Pieces": "Know that your children shall be strangers in a foreign land, [where] they will be enslaved and afflicted ... and afterwards they will go out with great wealth" (Genesis 15:13-14).]***
- ***So G-d had to plead with them: "Please! Ask the Egyptians for gold and silver, so that the Righteous One should not say: 'They will be enslaved and afflicted' He fulfilled, but He did not fulfill 'and afterwards they will go out with great wealth.'"***
- ***(Talmud, Berachot 9b)***



Bo

## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***Why was it so important that the Children of Israel should carry out the wealth of Egypt, to the extent that this was foretold hundreds of years earlier to Abraham as an indispensable component of their redemption?***
- ***Every creation contains a "spark of holiness" which embodies its divine purpose. When a person utilizes an object, force, or phenomenon to serve the Creator, thereby realizing its function within G-d's overall purpose for creation, he "redeems" and "elevates" the divine spark at its core.***
- ***Every soul has its own "sparks" scattered about in the world, which actually form an integral part of itself: no soul is complete until it has redeemed those sparks which belong to its mission in life. Therein lies the purpose of galut in all its forms: the exile of the soul from its sublime origins to the physical world, and the various exiles that nations and individuals experience in the course of their history, impelled from place to place and from occupation to occupation by seemingly random forces. All is by Divine Providence, which guides every man to those possessions and opportunities whose "spark" is intimately connected with his.***
- ***As the father and prototype of all exiles, the Egyptian galut was a highly concentrated period of history, in which the foundations were laid for all that was to unfold in subsequent centuries. The material world contains 288 general "sparks" (each of which includes innumerable offshoots and particles); of these, 202 were taken out of Egypt, redeemed, and elevated when the Jewish people carried off its gold and silver and used these to construct a Sanctuary for G-d in the desert (see Exodus 25-31).***
- ***(The Chassidic Masters)***



## **Mitzvot**

**G-d then conveys to Moses and Aaron a series of mitzvot (divine commandments) in preparation for their Exodus from Egypt.**

**The first mitzvah is to set the Jewish calendar in accordance with the monthly birth of the new moon, and to regard the month of the Exodus as "the head of the months."**

**The second mitzvah is to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d while still in the land of Egypt:**

**On the tenth day of this month, they shall take to them every man a lamb... a lamb for each household...**

**You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month; and the entire community of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it towards evening.**

Bo

## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***This chodesh (new moon, month) shall be to you the head of months; it shall be for you the first of the months of the year (12:2)***
- ***G-d showed Moses the new moon at its moment of rebirth, and said to him: "When the moon is reborn, mark the beginning of a new month."***
- ***(Mechilta)***
  
- ***There was a large courtyard in Jerusalem called Beth Ya'azek, where all the witnesses (who had seen the appearance of the new moon) used to assemble, and the bet-din (rabbinical court) used to examine them. They used to entertain them lavishly there, so that they should have an inducement to come...***
- ***The pair of witnesses who arrived first were cross-examined first. The senior of them was brought in and they said to him: "Tell us how you saw the moon -- in front of the sun or behind the sun? To the north of it or the south? How big was it, and in which direction was it inclined? How broad was it?" ... Rabban Gamaliel used to have diagrams of the phases of the moon on a tablet on the wall of his upper chamber, and he used to show them to the unlearned and ask, "Did it look like this or this?" ...***
- ***After that they would bring in the second witness and question him. If their accounts tallied, their evidence was accepted. The other pairs were questioned briefly -- not because they were required at all, but so that they should not be disappointed and discouraged from coming (the next time).***
- ***The head of the bet-din would then proclaim: "Sanctified!", and all the people would repeat after him, "Sanctified! Sanctified!"***
- ***(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah ch. 2)***



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- ***What blessing was to be recited by one who beholds the new moon, in the period when Israel used to sanctify the new month? Some of the Sages hold: "Blessed be He who renews the months." Others say: "Blessed be He who consecrates the months." And others say: "Blessed be He who hallows Israel," since unless Israel sanctify it, it is not sanctified at all.***
- ***(Midrash Rabbah)***
- ***The people of Israel set their calendar by the moon, because they are the moon of the world.***
- ***(Zohar)***
- ***The moon begins to shine on the first of the month and increases in luminance till the fifteenth day, when her orb becomes full; from the fifteenth till the thirtieth day, her light wanes, till on the thirtieth it is not seen at all. With Israel too, there were fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon. Abraham began to shine... Jacob added to this light... and after them came Judah, Peretz, Chetzron, Ram, Aminadav, Nachshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David. When Solomon appeared, the moon's orb was full... Henceforth the kings began to diminish in power... With Zedekiah [in whose time the Holy Temple was destroyed] the light of the moon dimmed entirely.***
- ***(Midrash Rabbah)***



