

~~How Do We Make It True~~

BO

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion, Bo, we learn about the last plagues that G-d sent to Egypt. G-d had wanted that Pharaoh would recognize that slavery was wrong. The Rabbis explain this when it said that G-d hardened His heart it means that He gave them the strength to withstand the suffering of the plagues. Pharaoh was to recognize himself that slavery was wrong. The plagues were just to direct his thinking toward it. The Jewish people were to leave Egypt. The Torah says that it was "a night of watching unto the Lord for bringing them out of the land of Egypt". This same night is a night of watching for the Lord for all the children of Israel throughout the generations. We can understand why this was called a night of watching for Israel and, of course, we observe and watch on that night, but why is this called a night of watching for G-d? After all, G-d is above time. That's what His name, Yud Kay Vahv Kay, symbolizes. In fact, since Einstein we know that time is not constant. We all have read science fiction stories about how someone took a long spaceship ride and came back to earth in what he thought was his aging process in two years, only to find that the generation that was alive now on earth were his great-great-grandchildren. G-d does not need a special night to watch. What is He watching? Perhaps we can understand this question if we analyze the last two plagues. All the plagues but the last one could be seen as natural occurrences. The river got filled with a red parasite which killed all the fish, etc. In fact, there are red tides in Florida to this day. Because the river was no longer habitable the frogs deserted it and entered the people's homes. Then vermin came, etc. The ninth plague, darkness, could be explained as a result of a volcanic eruption. The last plague, though, is a supernatural type of plague. We know of no disease which attacks only the firstborn. The Rabbis say that this ninth plague of darkness was a terrible plague, the worst. The Torah describes it this way: "No man saw his brother and no one rose from his place for three days and to all Israel there was light in their habitations." The Rabbis explain that the worst plague is when nobody can see his brother. Today we are all afflicted with the idea that the most important thing in life is personal growth and nobody, it seems, wants to bother with anybody else. You do not want to look at your brother and help him because it may stifle your growth. In America today so many people believe this. Rabbi Greenblatt was telling me how his daughter,

who lives in New York, got sick on a subway and fainted. Nobody helped her. She just lay there until she revived. Nobody wants to see his brother. The Torah here is teaching us that there can be no personal growth without seeing your brother. Any growth you really have is selfishness. In order to have growth you must look at your brother. G-d was watching to see whether Israel is still looking at their brother. If they are not then they are not really worthy of their freedom. In the last plague, the striking of the firstborn, we learn that the Jewish people were spared because they put the blood of the lamb on their doorpost. The lamb was a symbol of Egyptian idolatry. We had to reject it entirely before we were deserving of freedom. The Midrash says that not only was the blood of the lamb put on the door, but also the blood of circumcision. The Jewish people in Egypt had forsaken circumcision. When they were to leave the Jewish people not only had to show that they were against evil things, slavery and idolatry, but that they were for Jewish values. All too often today we find that our young people especially are against the evils they find in society but they really, in many instances, do not have Jewish solutions. Most of the positive movements in the West were founded by Jews; the labor unions, civil rights, even the Red Cross in America, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, etc. It is not, though, enough to be against things. We must also be for things with positive Jewish values. Pesach, then, is a night of watching for G-d, too. He is watching whether or not she helps each other and not only rejects false views but also works to implement positive Jewish views. If we do that then we will remain free forever internally if not externally. We Jews must not only point out faults but we must, like those who founded the labor unions and worked for civil rights, be positive and we must always be positive for particular Jewish values as well. The blood of the circumcision was mixed with the blood of the lamb. If we do then we will be assured that we will be free inwardly. G-d is watching to see how we are acting. The story about the man who was 80 years old. He lifted his eyes up to G-d and said, "G-d, I never asked You for anything all my life. I have struggled and tried to do my best. I have never asked You for anything. Now I am going to ask You for one little thing. Let me win the New York lottery." The next day he opened the paper and his name was not in there. He lifted his

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eyes to heaven and said, "G-d, why didn't I win? What's going on here? Let me win next week." The next week he opened the paper and, sure enough, he didn't win. He once again looked up and said, "G-d, what's wrong with You? Why didn't I win?" He heard a heavenly voice say, "Mr. Goldberg, give Me a break. Don't you think you should buy a ticket first?" We all must buy a ticket first. We must know what we are against, but we must be positive for something. Judaism can only survive if we are for Jewish values.

