

TorahFax: Bo
Rabbi Zalmen Marazov

Tuesday, Shevat 6, 5784 / January 16, 2024

The first mitzvah which G-d commanded the Jewish people, even before leaving Egypt, is found in this week's Parsha, Bo. It is the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh.

G-d told Moshe about this important mitzvah on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, two weeks before the Exodus. The month of Nissan was also to be the first month and head of all months of the year.

At the same time, G-d commanded that on the tenth of the month, they should take one sheep per family and keep it for four days and then bring it as a Pesach (Passover) sacrifice. The sacrifice had to be eaten together with matzah and maror. Some of the blood of the sacrifice were to be placed on the doorposts of the Jewish homes, so that when G-d will afflict the Egyptians with the plague of the first-born, He will see the blood on the Jewish homes and pass over them.

At the stroke of midnight, the first-born began dying. A great cry broke out throughout Egypt. Pharaoh himself went to look for Moshe and Aaron. He insisted that they take the Jewish people out of Egypt immediately. Moshe refused, as G-d told them not to leave their homes all night until morning. They left Egypt in the daytime in full view of the Egyptians.

Six hundred thousand men from the age of twenty and up, plus women and children left Egypt on that day - the fifteenth of Nissan. It was on a Thursday that the people left Egypt. G-d proclaimed the 15th day of Nissan as the holiday of Passover to celebrate each year the miracle of the Exodus.

Q. What is the significance of G-d's commandment that the month of Nissan is to be the "head" of all months of the year?

A. "Nissan" comes from the word "Nes" – "miracle." The month of Nissan, when the Jewish nation was liberated, being the head of all the months teaches us that, just as the Exodus was a miracle, so too, the very existence of the Jewish people, throughout the generations, is a constant miracle.

Q. What was the purpose of holding the sheep four days before bringing it for a sacrifice?

A. The Egyptians worshipped their animals. Sheep was an idol in Egypt. Over the years in Egypt, many Jews became idol worshippers just like the Egyptians. G-d wanted, in addition to taking the Jews out of Egypt, to take Egypt out of the Jews, to root out their adaptation to Egyptian lifestyle, worship and culture.

For this reason, G-d told them to take the sheep (the Egyptian idol), keep it for the four days and then slaughter it. During these four days, when the Egyptians asked them why they kept the sheep in their homes, they told them that they plan to bring it for a sacrifice to G-d. This way, they proclaimed their detachment from the Egyptian idols and their commitment to G-d.

Wednesday, Shevat 7, 5784 / January 17, 2024

Parshat Bo, which we will read this Shabbat, tells the story of the last three plagues, which G-d brought upon the Egyptians and the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt.

With the Exodus from Egypt, in addition to being freed from physical enslavement, Jews also attained their spiritual freedom - a freedom which no one can take from us. The freedom of becoming G-d's nation. As a result, the Jewish people have survived as a nation for over three thousand years. We survived all kinds of persecutions, inquisitions, crusades, pogroms & Holocaust.

Bigger and mightier nations have come and gone, yet we have endured, against all odds, more than anyone else over the course of history.

Remembering the Exodus is a daily mitzvah. The Torah commands that we must remember the day we left "Mitzrayim" (Egypt), each day of our lives. "Mitzrayim" comes from the word "meitzar," which means restriction. As human beings, we all have restrictions and difficulties.

Each day has its challenges. We have to overcome our external and internal challenges and restrictions, which limit our spiritual elevation. Remembering the Exodus means to remember that G-d gives each and every one of us the ability to overcome all adversity and restrictions, so that we can rise spiritually to greater heights each day.

This is the secret of our freedom and independence, which we achieved at the time of the Exodus and later at Mount Sinai, at the Giving of the Torah. Throughout the generations, our adversaries and enemies may have been able to take our physical possessions, however, no one was able to take our faith, nor break our spirit and connection to G-d.

The Midrash says that when the Jewish people were in Egypt, they brought blessing to that country. Joseph brought great prosperity to the Egyptians. When Yaakov came to Egypt, the famine stopped. Yet when Jews left Egypt, they left the country behind like, "an empty net without fish."

On the lighter side: Two school teachers met at an educational convention. As they were making small talk, one of them mentioned that her name was Sarah and she was Jewish and that she lives in Irvine, California.

"That certainly is a surprise," declared the other stiffly. "I thought all Jews lived in New York."

“Why, we live everywhere,” replied Sarah. “There is scarcely a city where you will not find Jews.”

