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## Parshat Bo: Entering Fog

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*Parshat Bo* contains the final three of the infamous ten plagues, among them darkness, one of the most frightening of them all.

21 The Lord said to Moses, "Stretch forth your hand toward the heavens, and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, and the darkness will become darker." 22 So Moses stretched forth his hand toward the heavens, and there was thick darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three days. 23 They did not see each other, and no one rose from his place for three days, but for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings. (Exodus 10: 21-23)

כא ויאמר ה' אל-מֹשֶׁה נְטֵה יָדְךָ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּמַשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ: כַּב וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ-אֲפֹלָה בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים: כַּג לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו וְלֹא-קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחְתּוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְלִכְלֹבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אור בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם: (שמות י: כא-כג)

A "darker darkness" or a palpable, heavy fog, fell across the land and it immobilized the Egyptians completely. They could not see one another or touch one another. They could not even move, so thick was the opaque cloud that enveloped them.

Pharaoh's response to this torturous experience is strong. He says to Moshe: Enough! Take your people and leave.

Pharaoh summoned Moses and said, "Go! Worship the Lord, but your flocks and your cattle shall be left. Your young children may also go with you." (Exodus 10:24)

וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר לְכוּ עַבְדוּ אֶת-ה' רק צֹאנְכֶם וּבְקִרְבְּכֶם יֵצֵג גַּם-טֹפְכֶם יִלְךְ עִמָּכֶם: (שמות י: כד)

Exasperated as he is by the repeated afflictions of the Egyptian people, Pharaoh is nearly ready to give up control over the Jewish people. But, he tenaciously holds onto one thing: control over their property. The people of Israel may leave Egypt to worship their God, but their belongings must stay behind. Perhaps he imagined they would then not leave or at least return upon completion of their worship mission.

Moshe finds this arrangement unacceptable and he utters a dramatic statement in response to the proposal:

25 But Moses said, "You too shall give sacrifices and burnt offerings into our hands, and we will make them for the Lord our God. 26 And also our cattle will go with us; not a [single] hoof will remain, for we will take from it to worship the Lord our God, and we will not know how we will worship the Lord until we arrive there." (Exodus 10:25-26)

כה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה גַם-אֶתֶּה תִּתֵּן בְּיָדֵנוּ זִבְחִים וְעֹלֹת וְעֹשֵׂינוּ לָהּ אֶל-ה'ינו: כו וְגַם-מִקְנֵנוּ יִלְךְ עִמָּנוּ לֹא תִשָּׂאֵר פְּרֹסָה כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ נִקַּח לְעַבֵּד אֶת-ה' אֶל-ה'ינו וְאִנְחֵנוּ לֹא-יָבִיעַ מִה-נִּעְבֵּד אֶת-ה' עַד-בֵּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה: (שמות י: כה-כו)

We will not leave our cattle behind. Every single thing will come with us. Not to enable our escape plan, but to enable our worship plan, indicates Moshe.

Moshe understood Pharaoh to be offering a faulty path to God (either instead of, or in addition to, a political manipulation.) Pharaoh's suggestion that the cattle stay was interpreted to be a theological assertion of sorts: that the way to worship the Jewish God is knowable. It requires people, but not animals; human bodies, but not the

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stuff that they bring with them. Moshe strongly resists this idea and, in so doing, provides a template for the pathway to worship going forward.

In contrast to Pharaoh's spiritual certainty, Moshe asserts a deep sense of uncertainty,

"... [W]e will not know how we will worship the Lord until we arrive there." . . . וְאֵנְחֹנוּ לֹא-נִדְעַע מִה-נִעְבְּד אֶת-ה' עַד-בְּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה"

The narrative is nine plagues in, God directly communicating with Moshe all along, and yet still, to Moshe, what God precisely wants from him and the people is unknown. The same Moshe who demands of Pharaoh repeatedly "Let my people go so that they might worship me" (Exodus 7:17, 7:26) "שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי" (שמות ז:יז, ז:כו)

actually has no idea what that *avodah* (worship) entails! Moreover, he won't until he arrives at an equally unknown destination. All he knows is that he must lead his people, together with all that they bear, away from the constriction that is Egypt toward the openness of the desert. And that there, in the liberated space of not knowing, they might come to know something of God. This willingness to leap into uncertainty is, for him, the *avodah*, the work that needs to be done.

Pharaoh encounters darkness as a plague, and his response is a panicked, desperate attempt to return to light. Moshe, who lives in the light ("וּלְכֹל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹרֶךְ יָמֵיהֶם"), calls his people toward a kind of fog, to willingly set out into a life full of mystery, but also of surprise. For in the words of Jeremiah, it is this spirit of risk and trust that ultimately earns God's grace:

... So said the Lord: I remember to you the lovingkindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me in the desert, in a land not sown. (Jeremiah 2:2) . . . כֹּה אָמַר ה' זְכַרְתִּי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבְתָּ כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה: (ירמיהו ב:ב)

As the Israelites begin their journey into the wild desert, Moshe's message to Pharaoh reminds them and us that the best pathway toward God is one that is wide open; that does not predetermine its destination; that stays alive to change and new possibilities. We are not asked to know a priori how to connect. Only to bring everything we've got--all of our resources and all of our baggage--and to be open to what comes our way. For

"we will not know how we will worship the Lord until we arrive there." "וְאֵנְחֹנוּ לֹא נִדְעַע מִה נִעְבְּד אֶת ה' עַד בְּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה"



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