

Parshat Bo 2018-5778

In this week's Torah reading, in *parshat Bo*, G-d sends the last three, and most devastating, plagues to Egypt: locust, darkness and death of the firstborn. The plague of locust wiped out the bounty of the Egyptian harvest, a contrast to the story of Joseph, in which he predicted that Egypt would become rich by providing that abundance to surrounding nations who were subject to famines. The plague of darkness is something we can relate to: I am told that now, over 4 months after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, between 20 and 30% of the island still has no power. I remember the October Surprise storm in Buffalo on Oct. 13, 2006: most suburbanites barely made it through 9 days with no power. Recent research shows that the hormones our body makes that fluctuate at different times in the day, part of circadian rhythm, are very critical to our health, and that long-term disruption of our having circadian day-night cycles can lead to serious heart disease and cancer. And the plague of death of the firstborn? If it were not horrible enough to lose a child, in the ancient Egyptian society, all transfer of wealth and power was based on the system of primogenitor, in which the firstborn inherited everything. Death of the firstborn was not just a personal loss, it wrecked havoc on Egypt's system of commerce and finance.

In short, by the end of this parsha, and by the end of the 10th plague, there was no difference in the status of the Israelite slaves and their now pummeled former masters. Thus, before the Israelites were given their first taste of freedom in 400 years, their oppressors were debased to their level, as if to say: "now you will know what it is like to suffer as a slave, and to yearn for freedom."

There are two very interesting statements in this week's reading that remind us of how the long-enslaved Israelites were coaxed to freedom. The first is that they were told to make a sacrifice of a lamb, literally called a *korban pesach*, from where we get the Hebrew name of the holiday *Pesach*. As you know, Jews are not allowed to eat the blood of animals, yet the Israelites were commanded to take the blood of the *pesach* sacrifice and wipe along the their doorposts so that the Angel of Death would pass over their houses and not kill their first born- hence the name in English, Passover. This protection at the doorway is later enshrined in Deuteronomy where we are commended to put reminders of G-d's love and protection "on your doorposts and gates". From this, we learn to affix *mezzuzot* on our

doorposts, containing that paragraph in Deuteronomy including the *Shema* prayer.

A second statement is that when eating the pascal lamb on the Passover holiday, "it shall be eaten in one house: you shall not take any meat outside, nor should you break a bone of it." The notion here is that it is meant to be a feast of freedom, not to be eaten quickly or on the run; not to be broken apart and attacked ravenously, like a starving person who has just found food, but to be savored as one would savor his or her newfound freedom. The actual scene could not have been stranger: imagine being an Israelite slave, eating your family's roasted lamb, slowly and with intention, all while surrounded by the screams of the Egyptians who had just lost their firstborn. Hours before, Pharaoh owned their bodies, and now they were free. They were free but not yet free to leave, because the next chapters remind us that Pharaoh was still ready to pursue and kill them with his remaining army, and that it took the re-flooding of the Red Sea to prevent this slaughter.

In the end, this is a story of paradoxes, of how the actual transition to freedom was slow and complicated. One thing that can be said is that on that night, when they ate of their pascal lambs, the Israelites felt in their hearts and souls as if they were free for the first time. Yet it would take 40 years of roaming the desert, soul-searching and the passage of a whole generation before the Israelites would gain true freedom and independence in the land of Israel.

Imagine how black slaves in the South felt when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Whenever they heard it, as early as on Jan. 1, 1863, or as late as 6 months later, commemorated by the Juneteenth holiday, those slaves felt free, even though they would not have true freedom for several years. Of the night they learned of the Proclamation, Frederick Douglass wrote years later: "Can any colored man, or any white man friendly to the freedom of all men, ever forget that night...? I shall never forget that memorable night, when in a distant city I waited and watched at a public meeting, with three thousand others not less anxious than myself, for the word of deliverance Nor shall I ever forget the outburst of joy and thanksgiving that rent the air when the lightning brought to us the emancipation proclamation...we forgot all delay, and forgot all tardiness... we were thenceforward willing to allow the president all the latitude of time, phraseology, and every honorable device that statesmanship might require for the achievement of a great and beneficent measure of liberty and progress."

The parallels of this tumultuous time in our country's history parallels the story of that first night of the *pesach*, the pascal lamb, in this week's Torah portion. These times were both great and terrifying, emancipating yet not fully producing freedom, freeing but not yet legally free.

Our great experiment with freedom and democracy continues in this country, but we should be reminded through the story of the *pesach*, that we are not yet fully formed as free people. The chasm between internal emancipation and external freedom is getting smaller, but we are constantly reminded that it remains a chasm that we must heal. We still fight in this country for the ability to live where we want, love who we want, say what we what, pray as we wish, vote equally like free people, and not be pulled over and killed because of the color of our skin.

Jews and African-Americans share a bond in that they know what is it like to be a minority in a strange land, a slave with no hope of redemption, an emancipated man without true equality. But we also understand that once our hearts and souls are emancipated, there is no turning back, there is only a march towards true freedom, a march that we must do together. We must say in unison to the Pharaohs of every generation, "the day of our liberation is now".