

Parshat Bo:
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Class of 2019

This past week, our country experienced its most silly and confounding rituals---Groundhog's Day. You all know how it goes-- the media all converge in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania and wait for the Groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, to emerge from his burrow. This year, Phil saw his shadow, so we supposedly have to endure six more weeks of winter. Personally, I believe in real meteorology for my weather forecasts. However, this day reminds me of something more meaningful in my life, the marvelous movie 'Groundhog Day.' This beloved film (well at least in our household) starring Bill Murray and written by the late great Harold Ramis, tells the story of an obnoxious, self-centered newsman, Phil Connors, who is sent with his TV crew to cover Punxsutawney Phil. Much to his chagrin, a snowstorm arrives and he has to stay in the quaint town. As he wakes up the next day and the many days afterward, he realizes he is living the same day, over and over again. To cut to the chase (and spoiler alert for those who haven't seen it--and frankly if you haven't, after Shabbat please see it ASAP), Phil realizes the way the he can finally get to the next day is to change his behavior. Each act of personal improvement that changes him from being a self-absorbed jerk to a decent human being helps him finally have a new day. When he no longer thinks and acts only for himself, when he begins to see beyond himself, he is then in a position to experience true happiness and fulfillment. The ending is ever so hopeful--he's a better person, the community benefits from his kindnesses and most importantly he gets the girl, his news producer.

When reading today's Parasha , I couldn't help but laugh at the juxtaposition of Groundhog's day (the movie here) and our narrative. Our Parasha of Bo begins with the same set up as last week's Parasha of Va'eiyra which essentially goes like this: Moshe and Aharon go before Pharaoh asking him to let the Jews go. If Pharaoh refuses, Gd will bring a certain devastating plague on Egypt and the Egyptians. Lo and behold, Pharaoh does refuse, the plague comes and Pharaoh is temporarily sorry. The Jews ask to leave he then refuses again and so the day repeats, over and over again with the minor change of the type of plague.

This week seemingly similar beginning, **actually** has a significant change. Let's take a look at the opening P'sukim:

1 Then the LORD said to Moshe, 'Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, **2** and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them--in order that you may know that I am the LORD. (Shemot 10:1-2)

א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אֲנִי
 הַכְּבֹדְתִי אֶת־לְבוֹ וְאֶת־לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׂתִי אֶת־י
 אֱלֹהֵי בְּקִרְבּוֹ. ב וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְּנֵי וְבָנֵי־בְנֵי
 אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלִיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־אֶתְנִי
 אֲשֶׁר־שָׂמֵתִי בָם וַיְדַעְתֶּם כִּי־אֲנִי ה'. (שמות
 י:א-ב)

In the six previous scenes, the six previous plagues, the narrative seems to indicate that the very purpose of the plagues are to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They are meant also to educate them-- to teach them that HKBH is the true Gd. Here though begins a change--

Gd says--I will bring these signs so that **'YOU** may recount in the hearing of your sons....in order that **YOU** may know that I am the LORD.' Now the purpose is broadened in that the plagues are not only to educate the Egyptians and to move Pharaoh to let the Jews go, but also to educate the Jewish people.

What exactly is this education and what is its ultimate purpose? Why and what is Gd teaching and why now?

Let's start with the education. What is the specific lesson here? Primarily it seems that it is to let the Jews understand a few important points:

-First, our Gd is the Gd of creation and the entire world. Remember the Jews were living in Egypt for over 400 years surrounded by the Egyptian culture of pantheism, many gods including Pharaoh as one of the gods in that culture. This is a **so** necessary piece for the impending redemption of the Jews from slavery. As we remember from our

recitation of the Haggadah on Pesach, our slavery was not only physical but also spiritual in that we were idol worshippers. The plagues here now serve to move the Jews away from the idolatrous culture of Egypt and recognize and know Gd.

-Second, the Israelites not only have to recognize that HKBH is the Gd and the Gd of the covenant between him and our forefathers, but also that it this Gd is the one who will redeem them. Gd showing the Jews specifically his signs and wonders is a necessary step to having them believe they he will be able to redeem them from slavery and bring them out from Egypt.

Professor Ziony Zevit, in his article *Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues*, notices that each plague seems to be the opposite of one of the days of creation. Locusts, arbeh, the first plague seen in our parasha and the one before it, barad, hail, both completely destroy the vegetation of Egypt. After this destruction, Egypt was the complete opposite of how the world was on the third day of creation. In Bereisheet chapter one verse 12 it states:

The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it.	וַתּוֹצֵא הָאֲרֶץ דָּשָׁא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֵשֶׂה-פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוּ-בוֹ לְמִינֵהוּ....
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In our parasha, after the plague it states in chapter 10 verse 15:

'...nothing green was left of tree or grass of the field in all the land of Egypt.'	...וְלֹא-נֹתַר כֹּל-יֵרֶק בְּעֵץ וּבְעֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.
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After all the plagues, after the killing of the first born, Zevit states:

“At the end of the narrative in Exodus, Israel looks back over the stilled water of the sea at a land with no people, no animals and no vegetation, a land in which creation has been undone. Israel is convinced that her redeemer is the Lord of all creation. It is this implicit theological principle that motivated the explicit creation of the literary pattern. He who had just reduced order to chaos was the same as He who had previously ordered the chaos.”