This Torah portion deals with the last few plagues of the Jewish people's exodus from Egypt. They were actually thrust out. The Egyptians kicked them out at the end. In this Torah portion we also learn the first commandments that were given to the Jewish people. We learn how the very first commandment was to set up a calendar. The second commandment was to take a lamb on the 10th of the month and to slaughter it on the 14th. The third commandment was that all the people were to gather together in family units and eat the lamb. Enough families should gather to make sure to have enough to eat the lamb. This seems very strange that these are the first commandments which were given to the Jewish people. These do not seem to be the type of commandments that you would give to slaves who were about to go free. There were no ringing declarations in them. There are no appeals to brotherhood, etc. These three commandments, though, illustrate what the Jewish conception of freedom is. What differentiates a slave from a free man in Jewish law? A slave has three disabilities in Jewish law. One, he cannot testify as a witness in any matter. Second, he is not bound by any commandments that have to do with time. Three, he cannot get married. A slave suffers from these three disabilities. Because slavery denies a person three important characteristics which make up freedom. To our modern way of thinking freedom means that you can do anything you want when you want to whomever you please. Pharaoh probably thought he was defending his freedom when he resisted Moses' efforts to free the slaves. Freedom in our modern conception means we are not bound to anything. To Judaism, on the other hand, freedom means that you have no master but you are bound by certain constraints otherwise you will not have freedom. To a slave time has no meaning. He can make no progress. He cannot get ahead. He has no sense of responsibility. All he wants to do is get through the day without injury. The concentration camp time was inverted. Days dragged but the years sped by because

every day was really the same. If we carefully analyze what we really are we will find that we are actually only an alarm clock, a time bomb. Each of us has hormones that go off at intervals that change us, that make us grow and eventually bring our death. The cells we have this year in our body are not the same cells we had last year, but scientists have found that even if we take cells and put them in optimum environments they will only reproduce a certain amount of times and then they will stop. We are like programmed entities who go through cycles. Time is very important. We must seize time or we will lose our freedom to act. A slave has no time. A free man knows how to use time, to seize it. A slave also is not bound by truth. He lives under fear and truth is second to survival. The Jewish people were commanded to take the lamb and kill it. Other religions misinterpret the meaning of the lamb. The lamb was worshipped by the Egyptians. It was a symbol of falsehood. In order to be free you have to recognize that you are bound by the truth, that you must live lives according to the truth. If you try to escape from the truth you become a slave of your own fantasies. Finally, freedom means that you are bound by relationships, that you can have relationships. You are bound by your family. A slave can have no family. Children, spouses are bought and sold. In order to be free we must be bound by time, by truth, and by family. This is also why the Sabbath and the Tephillin are signs which remind all Jews of the exodus. They are signs of freedom. The Sabbath has to do with time and the Tephillin, on the hand and head show that we are bound by truth and by relationships. In our day many people have become slaves because they do not realize that they have to be bound. The story about the man who came into the country club a little drunk yelling, "Happy New Year" at which point the people looked at him and said, "What are you talking about? It's the middle of May". "Oh my gosh" yelled the man, "my wife is going to kill me. I've never been this late before". Freedom requires a consciousness of time, relationships and truth

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There are two main signs besides the Seder for remembering the Exodus from Egypt. One of them is Shabbos and the other is the tephillin. Why should the tephillin be considered a sign of the Exodus? The Jewish people did not put tephillin on in Egypt and the tephillin had nothing at all to do with the Exodus. The answer to this question, I believe, is found in the basic Jewish premise that the world is not redeemed. There are never any perfect solutions. Any solution always brings in its wake other problems, but partial solutions are important. It is much better to have the problem of too much food rather than the problem of no food. It is much better to have the problems of freedom than the problems of slavery. Many times people will say that something has failed because it has not solved all the problems. They fail to realize that we can never solve all of any problem. All our solutions will end up spawning new problems. It is not true that the great society failed. Lyndon Johnson's programs solved many of the problems of America, but not all of them. It is true that Jewish education will not solve all the Jewish problems. It is true that the State of Israel will also not solve all the Jewish problems, but it is much better to have Jewish education than not and to have the State of Israel than not to have it. In this week's Torah portion, Bo, we learn how the Jewish people were to be free. Sure, their freedom would bring problems but freedom's problems are so much better than slavery. According to Halacha, there are three differences between a slave and a free man. In the olden days if a Jew owned a slave the slave had to agree to be circumcised or he would have to be sold or given back to his original master. Today, thank heaven, there is no such thing as slavery. A slave cannot be a witness. A slave could not get married. A slave did not observe the Commandments having to do with time. To be a slave means that you really have no time. Time is not yours. There is nothing you can accomplish, nothing you can do. The days drag on and the years fly by. To a slave there is no truth, because he must squelch his true feelings. He does not want to get beaten or killed. A slave has no family because children and his wife can be separated from him. A free man, though, is bound by time and by truth and by family. Freedom does not mean you can do whatever you want to do. You have to make good use of your time otherwise you are a

