



Parashat Bo, from “Le’David Barchi Nafshi” (“Of David, Bless the Lord, O My Soul”): Words of Torah according to the weekly Torah reading by David Schwartz, HY”d.

In Memory of the pure soul of our beloved David Schwartz, who fell in battle sanctifying God’s name, on the 27th day of the month of Tevet, 5784 (8 January 2024).

David Schwartz composed thoughts on each of the weekly Torah readings based on an essential message that he studied in depth with his unique spirit. The Torah thoughts were originally published on the occasion of his marriage to Meital. His Torah insights are shared now for the elevation of his pure soul and for the sanctification of his blessed memory.

The darkness of the exile in Egypt culminates in this week’s Torah reading. In the parasha, we see the final signs and wonders of God being carried out.

With each one of the first nine plagues, Moshe and Aharon turned to Pharaoh with the request to send out Israel from his land. After each one of the nine plagues, Pharaoh’s refusal to follow through on his word resulted in the next plague.

From a straightforward reading of the verses in the Torah, we see clearly that the tenth plague of *Makat Bekhorot*, the striking of the first-born, is different, as God is involved more directly in carrying out the action of the plague.

In accordance with this, the verse states: “And on this night I will pass through the land of Egypt, and I will strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord.” (12:12)

Each year at the Seder table, we recite the following interpretation of this verse from the Exodus. “‘And on this night I will pass through the Land of Egypt’: This means, “I, God, and not through an angel.”

‘And I will strike down every first-born’: I and not any other heavenly being.

‘And I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt’: I, and not a messenger.

I am God, the Lord, and no one else.”

The question from all this speaks for itself. Why was it necessary to have the “personal” involvement of God in the infliction of specifically that plague?

In addition to this distinction, we see another contrast from the other plagues as well, regarding the level of human involvement in the action. Whereas the people of Israel did not have a role to play in the other plagues, we find that specifically in the plague of the firstborn there is a

requirement for human participation, such that the people themselves would make a separation between Israel and Egypt.

God Himself had made an independent distinction without human involvement as the Torah states: "And the Lord shall distinguish between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt (9:4). Nevertheless, Moshe commands the people as well to mark the lintel and doorposts with blood so that when God carries through with the plague at night, God will distinguish between the homes of the Jews and the Egyptians.

But what need was there for all of this?!

The Slonimer Rebbe (Shalom Berezovsky, 1911-2000) in his work the "Netivot Shalom" explains that there are two components to the ten plagues. The first item was that God was to redeem Israel, in a physical manner, from the servitude of Egypt. Second, God was to bring about the status of Israel as His chosen nation. The goal of the *Makat Bekhorot* plague was to actualize these two components of God's will.

In a straightforward reading of the text, we see that the plague came about like all the other plagues in order to bring about the liberation of Israel from Egypt. On a deeper level, the plague was performed in order to select Israel as a chosen and distinct nation. With this plague, God chooses Israel as the nation of God, lifts up Israel from the forty-nine degrees of impurity, and effectuates God's covenantal promise to the patriarchs. As it states: "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth." (Gen. 15:13-14)

On a deeper level, we see that for the sake of fulfilling the covenant and achieving a higher goal, God acts in a direct fashion. God does not merely send a messenger as had happened in the other plagues. Rather, He Himself in His glory descends to the land in order to fulfill His promise.

However, it is still not clear why God specifically required the people of Israel themselves to make a sign of blood on their homes in this plague, and this is especially the case since it was in this plague that God directly implemented the action by Himself.

The Netivot Shalom clarifies this dilemma. The explanation is that the sign of blood on the homes was not needed for the plague per se, as no signage similar to this was necessary in any of the other plagues. Rather the purpose of the sign was to accomplish the selection of Israel as the nation of God.

There was a need to determine what type of person would be a Jew worthy to be a part of this nation. Yet, the process of determination resulted from the side of the very choice of Israel and was not connected at all, in a specific way, to the plague of the firstborn in its own right. Jews who wished to be a part of the Jewish people needed to make an effort on their end. Clearly, the

point was not that God Himself needed a mark on the homes. The mark was intended for the people of Israel themselves.

At that very time, at the moment that the Israelites were leaving Egypt, there was a need for the children of Israel to display clear intention that they were full partners in the process of the redemption from Egypt. A Jew who wants to be a part of that redemption needs to do an action that shows evidence of his will. The mitzva of circumcision and the mitzva of Pesach symbolize in a strong and substantial way the bond and covenant between God and the people of Israel.

These two main points are the foundation of Judaism, and the essential Jewishness of a Jew depends on them. A man who is not circumcised, or one who refrains from bringing a Pesach offering, is subject to the death penalty. Our sages say that Israel was redeemed from Egypt due to the merit of the blood of the Pesach offering and the blood of circumcision. On account of these two commandments, the people of Israel were chosen to be God's nation. Through this test, they would know who is a Jew, and we would see who has the burning desire to be a part of the chosen nation.

The great lesson for us in this is that we now understand that in order to be full and meaningful partners as a part of God's people, it is by no means enough for us to rest and preserve the commandments like a servant who simply follows the will of a master. Rather, it is upon us to push ourselves to accomplish God's will proactively, for the purpose of fulfilling our mission of being a proactive and creative people, as our lives in this world should not be like a leaf that is blown about by the wind.

A thought process that drives one to think that the essence of being Jewish is only about preserving the Torah and its commandments and that this exempts one from constant striving for the betterment of society pushes us away from our central purpose: to be the kingdom of priests and a holy nation.