“That’s not so,” retorted the other. I want you to know that there is not a single Jew in the village where I live.”

Sarah smiled, “Maybe that why it’s still a village!”

Thursday, Shevat 8, 5784 / January 18, 2024

Parshat Bo, which will be read this Shabbat, is the Parsha in which the story of the Exodus is told. The Torah tells us that 600,000 men from age 20 and up left Egypt at the time of the Exodus. In addition, there were women and children. Thus, a few million people left Egypt in the Exodus.

The Parsha begins with the last three plagues which G-d brought upon the Egyptians; the plague of locust, darkness and the death of the first-born.

The Torah describes the plague of darkness as follows, “There was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. One did not see his own brother... But to all children of Israel there was light in their dwelling places.”

Q. Why does the Torah use the expression, “One did not see his own brother,” to describe the severity of the darkness?

A. The stories in the Torah are important lessons for all generations. The Torah tells us that when one doesn't see the needs of his own brother, his own family, the needs of another human being, that is the affliction of, “The plague of darkness.

Hillel the Elder says, The mitzvah of “Love your fellow as yourself,” is the basis for the entire Torah.

A Jew emigrated to the U.S. from a small town in Poland and became very wealthy. In the beginning he would still send some money to his family back home in Poland, but in time he became so involved in his business dealings that he completely forgot about his poor family in Poland.

Years later his brother also immigrated to the U.S. He went to see his brother for help, but the rich man denied that he had a brother. The newcomer was sure it was his brother. No matter how much he tried, the rich man said that he had no brother and told him to leave.

Finally, he decided to try one more time. When the rich man opened the door his brother said to him, “I came to inform you that you better write a will as soon as possible, for you will soon die!”

“How dare you say that?” exclaimed the rich man. “I just had my yearly checkup and the doctor told me I am in excellent health!”

“I may not be a doctor,” said the brother, “But back home in our little village when one couldn’t recognize his own brother... we knew that he was extremely sick... and his days were numbered...”

The Torah in this week’s Parsha says, “To all children of Israel there was light in their dwelling places.” Indeed, we have to make sure that we see and feel for those in need and do our utmost to help them. In these difficult days, we must do whatever we can to help our brothers and sisters in Israel. May G-d protect them and bless them with victory and peace.

Friday, Shevat 9, 5784 / January 19, 2024

At the end of this week’s Parsha, Bo, we find the mitzvah of Tefillin.

This mitzvah is mentioned four times in the Torah: twice in this week's Parsha, and twice in the Book of Deuteronomy. In this Parsha the Torah tells us that Tefillin are to remind us that, “with a mighty hand G-d brought you out of Egypt.”

Inside the Tefillin are the four passages of the Torah, which speak about Tefillin, written on parchment. In the hand Tefillin (Shel Yad), which has one compartment, the four verses are written on one piece of parchment. In the head Tefillin (Shel Rosh), which contains four compartments, each verse is written on a separate parchment and placed in a separate compartment.

After putting on the Tallit, we bind first the Tefillin on the hand (Shel Yad) and then the Tefillin on the head (Shel Rosh). The hand Tefillin is worn on the "weaker" hand. Thus, a right-handed person wears the Tefillin on the left arm, while one who is left-handed places them on the right arm. The fact that the Torah mentions the mitzvah of Tefillin four times indicates the great importance of this mitzvah.

Q. Why do we put on the Tallit (prayer shawl) before the Tefillin?

A. There is a Torah rule that when one has to perform two mitzvot, the mitzvah which is performed more often comes first. Since the mitzvah of Tallit applies every day while the Tefillin are exempt on Shabbat and holidays, the Tallit is always put on first.

Q. What is the significance of wearing Tefillin on the arm and head?

A. The hand represents our deeds while the head represents logic and thought. Binding the Tefillin on the hand and head reminds us that our thoughts, intellect and deeds are to be utilized in accordance with the will of G-d.

Q. The Torah says, "And it shall be a sign on your hand," without specifying which hand. Why are the Tefillin placed on the weaker arm?

A. The word "your hand" is spelled in the Torah not in the usual way, but with an extra letter, "hay". This renders the word, "yad keha" which means "the weaker hand." As a result, a right-handed person puts the Tefillin on the left hand, while a lefty puts it on the right hand.

Q. Why don't we wear Tefillin on Shabbat and holidays?

A. As mentioned in this Parsha, Tefillin serve as a "sign" that G-d took us out of Egypt. Since Shabbat and holidays are themselves a sign and reminder of the Exodus, there is no need to wear Tefillin on those days.