

Torah Weekly

ת"ב

January 17-23, 2021
4-10 Shevat, 5781

Torah reading:
Bo: Exodus 10:1 - 13:16
Haftarah:
Jeremiah 46:13-28

PARSHAT BO

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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The Secret of Light

"There was thick darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three days. [One Egyptian] did not see his brother, and no one rose from his place for three days, but for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings"—Exodus 10:22-23.

As opposed to the other nine plagues which afflicted the Egyptians in a very practical way, each causing catastrophic personal and/or property damage, the Plague of Darkness didn't cause any tangible harm.

The absence of light merely denies people the ability to see their surroundings, making it impossible to discern objects or people in their vicinity. Though humans are endowed with another four senses, each providing the ability to become somewhat familiar with one's surroundings, none are as critical as sight. Lack of sight is such a major impediment that our sages tell us that to a certain degree a sightless person is considered to be lifeless.

Why is light – and the faculty of sight that it enables – so crucial? Two answers come immediately to mind, one practical and one psychological:

1) We are surrounded by items designed to improve our lives. Without light, however, the most helpful of implements is reduced to a mere obstacle. A chair, a table, or a mountain of gold for that matter, will trip up the person who walks in darkness.

2) Light motivates to action, as opposed to darkness which breeds depression and lethargy.

The bright environment created by light allows people to rise above their self-centered tendencies and truly empathize with others.

The Plague of Darkness which struck the Egyptians was a physical reflection of their sorry spiritual state. The Israelites didn't suffer from

the plague, because their light was provided for by Torah and mitzvot— "A mitzvah is a candle and Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23).

With the benefit of the illumination provided by Torah and its commandments, an entire new world comes to light. Suddenly, those things which one considered to be obstacles are revealed for what they really are—creations of G-d, intended to assist in one's spiritual journey. The piles of gold are revealed before the mind's eye. And the darkness which pervaded the Egyptian society didn't allow them to "rise from their place"; they were mired in their own selfish desires and pursuits and couldn't envision a higher goal. Worse yet, they "could not see their brother," their selfishness precluded them from sharing in the joy of a friend or commiserating with him or her in a time of distress. It is in our hands to brighten our lives; we were given the tools. And when we manage to live in light despite the darkness that surrounds us, that is a sure indication that the redemption – both personal and national – is just around the corner.

Why? Because what is our current exile state, *galut*, if not a thick darkness that obscures the truth? When we successfully claw away the darkness, the light that emerges is a portent for the time when darkness will be banished forever, when all of creation will finally see what it's all about. *By Rabbi Naftali Silberberg*

Finding Freedom

Free at last, free at last, thank G-d Almighty we are free at last. Who said these words? No, it wasn't Moses but American civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King. But it could have been Moses – or for that matter any one of the millions of Jews who were liberated from Egyptian bondage.

This is the week when we read of the great Exodus. *Let my people go that they may serve Me* was the Divine call transmitted by Moses to Pharaoh. Now, if the purpose of leaving Egypt and Pharaoh's whip was to be able to serve G-d, so where is the freedom? We are still slaves, only now we are servants of the Almighty!

Indeed, countless individuals continue to question the merits of religion in general. Who wants to submit to the rigors of religion when we can be free spirits? Religion, they argue, stifles the imagination, stunts our creative style, forever shouts instructions and lays down the law. Thou Shalt do this and Thou Shalt better not do that, or else! Do's and don'ts, rules and regulations are the hallmark of every belief system; but why conform to any system at all? Why not just be "me"?

Many Jews argue similarly. Mitzvahs cramp my style. Keeping kosher is a serious inconvenience. Shabbat really gets in the way of my weekend. And Passover has got to be the biggest headache of the year.

Long ago, the sages of the Talmud said it was actually the other way around. *There is no one as free as he who is occupied with the study of Torah.* But how can this possibly be true? Torah is filled with rules of law, ethics and even expectations and exhortations that we take the high road and behave beyond the call of duty. How could they say that Torah makes us free? Surely it is inhibiting rather than liberating?

Let me share an answer I once heard on the radio while driving in my car. It was during a BBC interview with Malcolm Muggeridge, the former editor of *Punch*, the satirical British magazine. *Punch* magazine was arguably England's most irreverent publication. It mocked and ridiculed the royal family long before they

did it to themselves. In his latter years, Malcolm Muggeridge became religious and the interviewer was questioning how the sultan of satire, the prince of *Punch* could make such a radical transformation and become religious? How could he stifle such a magnificent free spirit as his?

Muggeridge's answer was a classic, which I still quote regularly. He said he had a friend who was a famous yachtsman, an accomplished navigator of the high seas. A lesson he once gave him in sailing would provide the answer to the reporter's question. The yachtsman taught him that *if you want to enjoy the freedom of the high seas, you must first become a slave to the compass.*

A young novice might challenge the experienced professional's advice. But why should I follow that little gadget? Why can't I go where I please? It's my yacht! But every intelligent person understands that without the navigational fix provided by the compass we will flounder and sail in circles. Only by following the lead of the compass will the wind catch our sails so we can experience the ecstasy and exhilaration of the high seas. *If you want to enjoy the freedom of the high seas you must first become a slave to the compass.*

The Torah is the compass of life. It provides our navigational fix so we know where to go and how to get there. Without the Torah's guidance and direction we would be lost in the often stormy seas of confusion. Without a spiritual guidance system we flounder about, wandering aimlessly through life. Just look at our kids when they're on vacation from school and are "free" from the disciplines of the educational system. Unless they have a program of some kind to keep them busy – like a summer camp – they become very frustrated in their "freedom."