As the impending redemption gets closer, Gd recognizes that the Jewish people need to be taught essentially how to be those faithful to a loving caring Gd and not to be slaves **and** more importantly not to continue the slave mentality.

This is no easy task. For the Israelites as slaves were essentially living the same day over and over for over 400 (!) years! Essentially,, they truly had no control over their lives. Every day was the same--the same drudgery, the same mere existence. It was far worse than Bill Murray's character in Groundhog's Day waking every morning to Sonny and Cher's song, 'I Got You Babe.' No day was different and no day special. They didn't have within their means to do so and even more tragically, the Jews didn't have the necessary imagination to do so, even given the possible opportunity.

Another challenge for Gd was to find a way to change the Israelites behavior to be obedient not only to another master but rather to understand that this obedience and servitude was **not** going to be the same, in form or in substance, to their past obedience to Pharaoh. Gd had to, in his wisdom and mercy, make it clear to the Jews that in accepting HKBH, they weren't simply swapping out one tyrant for another--exchanging one demoralizing rut for another.

To accomplish this, Gd first undoes the 400 year Groundhog Day loop by giving all of B'nai Yisrael its first command with the famous Pasuk (12:2)

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you .	הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה.
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Here Gd gives them time –a time that they will determine for themselves. As the law developed from this verse, it will be human witnesses that will testify to the New moon and determine the new month.

Here Gd is giving something to the Jews that for over 400 years they never really had---not only control but **recognition** of time that didn't involve the very same thing day after day, year after year. This *mitzvah*, as many of the commentators note as the first commandment given to the emerging nation of Israel, stops the time loop and also

allows for the first time for the soon to be former slaves to **imagine** and **consider** something else--to **imagine** and **consider** freedom. At this very point, the Jews can now believe that tomorrow really **could be** a brand new day.

While Gd is definitely commanding and requiring obedience in this *mitzvah*, it is unlike the demands of Pharaoh, in that it requires not only obedience but active participation on the part of the Jewish people to fulfill. The commandment is not to fulfill some desire of Gd--it is not to help build a pyramid for Gd-- but rather is a directive that enables and strengthens the Jewish people to not only obey Gd but to love him. The goal of the relational quality of the mitzvot in that they aren't meant to build Gd up (he doesn't really need that) but to fulfill Gd's desire to have a relationship with us and have us live our best life.

It is not accident then, that the next commandment is the description of the first Passover, *Pesach Mitzrayim*. The very rituals here in and of themselves accomplish so many goals:

-First, this *mitzvah* of the Pascal Lamb, is for **everyone**. Everyone is required to fulfill this--it is truly the most egalitarian of commandments. The *mitzvah* allows the Jews to glimpse at their future as a **nation**.

-Also, this *mitzvah* also reinforces the our Gd is the only Gd. The lamb was one of the gods of Egypt and essentially the Jews are commanded to kill an Egyptian god and place its blood on their doorpost. While we all know from the narrative that this blood was to alert Gd as to where the Jews were, so as not to kill their first born--it seems that perhaps the real purpose of the commandment was to further move the Jews away from Egypt and its culture.

-Lastly, this *mitzvah*, by requiring the Jews to fulfill it themselves for the **benefit** of themselves and their families, helps the Jews understand that the commandments are not for Gd--it is not to fulfill the desires and needs of a new tyrant--but rather that they are for the good of the Jews themselves to help them live a better life and to get closer to Gd.

But curiously, the last line of Bo describes what will become a daily, ever repeating ritual. The pasuk states:

And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the Lord freed us from Egypt. (Shemot 13: 16)

וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְכָה וּלְטוֹטָפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ כִּי בְחַזֵּק
 יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרָיִם.
 (שמות יג:טז)

This verse is one of the sources for the Chachamim for the making and wearing of *tefillin*. Now interestingly, *tefillin* is a daily, weekday practice. After all the work Gd has employed getting the Jews out of the same-old-same-old, why require such a habitual practice? Wouldn't this undo all of Gd's hard work? The difference here of course is with purpose. *Tefillin* remind us that it was Gd who redeemed us from the seemingly inescapable drudgery of slavery and that he gave us the Torah to prevent that from happening again. They are meant to save us from the destructive and habitual behaviors we find ourselves in from time to time. The Torah and Gd's direction protect us from experience the slavery of the ruts we create for ourselves. It gives us the tools to not only create but more importantly to believe that we have, with Gd's help, the potential for a better day. The new regular behaviors that are given to us in our mitzvot allow us to allow Gd to redeem us—not only in the past, not only during *Pesach*, but every single day.



Rabbi Marianne Novak received her BA in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women's Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.