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slave. You have to be bound by truth, by trying to do the right thing otherwise you are a slave. And you have to be bound by family otherwise you are a slave. The Sabbath teaches a Jew about time. The Seder teaches the Jew about family, and the tephillin teaches a Jew that you must bind truth to your hand, your heart and your mind. There is a story about a teacher who asked the class, "A mother has five children but only four potatoes. How can she divide the potatoes equally among the children?" One of the boys said, "I know, she should mash them". Maybe some of the children will not like mashed potatoes but this partial solution is still a good solution. Freedom brings problems. Freedom binds us to the truth, to family, and to time.

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In the Torah portion, Bo, we learn about Layel Shimureem. We learn about the night of watching. This was the night in which the Jewish people put the blood of the lamb on the door and they made a Seder. They were to eat the lamb and to eat it with their loins girded and their shoes on and their staff in their hand. They were even to eat Matzah and Moror. They had a real Seder. It is strange, though, that they had a real Seder commemorating their freedom when they were not free yet. In the sentence before we learn about Layel Shimureem we learn that it was at the end of 430 years. According to the Rabbis, it was 430 years since the promise was made to Abraham that his children would inherit the Land of Israel, but first they would go down to Egypt. They had actually only spent 210 years in Egypt. It says that this was a "night of watching for G-d and Israel throughout all their generations". It does seem strange, though, that they were celebrating the Exodus before they were free. They did not leave Egypt until the next morning. What is this all about? In life there is an objective state and a subjective state. We all live in our minds as well as in the world. One of the big errors of modern man is to fail to realize that there are these two different realms of human living. Especially since the second World War, people are being taught to do what feels good. Their subjective state is all that counts. If something feels good to them then it must be good, and if something does not feel good to them then it must be bad. There are no objective criteria right and wrong just how to feel about something. The only problem with this type of morality is that many times it can feel good to kill and hurt somebody, but we cannot say that it is good. People say revenge is sweet, but that does not make it right or good. We in Judaism have always believed that there are objective criteria outside ourselves that make for right or wrong,

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and when there is a conflict between what we want to do and what we should do, then we have to do what we should do. It is not always easy, and many times we fail, but that's why we have the concept of Teshuva, or repentance, so we can try again. We do not say, though, that because I failed to do the right thing I am going to do the wrong thing and it is right. The whole purpose of Jewish education, the Rabbis have commented, is to make you want to do what you should do, to get you so involved in the issues at hand that you cannot but want to do the right thing. Jewish education is not just to teach you a few rituals. It is to connect you in life so that you will always want to do the right thing. The end result is not as important as learning how we got there and why and how we are doing things. It is not enough just to tell a person to make the Kiddush. After learning six blatt of Gemora on the Kiddush and Shabbos you understand it much deeper and you want to do it. When Jewish learning stops the Jewish religion stops. Many Jews do not want to learn because they do not want to do what they know they should do in many areas of life. I remember when several young South African boys came here a few years ago and they all told me how stupid football was, how slow it was compared to soccer, how it is so complicated with tight ends and flankers, etc. However, after a few years I notice that these same boys are following football more avidly than even American boys. They got into the game. They understand all its intricacies. They understand it thoroughly and they really want to go see it and play it. This is the same thing with many aspects of Judaism. You have to know about it, know its intricacies and then you will want to do it. This is what Layel Shimureem is reaching us. The Jewish people were not free yet, but they had prepared so much for

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it, they had learned so much about it that they could feel and taste it even before they had it. Freedom is sometimes elusive and sometimes people would rather not have it if it means sacrifice, but the Jewish people had prepared for it. That's why even to this day Pesach is a holiday we prepare for more than any other holiday, and they could taste it and would, therefore, appreciate it even more when they were given it. In life many times many people are failures because they do not attack their tasks with enthusiasm, with drive. They do not feel inside that the tasks they are doing are important or worthwhile or interesting and, therefore, they only go through the motions and they fail. There is a very strange Medrash which says that the blood the Jewish people put on the door the night before they were to leave Egypt contained not only the blood of the lamb but also the blood of circumcision. The lamb, of course, was a symbol of Egypt culture. The people worshipped the lamb especially at that time of the year. Even today the sign of the Zodiac for that time of the year is Aries, a fancy word of lamb. The Jewish people had to reject the pagan false concepts of Egypt. That's why the blood of the lamb had to be used. But, it is not enough just to be against things. Unfortunately, there are many Jews today who are only Jews because they are against things, not because they are for Judaism. They remain Jews only because of anti-Semitism. They remain Jews only because they are against the false ideas of the outside world, but they, themselves, do not really believe in Judaism. In fact, they probably have even negative views about it. That is not enough to be against something in order to accomplish important and worthwhile things. You must be for something. The Jews, before they could get freedom, had to be against slavery and the Egyptian culture, and they also had to be for Judaism. That's why this strange Medrash says that

