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age. The matters that Moshe discussed with Pharaoh are the same urgent issues on the table today—religious freedom; displacement; reparation. Our goal when convening with the pharaohs of our day on these topics should be to win them over whenever possible, not to harden their hearts and raise the stakes of the conflict. But the more conflict there is, the more opportunity we have to show the world that we're the good people, not the bad people—and the plagues seem to be exactly that sort of gratuitous showdown.

One way to resolve this tension could be to make a utilitarian argument—sure, a lot of first-borns were slain in the moment, but how many more were saved by the knowledge of God that's been haunting the human conscience ever since? Sometimes you have to make the contrast between good and evil stark in order for people to pick a side; and once the lesson is learned, it avoids a lot more damage than was necessary in order to teach it.

But the plagues, I think we should understand, were not a performance at all—if they were, the verse might say “in order that you might see...” Instead, it says “in order that you might *know*.” It is precisely when the redemption hasn't happened yet—when the innocent are still being abused, and the divine pretensions of the powerful seem plausible—when we *don't* see any signs of God's presence—that it matters to know Who's really in charge. This knowledge is not just a comfort to Israel when, as has often happened, we find ourselves at the mercy of some or another Pharaoh, nor was its communication to us in Egypt just a model for showing solidarity with people when we can't provide them much else.

The memory of God's might in Egypt is also a reminder that no pretension to infallibility goes unknown for what it really is. No one is above being cut down to size—and, as we learned as slaves in Egypt, if you think you're big, and you treat others as though they are small, don't be surprised when the One who really knows you comes along and sets the record straight.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Bo

February 1, 2020 | 6 Shevat 5780

Annual | Exodus 10:1-13:16 (Etz Hayim p. 374-394; Hertz p. 248-262)

Triennial | Exodus 10:1-11:3 (Etz Hayim p. 374-379; Hertz p. 248-252)

Haftarah | Yirmiyahu 46:13-28 (Etz Hayim p. 395-398; Hertz p. 263-264)

D'var Torah: Plagues & Performativity

Leon Kraiem, Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus & Student at Brandeis University

This parashah covers the last of the ten plagues that God brings upon Egypt before Pharaoh finally relents and lets Israel go. In my mind, the sequence of this narrative was always fairly straightforward: Moshe asks Pharaoh to let his people go. Pharaoh refuses. God sends plagues until Pharaoh submits. Then, mission accomplished, he lets our people go.

But that's not the story that's told in the text. “Go to Pharaoh,” God tells Moshe at the start of Parashat Bo, “for I have hardened his heart, and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, 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.” (10:1-2)

The simple meaning of this verse seems to be that God did not display signs in order to soften Pharaoh's heart so that he would let Israel go. On the contrary—God *hardened* Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh *wouldn't* let Israel go so that God could display the signs. Which provokes the obvious question: What, then, is the purpose of the signs? Why cause all that suffering if it isn't necessary—quite the contrary—to taking Israel out of Egypt?

We need an answer to this question because we live in a particularly performative

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D'var Haftarah: A Message of Solace

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Many factors enter into the equation of whether individuals and nations survive and prosper. Judea, during the period before the destruction of the First Temple, was a little nation caught in the maelstrom between two world powers, Egypt and Babylonia. It seemed that juggling alliances would be the determiner of its fate. Still, it may be argued that Judea's fate was sealed, that nothing it did would save it from being destroyed and conquered. But was it doomed? Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) answered this question in these words: "And now, do not fear, My servant Yaakov, nor be panicked, Israel. For I am about to rescue you from afar and your seed from the land of captivity, and Yaakov shall once more be quiet and tranquil with none making him tremble. As for you, do not fear, My servant Yaakov, said the Lord, for I am with you. I will make an end of all the nations where I have dispersed you, but of you I will not make an end, yet I will chastise you in justice, will surely not leave you unblamed." (verses 27-28)

This message of solace is addressed symbolically to the father of the people, Yaakov, even though he is long gone. Literarily, this allows the prophet to speak both to the individual and to the nation. The nation he addresses is in for hard times, exile, destruction and domination – all of these are the ingredients of despair and hopelessness. Yirmiyahu's insight is precious. He issues a religious imperative to seek hope in the bad times and not to be overwhelmed by them. Redemption and restoration are possible. All that is required is will and faith. This message has become the anthem of the Jewish people that has fostered its creative survival throughout the ages. Surrender to despair in the face of bad times was never an option, only an opportunity.

There will be bad times in life and no one remains unscathed, not on the national level nor as individuals. It is possible to weather the bad times and ultimately to triumph over them. Yirmiyahu reminds us that we are never alone. God is with us both in good times and in bad. He is the source of our solace. He is our anchor, our strength and our ultimate source of hope.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

Parashah Study: Are We Free?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Text: Shemot 12:1-2

(1) *And the LORD said to Moshe and to Aharon in the land of Egypt, saying:*

(2) **"This month is for you head of months, it is the first for you of the months of the year."**

- Why is the mitzvah that establishes the calendar given to the people at this point (just before the instructions for the night of the Exodus)?
- What is the significance of a calendar for a people? Where do we do that today?
- Why is it stressed that God gives these instructions to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt?

Commentary: Seforno Shemot 12:2

This month is for you head of months - From here onward the months will be yours to do with them as you desire; but in the days of servitude your days were not yours but rather were there for the labor for others and their desires. Therefore – **"it is first for you of the months of the year"**, for in it your existence as able-to-choose began.

- According to Seforno, what is the significance of time in the Israelite peoplehood narrative? Why would this be the first mitzvah given to the Children of Israel as a people?
- What word(s) in the text pointed him in this direction?
- What is the significance of the Jewish calendar today in our lives? What does it say about us?
- What do you consider to be the markers of a [free] people?

Related Text: Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (Spain c. 1075-1141)

*Servants of time are servants of servants
The servant of the LORD - he alone is free.
Therefore, when each one seeks his lot
My soul says, 'the LORD - my lot shall be.'*

- Who, in your opinion, are servants of time? Why are they the "ultimate enslaved"?
- How can one claim that a 'servant of the LORD' is free, considering the [many] mitzvot are involved?
- What is the relationship between time and freedom?
- Who would you consider free and who is enslaved in our modern world (and considering R. Yehudah HaLevi's poem)?