

# OHRSNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

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### ***The Home of Holiness***

***“...and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with some of the blood...” (12:22)***

**Parshas Bo** marks a decisive moment in Jewish history. Until this point, the redemption from Egypt is solely through Divine power imposed from above through the plagues. But in Parshas Bo, something new takes place: *human participation*.

For the first time, *Bnei Yisrael* are commanded to act — to bring the *korban Pesach*, to mark their doorposts with blood, to eat matzah, to sanctify time themselves through the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people: ***Kiddush HaChodesh***, the sanctification of the month.

Redemption comes not merely through miracles. Redemption begins when we *choose* to align ourselves with the Divine will. The Jewish people are still physically in Egypt, surrounded by impurity and oppression, yet they are already living a different reality.

Egypt represents a world where nothing changes — a civilization locked into nature, habit, and inevitability. Torah represents the opposite: the ability to step out of what *is* and move toward what *ought to be*. That is why the first mitzvah is not belief, but action — the sanctification of time itself. A Jew does not merely endure history; a Jew shapes it.

The *korban Pesach*. Taking a lamb — the chief Egyptian deity — and openly designating it for a mitzvah was an act of quiet but absolute inner freedom. It was rebellion not through violence but through action, through commitment. That is the essence of Jewish redemption.

When I became religious, my mother did not merely tolerate my decision. She *entered into it*. When I told her that I was keeping kosher, she decided to *kasher* her entire kitchen. Her friends were baffled. “What do you need to do that for?” they asked. “If he wants to be a *meshugener*, that’s up to him.” My mother answered with quiet clarity: “I don’t want a house where only half of my grandchildren can eat at my table.”

She called up Rabbi Danny Kirsch from the JLE/Ohr Somayach in London, and together they kashed the whole kitchen.

But it didn't stop there. As she saw more of my life, she saw not extremism or withdrawal from the world, but values, dignity, and meaning. The more she observed a life structured by Torah, the more she recognized its truth. In time, she herself began to keep Shabbat and to pray as much as she could. And eventually she would say, almost in disbelief: "Why isn't everybody doing this? This is what Jews are supposed to be doing, isn't it?"

In Parshas Bo, redemption begins not with thunder, but with a home. With a doorpost. With a decision that says: *this space belongs to something higher.*

And that, perhaps, is the deepest lesson of Parshas Bo: that true *geulah* begins when a person chooses to let holiness enter their home, their time, and their life.

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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Hashem tells Moshe that He is hardening Pharaoh's heart so that, through miraculous plagues, the world will know for all time that Hashem is the one true G-d. Pharaoh is warned about the plague of locusts and how severe it will be. Pharaoh agrees to release only the men, but Moshe insists that everyone must go. During the plague, Pharaoh calls for Moshe and Aharon to remove the locusts, and he admits he has sinned.

G-d ends the plague but hardens Pharaoh's heart, and again Pharaoh fails to free the Jews. The country, except for the Jewish People, is then engulfed in a palpable darkness. Pharaoh calls for Moshe and tells him to take all the Jews out of Egypt, but to leave their flocks behind. Moshe tells him that, not only will they take their own flocks, but Pharaoh must add his own too.

Moshe tells Pharaoh that G-d's going to bring one more plague, the death of the firstborn, and then the Jews will leave Egypt. G-d again hardens Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh warns Moshe that he will be put to death if he appears again before Pharaoh.

G-d tells Moshe that the month of Nissan will be the chief month. The Jewish People are commanded to take a sheep on the 10th of the month and guard it until the 14th. The sheep is then to be slaughtered as a Pesach offering, its blood put on their doorposts, and its roasted meat eaten. The blood on the doorpost will be a sign that their homes will be passed-over when G-d strikes the firstborn of Egypt. The Jewish People are told to memorialize this day as the Exodus from Egypt by never eating *chametz* on Pesach.

