

PARSHAT BO  
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Dr. Byron Sherwin in his book *Faith – Finding Meaning: A Theology of Judaism* writes: “In medieval Jewish literature, the consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are compared to a body and the vowels to a soul. Yet, a Torah scroll is written only with consonants. Indeed, a vocalized Torah scroll is unfit for ritual use. The Torah requires a person supply the vowels, the vocalization, the soul, in order for it to become animate, alive, heard. ...By giving vocalization to the text, the reader animates and interprets the text, giving it life, allowing it to be spoken, heard, and understood.”

Parshat Bo is my Bar Mitzvah parsha. On that Shabbat in early 1964, I read the entire Torah portion and became an adult Jew. Since that time I continue to read at least a little bit of the parsha each and every year. It reminds me of the passage of time, of that significant event on my personal life calendar, and of the need to continue to look at the text with new eyes, study it, and find new meaning in it. Without reading it, using the musical notes to chant the text and studying its meaning, the text remains mute and simply serves as an ancient manuscript to be found on a shelf in someone’s library.

The portion of Bo is an important one in the Biblical story. Not only does it describe the Exodus of the Israelites from the bondage of slavery, setting the scene for their long journey in the Sinai wilderness, but commencing with Chapter 12 we have the first legal section of the Torah. Until now it has all been narrative, describing the creation story, filling us in on the details of the lives of our matriarchs and patriarchs, and detailing Jacob’s and Joseph’s sojourn in the land of Egypt. Even the first few chapters of the Book of Exodus inform us of the narrative of Moses’ birth, the revelation at the thornbush, and the initial demands of Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. As our people prepare for the evening when they will finally leave Egypt, they are told to commemorate the moment in an appropriate fashion. Chapter 12 sets the scene not only for the Israelite’s exodus, but for the modern Passover Seder that we celebrate each year in our homes and communities.

The section begins with G-d speaking to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.” In other words, the entire Exodus legal narrative is based on the calendar. The month in which the Israelites are scheduled to leave Egypt shall be the first of all the months of the year setting the scene for additional information on the Jewish calendar year, the holiday cycle and the sacred seasons of our people, found later in the Torah.

The calendar year is one of the most sacred institutions of our people. Our year is based on the lunar calendar. Each 29 ½ days that it takes the moon to revolve around the earth creates a new Jewish month on the calendar, with some months having 29 days and other months being 30 days long. Yet, we are told later in the Biblical narrative that Passover must occur in the springtime of the year, at least in the northern hemisphere. Thus, if we, like the Moslem calendar, allowed the lunar cycle to continue on its merry way, we would lose 11 days each year to the solar cycle. In time, Passover would not be in the spring but could be celebrated at any

other time during the year. Thus, the 7 times in 19 years, including this year of 5776, we add another month, the month of Adar, to push forward the days and to make sure that the holidays occur in the proper season.

The Jewish calendar is a marvelous invention. It was set in its current form by Hillel II in the 4<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era and continues unchanged until this day. With the Babylonian exile two new year's days on the Jewish calendar were established. The first of Tishri became the new year for the counting of years, the Rosh Hashana of today, and the first of Nisan, in which the holiday of Passover occurs, remained the beginning of the year for the festival season. Today we are most familiar with the Tishri model as we count the days in the year and the years on our calendar.

In some ways, this parallels how we live our lives. We live by two calendars. Most of us follow the secular calendar. January 1, 2016 symbolized a new year and our legal contracts, businesses, schools, and personal calendars follow this yearly count. However, there is another cycle to the year which we should follow as well. Once a week we celebrate Shabbat; the pilgrimage festivals, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot are celebrated at set times in our yearly cycle; Hanukkah and Purim occur each year allowing us to celebrate past Jewish victories; and the High Holidays – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – instruct us to start the new year by examining our conduct in the past and improving it in the coming year. This cycle of the calendar year informs our lives in so many ways. Too often, however, we don't internalize it and allow it to motivate us in the proper fashion.