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- ***It is written (Genesis 1:16), "And G-d made the two great luminaries"; but then it says, "The great luminary... and the small luminary"?***
- ***[Indeed, at first they were both great; but then] the moon said to G-d: Master of the Universe! Can two kings wear the same crown?***
- ***Said G-d to her: Go diminish yourself.***
- ***Said she to Him: Master of the Universe! Because I have said a proper thing, I must diminish myself?***
- ***Said He to her: You may rule both during the day and at night.***
- ***Said she to Him: What advantage is there in that? What does a lamp accomplish at high noon?***
- ***Said He to her: The people of Israel shall calculate their dates and years by you.***
- ***Said she to Him: But the sun, too, shall have a part in that, for they shall calculate the seasons by him.***
- ***Said G-d: The righteous shall be called by your name -- "Jacob the Small," "Samuel the Small," "David the Small."***
- ***Still G-d saw that the moon was not appeased. So G-d said: "Offer an atonement for My sake, for My having diminished the moon." This is the significance of what Reish Lakish said: Why does the he-goat offered on Rosh Chodesh (the first of the month) differ from the others in that it is specified as for G-d? G-d is saying: This he-goat shall atone for My diminishing of the moon.***
- ***(Talmud, Chullin 60b)***



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## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***The months of the year are lunar months, as it is written: "... This chodesh shall be to you the head of months." So said our sages: G-d showed Moses the figure of the [new] moon in a prophetic vision, and said to him: "Thus you should see and sanctify."***
- ***However, the years which we figure are solar years, as it is written: "Keep the month of spring" [i.e., ensure that the month of Passover is always in the spring season].***
- ***The solar year is eleven days longer than a year of [twelve] lunar months. Therefore, when this surplus accumulates to the amount of 30 days -- either a little more or a little less -- one adds an extra month so that the year has 13 months; this is what is called a shanah meuberet ("pregnant year"). [This is done] because one cannot make the year to consist of so many months plus so many days, since the verse says, "[It shall be for you the first of] the months of the year" -- implying that the year should consist of months, and months only.***
- ***The moon is concealed each month, and remains invisible for approximately two days -- for about one day before it is closest to the sun, and about one day after it is closest to the sun -- after which it can be seen in the west in the evening. The night on which it is visible in the west marks the beginning of the month, and one counts from that day 29 days. If the moon is visible on the eve of the 30th, then the 30th day is Rosh Chodesh ("head of the month"); if not, then the 31st day is Rosh Chodesh, and the 30th day belongs to the previous month.***
- ***(Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Sanctification of the Month)***
- ***Time is the first creation (see Sforno on Genesis 1:1); thus, the sanctification of time is the first mitzvah commanded to Israel.***
- ***(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)***





## **The First Seder**

**They shall take the blood, and put it on the two side posts and on the upper doorpost of the houses in which they shall eat it. And they shall eat the meat in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread: and with bitter herbs they shall eat it...**

**Thus shall you eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; you shall eat it in haste, it is G-d's passover.**

**For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast: and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am G-d.**

**And the blood shall be to you for a sign upon the houses where you are: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.**

**The event shall be established a festival for all generations,**

**"for on this very day I have brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt... Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses... in all your habitations shall you eat matzot (unleavened bread)."**

## **The Exodus**

**And it came to pass at midnight, that G-d smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt: from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle.**

**And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all Egypt; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead.**

**And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said: "Rise up, and get you out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel; and go, serve G-d, as you have said. Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also."**

**And Egypt was urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said: We are all dead men.**

**So hastily were the Children of Israel driven out by the Egyptians that "the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders."**

**Nor did they forget to take the wealth of Egypt with them, as G-d had requested. "They requested of the Egyptians articles of silver, and articles of gold, and garments. G-d gave the people favor in the sight of Egypt, so that they lent them; and they despoiled Egypt."**

**And the children of Israel journeyed from Raamses to Sukkoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.**

**A mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, very much cattle.**

**And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were driven out of Egypt, and could not delay, neither had they prepared for themselves any provision...**

**And Moses said to the people: "Remember this day, in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand G-d brought you out from this place: no leavened bread shall be eaten. This day you came out, in the month of spring."**