Moshe relays G-d's commands, and the Jewish People fulfill them flawlessly. G-d sends the final plague, killing the firstborn, and Pharaoh sends the Jews out of Egypt. G-d tells Moshe and Aharon the laws concerning the Pesach sacrifice, redemption of the firstborn (*pidyon haben, etc.*) and *tefillin*.

# Q & A

## Questions

1. What was Pharaoh's excuse for not releasing the Jewish children?
2. How did the locusts in the time of Moshe differ from those in the days of Yoel?
3. How did the first three days of darkness differ from the last three?
4. When the Jews asked the Egyptians for gold and silver vessels, the Egyptians were unable to deny ownership of such vessels. Why?
5. *Makat bechorot* took place at *exactly* midnight. Why did Moshe say it would take place at *approximately* midnight?
6. Why did the first-born of the animals die?
7. How did Moshe show respect to Pharaoh when he warned him about the aftermath of the plague of the first-born?
8. G-d told Moshe "so that My wonders be multiplied" (11:9). What three wonders was -G- d referring to?
9. Why did G-d command the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh to Aharon, and not only to Moshe?
10. Up to what age is an animal fit to be a Pesach offering?
11. Prior to the Exodus from Egypt, what *mitzvot* involving blood did G-d give to the Jewish People?
12. Rashi gives two explanations of the word "*Pasachti* ." What are they?
13. Why were the Jews told to stay indoors during *makat bechorot*?
14. What was Pharaoh screaming as he ran from door to door the night of *makat bechorot* ?
15. Why did Pharaoh ask Moshe to bless him?
16. Why did the Jewish People carry their matzah on their shoulders rather than have their animals carry it?
17. Who comprised the *erev rav* (mixed multitude)?
18. What three historical events occurred on the 15th of Nissan, prior to the event of the Exodus from Egypt?
19. What is the source of the "milk and honey" found in *Eretz Yisrael*?
20. The only non-kosher animal whose first-born is redeemed is the donkey. What did the donkeys do to "earn" this distinction?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

## Answers

1. 10:11 - Since children don't bring sacrifices there was no need for them to go.
2. 10:14 - The plague brought by Moshe was on one species of locust, whereas the plague in the days of Yoel comprised many species.
3. 10:22 - During the first three days the Egyptians couldn't see. During the last three days they couldn't move either.
4. 10:22 - During the plague of darkness, the Jews could see; and they searched for and found the Egyptians' vessels.
5. 11:4 - If Moshe said the plague would begin exactly at midnight, the Egyptians might miscalculate and accuse Moshe of being a fake.
6. 11:5 - Because the Egyptians worshiped their animals as gods, and when G-d punishes a nation He also punishes its gods.
7. 11:8 - Moshe warned that "*All these servants of yours will come down to me*" when, in fact, it was Pharaoh himself who actually came running to Moshe.
8. 11:9 - The plague of the first-born, the splitting of the sea, the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers.
9. 12:1 - As reward for his efforts in bringing about the plagues.
10. 12:5 - One year.
11. 12:6 - Circumcision and *Korban Pesach*.
12. 12:13 - "*I had mercy*" and "*I skipped*."
13. 12:22 - Since it was a night of destruction, it was not safe for anyone to leave the protected premises of his home.
14. 12:31 - "Where does Moshe live? Where does Aharon live?"
15. 12:32 - So he wouldn't die, for he himself was a first-born.
16. 12:34 - Because the commandment of matzah was dear to them.
17. 12:38 - People from other nations who became converts.
18. 12:41 - The angels came to promise that Sarah would have a son, Yitzchak was born, and the exile of the "covenant between the parts" was decreed.
19. 13:5 - Goat milk, date and fig honey.
20. 13:13 - They helped the Jews by carrying silver and gold out of Egypt.

# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## Birkat HaGomel – Thanksgiving Blessing (Part 1)

*“A ship in harbor is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.”*  
G.T. Shedd

### Introduction

*In this series we will discuss - not the halachic definitions of who is obligated to recite Birkat HaGomel and when it should be said - but rather the meaning of the blessing itself and the reasons for reciting it.*

The Talmud teaches (*Brachot* 54b) that when a person goes through a dangerous situation, they should recite a blessing of thanksgiving; four kinds of people are listed there who need to thank Hashem for having protected them:

*Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Four [kinds of people] must give thanks: Seafarers, those who cross the desert, someone who was sick and recovered, and someone who was imprisoned and was released.*

Rashi clarifies that these people should only give thanks once they are out of danger. Why does the Talmud single out these four categories? After all, there is no lack of dangerous situations that Rav could have mentioned. The Talmud there explains that these four categories appear in chapter 107 of *Tehillim* as those who shall “*praise Hashem for his kindness...exult Him in public...*”<sup>1</sup>, and that is why they are the ones that are specifically mentioned in conjunction with *Birkat HaGomel*.

Rabbi David Ibn Yachya (1455-1528) was a leading Rabbi of the Portuguese community during the Inquisition. He had to flee for his life, narrowly avoiding being burned at the stake, and ended up in Naples and then Corfu. He offers a fascinating insight into chapter 107 of *Tehillim*. Chapter 107, he writes, is a song of thanksgiving that charts King David’s life. What prompted King David to compose it? He explains that King David was inspired to offer up thanks to Hashem when the Holy Ark was successfully returned, after it had been captured by the Philistines.

As with so much of *Sefer Tehillim*, King David is teaching us a foundational lesson to apply to our daily lives: We need to live with an awareness and recognition of Hashem’s goodness at all times – and to always remember to thank Him for everything that He gives us. Interestingly, the order of these four ordeals in chapter 107 is not the same as the order in which the Talmud discusses them. In *Tehillim*, the order is: Crossing the desert, release from prison, recovering from sickness, sailing the sea. The Talmud’s order is: sailing the sea,

crossing the desert, recovering from sickness, release from prison. Tosafot explains as follows: King David lists the ordeals in order of danger, whereas the Talmud lists them according to which are more commonplace.

The text of the blessing that appears in the Talmud is slightly different to the one that has been universally accepted for hundreds of years and is codified in the Shulchan Aruch. The version in the Talmud simply says: “*Blessed are You [Hashem, our God, King of the universe] Who bestows beneficial kindness.*” The blessing we actually recite contains several other details and additions: “*Blessed are You Hashem, our God, King of the universe, Who bestows good things upon the guilty, Who has bestowed every goodness upon me.*”

There is another customary addition above what is stated in the Talmud: According to the accepted custom (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 219:2) all those present respond to the blessing by saying: “*Amen! May He Who has bestowed goodness upon you continue to bestow every goodness upon you forever*”, a custom not mentioned in the Talmud.

As noted, there are four groups who are obligated to recite *Birkat HaGomel*. Whilst three of the categories are relatively simple to define, one of them is the cause of great debate. When the Talmud refers to “someone who was sick and recovered”, how sick do they have to be in order to be obligated to recite *Birkat HaGomel*? The opinions range from life-threatening sickness (*Rema, Orach Chaim* 219:8), *ibid*) all the way to any sickness that confines a person to their bed (*Biur Halacha, ibid.*).

*Birkat HaGomel* is so significant that there is a prevalent opinion among the Halachic authorities that it needs to be recited in front of a Minyan. Anyone who thinks that they may need to recite *Birkat HaGomel* should consult with a Halachic authority first to ascertain if they are, or are not, obligated to do so.

With Hashem’s help, in the upcoming articles we will explore the text of the blessing and why those listening to the blessing are obligated to answer in such a unique way.

*To be continued...*

1 תהילים פרק קז (לא) יוזו ליהוה חסדו ונפלו אותיו לבני אָקָם: (לב) וירא ממיוהו בקהל עם ובמושב זקנים יתללו הוה:

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# TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

## LESSONS FROM THE EGYPTIAN BONDAGE

Hashem introduced himself at Sinai, saying, “I am Hashem, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt,” meaning that I lay claim to your servitude by virtue of the fact that I released you from bondage (*Rashi* to *Shemos* 20:2). In other words, just as we used to be obligated to serve Pharaoh, we are now obligated to serve our Redeemer. The applications of this principle are endless; we will point out just a few.