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the blood of circumcision was placed along with the blood of the lamb on the door. The blood of the lamb stands for negative rejection. The blood of the circumcision stands for a positive commitment to Jewish values. In our day and age, unfortunately, there are not enough people who are for things. The Jewish people celebrated a Seder even before they left Egypt celebrating their freedom because internally they were already free. Internally it was already theirs. They had rejected Egyptian slavery and had believed in Jewish goals. They celebrated even before they were free physically because mentally and spiritually they were already free. This made possible their physical redemption. Today when we attack tasks we must be filled with enthusiasm and belief in our task otherwise we will not succeed. Anticipation and preparation are more important than the task, itself. That's why Jewish learning is so important and critical. The story about a man who was walking down a dark alley and was beset by a bandit who wanted his money. He fought with the bandit for over an hour. The bandit finally overcame him and said, "Give me your wallet." When he opened it there was only 50¢ in it. He said, "Why did you fight for over an hour for 50¢?" The man replied, "I didn't fight over the 50¢. I thought you wanted the \$100 in my shoe." It is not inner things that people can see that are the most important. That determines whether or not we will be a success.

How Free Can We Be

JANUARY 1984

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Many times people come to me and say, "Rabbi, you have to help me. I feel trapped. Things are caving in all around me. I am not in control. I do not know what is happening. I feel powerless, and I want to gain some feeling of freedom and independence. I feel like I am a pawn, a robot. I am not the true me. I want to feel free." Usually, the people who come to me with this feeling are suffering from a midlife crisis. They wake up to the fact that they are 40 or 45 or 50, and they panic. They feel that they have not lived.

In their youth, they worked hard and got good grades mainly to please their parents. They spent long years in school preparing for a career, and then after they embarked upon a career, they got married. They, again, had to put in long hours in order to be a professional success and to support their families. Suddenly, they feel trapped. Is this what life is all about, hard work, constant effort? They feel they have never had freedom. They want it. Many times these people actually throw over their families and even their professions in order to try to be free and to find out who they really are. Unfortunately for them, most of the time they find out that who they really are is the person they were before they threw everything over. They then frantically try to regain what they had given up, and find, much to their chagrin, that in most instances it is very difficult and, many times, impossible. They realize now that their quest for a feeling of freedom was an illusion, and that they really felt the best when they had definite goals and people to work for who needed them.

Freedom is a difficult proposition. In fact, modern man has been going in two directions on the subject for at least the past 100 years. On

the one hand we have been proclaiming that we all must be free to do what we want, when we want, how we want, while, on the other hand, we have been championing philosophical materialism which states that man is only the product of cause and effect, and that we really have no freedom at all. Just as when we throw a ball into the air we can determine where and how it will land by filling in a scientific formula, so, too, when we deal with man all we need to know is the differing forces working on him in order to calculate how he will act. You apply certain forces and his actions are inevitable. Materialism, in a philosophical sense, does not mean that we are all interested in getting Cadillacs and swimming pools and big houses. It means that there are no forces working on us except the forces that can be seen and that these forces can be determined in the same way that we determine the forces that act upon the a-beam of a birdge we are building.

In the Torah portion, Bo, we learn how the Jewish people gained their freedom from Egypt. At the same time, we learn something very strange. We learn how the first Commandment which was given to the Jewish people was the commandment to construct a calendar, and not just any calendar, but a lunar calendar. We are told "Ha-Chodesh Haze Lochem" "this month is for you". Later on we learn "V'hoyo Lochem", "and it shall be to you". The Rabbis interpret this to mean that the Sanhedrin was to determine the dates for the festivals in Judaism and were to declare the new moons. In Biblical and early Talmudic times, the Sanhedrin fixed the new moons by actual observation and the dates of the new moons were sent out by messengers from Jerusalem to the surrounding countries. A lunar month is $29\frac{1}{2}$ days. Since there is no such thing as a half a day in nature, some months had to be 29 days and some months had to be 30 days. The