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## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***On the tenth day of this month, they shall take to them every man a lamb... You shall keep it until the 14th day of the same month; and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it towards evening (12:3-6)***
- ***When G-d told Moses to slay the paschal lamb, Moses said: "Master of the Universe! How can I possibly do this thing? Don't You know the lamb is the Egyptian god? 'Lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?'"***
- ***Said G-d: "By your life, Israel will not depart from here before they slaughter the Egyptian gods before their very eyes, that I may teach them that their gods are really nothing at all." This is what He actually did; for on that night He slew the Egyptian firstborn, and on that night the Israelites slaughtered their paschal lamb and ate it.***
- ***(Midrash Rabbah)***
  
- ***That year, the 10th of Nissan was a Shabbat; this is why the Shabbat before Passover is called Shabbat HaGadol ("The Great Shabbat") -- because a great miracle happened on that day. For when the Children of Israel took their paschal lambs on that Shabbat, the Egyptian firstborn converged on them and asked them: "Why are you doing this?" They replied: "It is a passover sacrifice to G-d, for He will kill the firstborn of Egypt." The firstborn approached their fathers and Pharaoh to request that Israel be allowed to go, but they refused; so the firstborn waged war against them, killing many of them. Thus the verse (Psalms 136:10) proclaims: "[Offer thanks] to He who smote the Egyptian with their firstborn."***
- ***(Tosafot to Talmud, Shabbat 87b)***



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## Exodus 10:1-13:16

- ***I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt... and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am G-d (12:12)***
- ***"I will pass" -- I, and no angel; "I will smite" -- I, and no seraph; "I will execute" -- I, and no messenger; "I am G-d" -- I am He, and no other.***
- ***(Passover Haggadah)***
- ***And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments (12:12)***
- ***Those that were of wood rotted; those that were of metal melted.***
- ***(Rashi)***
  
- ***And it came to pass at midnight, that G-d smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt (12:29)***
- ***The Jews in Egypt had sunk to the "forty-nine gates of impurity" so that, morally and spiritually, they were virtually indistinguishable from the Egyptians. Thus, when G-d passed over the Jewish firstborn to kill the Egyptian firstborn, the divine attribute of justice argued: "How are these any different from these? These are idol-worshippers, and these are idol-worshippers!" Nevertheless, G-d chose to extract the Children of Israel from "the bowels of Egypt" and acquire them as His chosen people.***
- ***This is why the plague of the firstborn occurred precisely at midnight. The first half of the night embodies the divine attribute of gevurah (justice), and its second half, the divine attribute of chessed (benevolence). Midnight is the juncture that fuses and supersedes them both, since the power to join two opposites can only come from a point that transcends their differences. "Midnight" is thus an expression of a divine involvement in creation that transcends all standard criteria for punishment or reward.***
- ***(Ohr HaTorah)***



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- ***A mixed multitude went up also with them (12:38)***
- ***The Hebrew word rav ("multitude") has a numerical value of 202; the "mixed multitude" represents the 202 sparks of holiness that the Jewish people extracted from Egypt (see commentary on 11:2 above).***
- ***(The Kabbalists)***
- ***And it came to pass on that very day, that G-d took the Children of Israel out of Egypt (12:51)***
- ***In the Passover Haggadah we say: "If G-d had not taken our forefathers out of Egypt, we, our children, and our children's children, would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt..."***
- ***Our sages explain that the Children of Israel had become so entrenched in the paganism and depravity of Egypt, that the Exodus came at the very last possible moment, as they approached the very brink of total indistinguishability from the Egyptians. Had they remained slaves in Egypt a moment longer, there would have been no "Children of Israel" to redeem.***
- ***(Rebbe's Haggadah)***



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- ***"Egypt rejoiced when they went" (Psalms 105:38). Said Rabbi Berechiah: This is comparable to a fat man who is riding on a donkey. The donkey longs: "O when will he get off me"; and he longs: "O when will I get off the donkey." As soon as he gets off, the man is happy and the donkey is happy. Still I do not know: who is the happier?***
- ***So, too, when the Jews were in Egypt, and the plagues were befalling the Egyptians, the Egyptians were longing: "O when will the Jews get out!" And the Jews were longing: "O when will G-d redeem us!" As soon as they went out and were redeemed, these were happy and these were happy. Still, I did not know: which was the happier? Until King David came and said: "Egypt rejoiced when they went."***
- ***(Midrash Tehillim)***
- ***And you shall relate to your son on that day, saying: This is done because of that which G-d did to me when I came out of Egypt (13:8)***
- ***In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt; as it is written: "... This is done because of that which G-d did to me when I came out of Egypt."***
- ***(Talmud, Pesachim 116b)***