1. Egyptian taskmasters would go to Jewish homes at the crack of dawn and force the men to get up and begin working. No excuses were accepted.

We are similarly commanded to rise and pray to Hashem every morning without fail, which is the service of the heart, and the ideal time is at approximately the crack of dawn so that we begin the *Shemoneh Esrei* at sunrise. One must shake off the chains of slumber and “strengthen himself like a lion to rise in the morning for the service of the Creator” (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 1:1). Such is the dedication of a slave, especially a slave who loves and reveres his Master.

2. The Torah informs us that Pharaoh contracted us to build the cities of Pisom and Ramses. Why did it take a whole nation of slaves so long to build two cities? The Sages explain that they were instructed to build on faulty soil, and their structures kept on collapsing (see *Shemos Rabbah* 1:10). It was surely doubly bitter for the Jewish people to toil for the sake of others—and then not even to see the fruits of their labor.

This teaches a profound lesson: If our efforts to serve Hashem ever seem fruitless, this does not exempt us from continuing and trying harder. What is more, Hashem rewards primarily for effort, as it says in *Pirkei Avos*, “The reward is according to the difficulty” (*Avos* 5:23), and as the *Pele Yoetz (Limud)* similarly remarks, “Hashem does not count pages but rather hours [of Torah study].”

3. Pharaoh set a daily quota of bricks for each Jew, according to his or her ability. He determined this quota based on the output of the first day of work (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:11) when the Jewish people were no doubt exerting themselves to impress and still had all their strength. By threatening to substitute babies for bricks if anyone fell short of the quota, Pharaoh ensured that it would almost always be met.

We find similarly that every Jewish adult male is obligated to set aside daily times for Torah study, and in the event that he is too occupied to complete his quota, he should regard it as a debt and “repay” it that evening. He may not give up his set time of study even if he will lose out on a significant profit (*Mishnah Berurah* 155:4). In other words, we must regard these times as a slave regards his quota of work—as we ourselves regarded our quota of work in Egypt.

4. As slaves, we had to work hard, very hard. Our responsibilities occupied our minds, and our food and conveniences received secondary attention. Only thereby can a person accomplish significantly.

We are similarly obliged to serve Hashem with all our hearts and souls (*Devarim* 11:13), and it is only possible to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the Torah through intensive study and self-sacrifice (*Berachos* 63b and *Avos* 6:4).

5. Pharaoh taxed a fifth of the produce of all the citizens of Egypt other than the priests (*Bereishis* 47:26), in addition to setting other taxes (see *Abarbanel* to *Shemos* 1:11).

We are similarly commanded to dedicate approximately a fifth of our produce to Hashem: we set aside a tenth as *Maaser Rishon* and another tenth as either *Maaser Sheini* or *Maaser Ani*. In addition, there are a total of twenty-four gifts we give to Kohanim, servants in Hashem’s House. With regard to monetary income, it is customary to give a tenth of one’s profits to charity, and it is commendable to give up to a fifth, unless a person can afford to give more (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 249:1). While the exact measure is subject to consideration, charity itself is an obligation, and we may thus compare it to a tax that a king places upon his subjects.

Having compared our subjugation to Hashem to our subjugation to Pharaoh, it must be emphasized that they are very different; in fact, they are opposites. For one thing, Pharaoh did not pay us, while Hashem promises such a fantastic reward that we are eager to fulfill whatever Mitzvah comes our way. Our service in Egypt accomplished nothing other than prepare us to serve Hashem, while our service of Hashem has an effect on everything in our lives. Moreover, in the Haggadah, we describe our period of bondage in Egypt as “slavery, misery, mourning, and darkness,” and the redemption as entry into “freedom, joy, a festival, and great light.” While there is nothing as degrading as being a slave to a human being, there is nothing as exalted as being a slave to the Almighty.