

## **BO January 2024 written for WLCJ Sisterhood Shabbat (Women's League Shabbat)**

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Exodus 10:1 – Exodus 13:16

Parashat Bo continues the story we began last week in Parashat Vaera with three more plagues in Egypt that eventually are able to convince a reluctant Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to depart to freedom. The story is familiar, and it should be because it is in reading Bo that we, the Israelites, are also instructed to remember the tale, and to teach its message to our children, grandchildren and all our descendants. Following this instruction, we count and repeat the plagues with our drops of wine during the Passover seder, a “hands on” way to remember this part of our history with everyone gathered at the table.

As in the story in Parashat Vaera, ten plagues occur over the course of a year. Each is a successively worse disaster. Starting with bloody waters, frogs, pestilence, fiery hail, and worse, the environmental disasters continue to damage Egypt, despite Pharaoh's hardened heart and continued resistance to their message. Pharaoh is told again and again that the plagues happen because God wants Pharaoh to “Let my people go so that they are free to worship Me.”

This week in Parashat Bo, we read of the last three plagues: locusts, darkness, and the killing of the firstborn, which are increasingly catastrophic. It becomes even more evident that a very powerful God controls their occurrence. Pharaoh's efforts to have his magicians trivialize the plagues, are unsuccessful. As we read in Bo this week, Pharaoh's attempts to negotiate with Moses a partial freedom, is in response to the power of the worsening disasters. The plagues don't stop and we know the end result. After 400 years, thanks to the power of God, the Israelites are brought out of Egypt.

Today when we consider the ten plagues, what do we think? How do we interpret the events we read of? Is this just a biblical fable with a moral to teach us and freedom as a happy ending? Is it fiction written to illustrate a powerful God? Or did such catastrophic events really occur?

Researchers have looked to determine the types of naturally occurring events that could be responsible for the plagues. The plague of darkness, Exodus 10:22-23, is well studied for its connection to the known geology of the region. Darkness is a natural result of blocking the sun.

What could cause a blockage that would last the three days mentioned in Bo? We are familiar with the darkness that results from a solar eclipse. In a solar eclipse light rays from the sun are blocked by an occasional perfect alignment that positions the moon directly between sun and the Earth. The shadow of the moon creates an area of darkness on the Earth. Could that be the cause of the plague related in Bo? No, because darkness as a result of an eclipse can't last for three days. It's dark only during the short time that the

Earth, moon, and sun are in direct alignment. Total darkness caused by a solar eclipse lasts for just a few seconds to a maximum of 7 ½ minutes because the moving Earth and moon are soon out of the perfect alignment required for darkness.

What other natural phenomenon might cause the darkness plague? Studies have found deposits of fire-born debris known as pyroclastics including ash, pumice, and other particles of broken rock from volcanic explosions, in excavations of Egyptian ruins. Analysis of the particles indicates they originate from the volcano Santorini, 550 miles north across the Mediterranean Sea. Ash from a volcanic explosion can be carried by wind over long distances. Large amounts of ash will significantly block sunlight. It can take several days until enough particles settle to the ground, clearing the sky for sunlight. The smallest particles remain in the atmosphere for much longer times, causing worldwide climatic changes and as we know today, hazardous air travel such that flights must be diverted around plumes of ash from eruptions.

To explain the plague of darkness, using a large volcanic explosion fits the narrative very well. It also fits well with the earlier plague of hail from Exodus 9:23 where we read that *“Moses held out his rod toward the sky, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground.”* This description fits an earlier pyroclastic episode in which volcanic debris fell, where the volume of particles was insufficient to cause significant darkness.

Now it's realistic to say that “yes, the darkness, and the hail happened,” making this a recounting of history not merely a fable.

It's often said that we must learn from history. What is the message? What is it that we are to learn and remember from this reading?

Two major ideas are presented for us to absorb. **First**, learn what occurred, and more importantly, learn why it happened. **Second**, remember the why. Teach it to your children so that they can understand the power of their God and what that merits.

What occurred is written, for us to read in the text. Why did it occur? We read in each plague story that God will use his power to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites so that they can be free to worship their God. We need to learn and remember that our freedom is the result of God's power. In exchange for our freedom, we are responsible for continuing to teach generation after generation to worship our God who did so much for us. Thus, we learn, we remember, and we share this message.

Parashat Bo is an excellent match for Women's League and Sisterhood Shabbat. Women are the organizing power behind so many of the events that support learning, teaching, and remembering the message of this narrative. Who does so much of the planning and preparation of the Passover seders we attend or host? We do it. We clean, we plan, we pull out supplies, we bake, we cook, we invite others to join us. At our seder

tables we recount this history. As instructed in Bo, at every step we remind ourselves, our families, our communities, and our future generations, that God gave us a magnificent gift that deserves our appreciation.

Shabbat Shalom on this Women's League Shabbat!