## More Mitzvot

**Moses also instructs them to observe the following mitzvot as commemorators of the Exodus:**

- \* Each year, on the 14th of Nissan, all leaven must be removed from every Jewish home; that night, matzah should be eaten and the story of the Exodus told to one's children. No leaven should be eaten or be found in one's possession for seven days.**
- \* All firstborn should be consecrated to G-d, in commemoration of G-d's killing the firstborn of Egypt and sparing the Jewish firstborn. Firstborn animals are to be sacrificed as offerings to G-d, and firstborn sons are to be "redeemed."**
- \* The tefillin should be worn as "a sign on your arm and a remembrance between your eyes, that G-d's Torah be in your mouth; for with a strong hand did G-d bring you out of Egypt."**

## The Consciousness of Freedom

By Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson

After a series of plagues that crush the country and subdue its king, Pharaoh finally surrenders. After mercilessly torturing, abusing and murdering the Hebrews for decades, they are set free. On the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Nissan, the Jewish people, at last, experience a mass exodus from a genocidal regime and a tyrannical monarchy. They have embarked on the path to freedom.

More than three millennia have passed since that day. That is quite a long time. Yet the children and grandchildren of the slaves who departed Egypt still commemorate this event annually. To this day, Passover remains the most widely observed and celebrated Jewish holiday. Many Jews who deem themselves as remote as can be from tradition and religion are still compelled to participate in some sort of Passover seder.



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The significance of this cannot be overstated. It is easy to celebrate the miracle of freedom when you are free. Yet for most of their history the Jewish nation found itself exiled, oppressed, dominated—physically, emotionally and religiously—by tyrants and dictators of all stripes. If Passover represents the journey from slavery to freedom, what became of it after the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple and Israel's subsequent exile? Or after the Greek and then Roman conquest of the Jewish land and the exile of its inhabitants? What happened to the celebration of liberty following the destruction of the Second Temple, the failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion, the horrific Hadrianic persecutions and the long, tragic series of events that led to the greatest exile in Jewish history? Could Jews celebrate emancipation under oppressive circumstances? Could Jews still sit down annually and sincerely declare, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and G-d has liberated us?"

## The Consciousness of Freedom

By Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson

### Liberty Under Oppression?

This question was raised by one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 16th century, who was himself subjected to horrible persecutions from Christian authorities. Rabbi Yehuda Leow (1512-1607), known as the Maharal, was chief Rabbi of Prague, and one of the most influential Jewish personalities of his time, author of many major works on Jewish thought. During his day, Jews suffered terribly from the infamous blood-libels, being accused of slaughtering Christian children prior to Passover in order to use their blood for the Passover matzah, and legend has it that Rabbi Leow created a Golem, a man created through Kabbalistic powers to combat the blood libels afflicting the Jewish community of Prague.

The Maharal of Prague wondered aloud how the Jewish people could have celebrated their freedom from Egypt during times when they were plunged back into the darkness of exile and persecution? Could a 2nd century Palestine Jew truly celebrate Passover? How about an 8th century Yemenite Jew? A 14th century Spanish Jew? A 17th century Polish Jew? Or a German Jew in 1938? A Russian Jew in the 1960's?

## The Consciousness of Freedom

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Yet celebrate they did. For 3,300 years, as Passover came around, a stubborn nation was determined to re-experience freedom. Under the watchful eye of the Inquisition, in Stalin's Gulag Archipelago, even in the Warsaw Ghetto, you could hear the same question being asked each year: "Why is this night different than all other nights?" And the answer given: Because tonight we were set free!

How did they manage to do this? Were they irrational escapists, oblivious to reality? Or, perhaps, the Jewish people were celebrating something very authentic they felt in their souls every Passover, despite the often unbearable conditions from without?

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### The New Man

The answer presented by the Maharal of Prague is profound and moving.

The Exodus of Egypt, he suggests, was not merely a political and geographical event, in which slave laborers were allowed to leave a country and forge their own destiny. It was also an existential mutation, in which the gift of freedom was “wired” into the very psyche of a people. With the Divine liberation from Egyptian bondage, a new type of person was created—the Free Man: The individual who will never make peace with oppression and who will forever yearn for liberty. The exodus implanted within the soul of the Jew an innate repulsion toward subjugation and an inherent quest for liberty.