Invariably we ask, is Passover early or late this year. Are the High Holidays early or late this year? In fact, as we all know, Passover occurs on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan and Rosh Hashana on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Tishri. They may move a little because of the luni-solar calendar that we follow, however, they always come on time.

So often we do not take cognizance of the rhythm of the Jewish calendar and allow it to teach us important values. Once a week we are to celebrate Shabbat, a day of rest, tranquility, and serenity. Unfortunately, many Jews do not commemorate it as a sanctified day in our busy week. In a new book entitled *The Heart of the Matter: Studies in Jewish Mysticism and Theology*, Dr. Arthur Green writes that the Shabbat is not only a palace in time, as described by Abraham Joshua Heschel, but “the Sabbath gradually supplanted the Temple as the central unifying religious symbol of the Jewish people.” Once a week we have an opportunity to sanctify time and to recognize not only the creation story, wherein G-d rested on the seventh day, but recall the central focus of our prayers and pilgrimage in ancient times. Once a week we have the privilege of having the cycle of the Jewish calendar enliven our souls.

For many of us the Jewish calendar does remind us of significant events in our lives. The Yahrzeits of our loved ones, the days on which we commemorate their passing, are observed on the Hebrew dates of their deaths. Those Hebrew dates very often are etched permanently in our minds, hearts, and souls. Bryna and I, for example, have three yahrzeits on the holiday of Passover: the second day, the sixth day, and the eighth day. We know those dates by the Jewish calendar year and the festival of Passover. I have trouble recalling the English dates on which our loved ones died. I am sure the same is true for many of you.

However, most of us celebrate our birthdays on dates set by the secular year. How many of us know the Hebrew date on which we were born? Rabbi Benny Lau tells the story of a religious soldier who entered the Golani unit of the IDF in the first week of February 1980. One week prior to this he left his Yeshiva and the secure bubble in which he lived and studied. The Commander asked the entire unit to tell him the day of their birth. When it was his turn, the young soldier gave the Hebrew date on which he was born. The entire group began to laugh. They knew the English date and couldn't understand why he would have the Hebrew date as his. Our oldest grandson, Shmuli, would answer the same way. He turned eight on the English date of September 1, a few months ago. However, when we were going to wish him a happy birthday, he said to us: "I live in Israel and go by the Hebrew date, I don't want to celebrate it on the secular date." On the Hebrew date, a few days later, we wished him a happy birthday and he felt better about it. My eight-year-old grandson taught me an important lesson, we should not only know the days of our Yahrzeits according to the Hebrew calendar but our birth dates, as well. It is part of the calendar of our lives.

The rhythm of the Jewish calendar has an enormous impact upon our Jewish identity. If we live in the secular world and are only influenced by the secular calendar we don't appreciate the Jewish heritage that has been handed down to us. We are not motivated to celebrate Shabbat, commemorate the holidays, and signify our important personal dates on the Hebrew calendar. Sometimes it takes the innocence of an eight-year-old boy to remind you of that lesson. For Shmuli living in Israel, his entire life now is based on that Hebrew calendar. When he grows up I am sure that the secular calendar will assume more prominence for him. However, at this time, it is the cycle of the Jewish week, month and year which motivates and controls his life. What a great lesson it is for all of us.

We want and should live in both worlds, but we cannot allow the secular milieu in which we live to override our Jewish rhythms and our Jewish identity. It is a constant challenge for us. Just think of the holiday season towards the end of December when our minor holiday of Hanukkah is dwarfed by the Christmas celebration around us. If we are concerned about passing down to our descendants a love of Jewish life, a strong Jewish identity and the values of our tradition, we must live our lives not only according to the secular society in which we live, but with the rhythms of the Jewish calendar each week, each month, and each year.

With Chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus and the preparations of the Israelite people for the liberation from bondage, G-d tells Moses and Aaron, and through them the people of Israel, that the calendar is in their hands, that the rhythms of Jewish life are theirs to learn from. It will have an effect upon their identity as a family, as a community, and as a people. As we look at our lives, in this day and age, the same lessons apply.

May the rhythms of Jewish life, and the calendar of the Jewish year, the seasons of the Jewish festivals, have an impact upon our lives this week and every week.