Within the Torah lifestyle there is still ample room for spontaneity and freedom of expression. Not all rabbis are clones. To the untrained eye every *yeshiva bochur* looks identical – a black hat, glasses and a beard. The truth is that everyone is distinctively different; an individual with his very own tastes attitudes, personality and preferences. They may look the same but they are each unique.

We can be committed to the compass and still be free spirits. Indeed, there are none as free as they who are occupied with Torah.

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

Sunday, January 17, 2021 --- 4 Shevat, 5781

R. Abraham Kalisker (1810)

Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk (1741-1810) was a controversial figure in the 3rd generation of Chassidic leaders. In his youth, he was a study partner of Rabbi Elijah "the Gaon of Vilna," who led the initial opposition against Chassidism; but later Rabbi Abraham himself joined the the forbidden *kat* ("sect," as the Chassidic movement was derisively called by its opponents) and became a disciple of Rabbi DovBer, the Maggid of Mezeritch, the successor to Chassidism's founder, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. After Rabbi DovBer's passing in 1772, much of the opposition to Chassidism was directed against Rabbi Abraham's disciples, who, more than any other group within the movement, mocked the intellectual elitism of the establishment's scholars and communal leaders; even Rabbi Abraham's own colleagues were dismayed by the "antics" of some of his disciples. In 1777, Rabbi Abraham joined the first Chassidic "aliyah", in which a group of more than 300 Chassidim led by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk emigrated to the Holy Land. Rabbi Abraham passed away in Tiberias on the 4th of Shevat of the year 5570 from creation (1810 CE).

R. Israel Abuchatzera (1984)

Rabbi Israel Abuchatzera (1890-1984), known as "Baba Sali," was born in Tafillalt, Morocco, to the illustrious Abuchatzera family. From a young age he was renowned as a sage, miracle maker and master kabbalist. In 1964 he moved to the Holy Land, eventually settling in the southern development town he made famous, Netivot. He passed away in 1984 on the 4th of Shevat. His graveside in Netivot has become a holy site visited by thousands annually.

Monday, January 18, 2021 --- 5 Shevat, 5781

2nd Gerer Rebbe (1905)

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter (1847-1905), the second Rebbe in the Chassidic dynasty of Ger -- known for his famed Chassidic work "Sefat Emet" -- passed away on the 5th of Shevat of the year 5665 from creation (1905). He was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Abraham Mordechai.

Wednesday, January 20, 2021 --- 7 Shevat, 5781

R. Dovid of Lelov (1814)

Chassidic master Rabbi Dovid Biederman of Lelov (1746-1814) was a disciple of the "Seer of Lublin." Rabbi Dovid was known for his extraordinary *ahavat yisrael*; it was said of him that he was incapable of seeing faults in a fellow Jew. Two printed collections of stories about him are *Migdal David* and *Kodesh Hillulim*.

Thursday, January 21, 2021 --- 8 Shevat, 5781

End of the "Elders Era" (1228 BCE)

The last of the Elders (*z'keinim*) who were contemporaries of Joshua and outlived him, passed away in the year 2533 after creation. They were part of the chain of Torah transmission as listed at the beginning of Ethics of the Fathers: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets..." In ancient times, this day was marked as a fast day. [Some are of the opinion that this occurred on the 5th of Shevat].

Friday, January 22, 2021 --- 9 Shevat, 5781

"Moshiach's Torah Scroll" completed (1970)

The writing of the "Sefer Torah to greet Moshiach," initiated at the behest of the 6th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, in 1942, was concluded 28 years later at a special gathering convened by the Lubavitcher Rebbe on Friday afternoon, the 9th of Shevat, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's passing.

Shabbat, January 23, 2021 --- 10 Shevat, 5781

Passing of the Rashash (1777)

Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, known by his name's acronym, the *RaShaSH*, was born in Yemen, and as a young man immigrated to Israel. He was quickly recognized for his piety and scholarship, especially in the area of Jewish mysticism, and was appointed to be dean of the famed Kabbalistic learning center in the Old City of Jerusalem, the *Yeshivat ha-Mekubbalim*.

He authored many works, mostly based on the teachings of the great kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari. Rabbi Sharabi's most famous work is a commentary on the prayerbook, replete with kabbalistic meditations.

His mystical works are studied by kabbalists to this very day. He is also considered to be a foremost authority on Yemenite Jewish traditions and customs.

Passing of Rebbetzin Rivkah (1914)

Rebbetzin Rivkah Schneerson was born in Lubavitch in 1833; her maternal grandfather was Rabbi DovBer, the 2nd Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch. In 1849 she married her first cousin, Rabbi Shmuel, who later became the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe. For many years Rebbetzin Rivkah, who survived her husband by 33 years, was the esteemed matriarch of Lubavitch, and Chassidim frequented her home to listen to her accounts of the early years of Lubavitch. She is the source of many of the stories recorded in the talks, letters and memoirs of her grandson, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak (the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe). The Beth Rivkah network of girls' schools, founded by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak in the 1940's, is named after her.