Hence, the entire drama that led up to the Exodus from Egypt: the dialogue with Pharaoh, the miracles performed by Moses and Aaron, the king becoming more obstinate, the ten unparalleled plagues that subdued Egypt, and finally the lavish seder ceremony performed while still in Egypt. In an era when oppression was the norm, when kings were believed to have divine and endless power, and the ordinary human being was at the mercy of whimsical leaders and gods, the Egyptian Exodus was intended to revolutionize the landscape of the human imagination for all of eternity. The Jews would discover—and would be responsible to impart this discovery to all of humanity—that the primary responsibility of every society is to preserve the freedom and dignity of every individual human being under the sovereignty of a free G-d who desired free human beings who choose to construct a world founded on freedom, the dignity of the individual and the moral calling to build a fragment of heaven on planet earth.

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Thus, even if subsequently conquered and oppressed, targeted for abuse, hunted down like animals, the Jew would never cease to see himself inherently as a free man. He would never acquiesce emotionally to persecution, and would never come to terms with the reality of suppression. He would never stop seeing slavery and exile as the ultimate aberration of reality and the greatest distortion of the human enterprise. His very being would cry out in protest against tyranny and cruelty, and he will incessantly remain obsessed with the belief that the future must be different, that redemption is yet to come, that a society in which evil and corruption rules cannot endure.

This, the Maharal posits, is what Jews celebrated each year at their Passover seders, notwithstanding their deprived circumstances. They were not living in la-la land. They knew very well they were exiled, yet they thanked G-d for the Exodus of old, because it implanted in them for eternity the awareness of freedom, the yearning for freedom, and the conviction that freedom is the innate right of each and every one of them. If – as the Baal Shem Tov brilliantly put it – you are where your will is, this means you are essentially free. If you crave freedom, you are indeed free.

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### A Divine Gift

The Chassidic masters develop this idea one step deeper. If for some religious thinkers man's quest for freedom is symptomatic of his craving for frivolous self indulgence and emancipation from the yoke of responsibility, in Jewish mysticism, our yen for freedom is one of our most divine qualities, ingrained within us because of the divine consciousness embedded in the human spirit. Man yearns to reflect G-d. Just as G-d is utterly free, man created in G-d's image yearns to be utterly divine, hence utterly free. It is this G-dliness inherent in a human being that drives us to constantly challenge and transcend the limits imposed on us, including even the limits of our own nature.

How interesting—and tragic—to compare this inspiring observation of the Maharal with the hateful observations made by one of the philosophical leaders of modern Islamic fundamentalism, Sayyid Qutb. In his book "Milestones," Qutb argues that during their Egyptian captivity the Jews acquired a 'slavish character.' As a result they became craven and unprincipled when powerless, and vicious and arrogant when powerful. These traits became eternal Jewish qualities and it accounts for their timeless perfidy, greed, hatefulness, diabolical impulses, and never-ending conspiracies and plots against Muhammad and Islam.

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### Why Do they Rebel?

This idea of the Maharal contains profound ramifications in the field of contemporary education. Being that freedom is an intrinsic property of the human soul, a manifestation of its G-dly nature, we must be extremely cautious to encourage, rather than be threatened, by its full and intense expression.

If this is true of every person, how much more so with children and teenagers, who have a particularly profound quest for freedom, for individual self expression, for the liberty to make their own choices and to author their own existence. This is not sinful; it is a noble quality that can be actualized to produce the greatest blessings. If we suppress their liberty, it may compel them to express it in undesirable ways.

So for example, when parents and educators impose upon their children and students values and traditions by means of authority and coercion alone, many of these kids upon adulthood might reject these values. This is not out of disdain for the values per se as much as it is their way to prove to themselves and their environment that they are indeed free.

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### Why Do they Rebel?

Education, of course, requires authority and discipline. Children who are granted the license to do whatever they want, often end up having unhappy lives, lacking stability, direction, and security. In the long run, children are unhappy when they are given too much power. On the other hand, when moral and religious values are communicated to youngsters only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, when faith is about dogma rather than depth, when passion is completely replaced by obligation, love by habit, the voice of the soul supplanted by the burden of tradition, the values we hold so dear can be perceived as instruments of oppression in the eyes of our children. In their desperate need for freedom, we sometimes give them no choice but to say goodbye to all we attempted to teach them.

A delicate balance between anarchy and suppression must be maintained. Youngsters must be shown why the traditional, moral and religious values of their parents and grandparents are means for self-actualization, self discovery – and the ultimate freedom. And they must be given wise opportunities to experience the glee of having the freedom to choose that which constitutes the path to a dignified and deep life; the freedom to choose freedom.



# A Few Final Thoughts

- All of what we are, we see, we did and will do, is the Work of HaShem This we celebrate fifty-two times a Year on Shabbat.
- “May it be Your Will, HaShem, that the Holy Temple be rebuilt speedily in our days and grant us our share in Your Torah....”
  - Shabbat Shalom