

Bo, "Come"
Exodus 10:1-13:16
January 16, 2016
Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh

Parshat Bo, which means "come," actually tells the story of our people, Israel, going out of Egypt after living there for 400 years. Three last plagues, locusts, darkness and the death of the first born, finally convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave. They do so at midnight, escaping into the desert. But first God instructs them how to commemorate this sacred moment of freedom by instituting the rite of the Pesach (Passover). God declares that they shall eat paschal lamb, matza (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs and tell this story throughout their generations so no one would ever forget how they passed from slavery to freedom.

Niggun

This portion contains the last three plagues--the locusts, darkness, and the smiting of the first born, as well as the instructions for the Passover telling, and retelling, of the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

We are told that the entire drama, and the instructions for the story's retelling, exists so we can learn awe of God. We not only remember this story at Passover, but at every holiday, and every Sabbath, and at every prayer service. There is a constant reminder that God brought us out of Egypt. Remembering awe of God is vitally important.

One of the first things we remember, as we wash our hands first thing each morning, is that the beginning of wisdom is awe.

If awe is the beginning of wisdom, how do we cultivate awe through remembering the Exodus?

All three plagues contain increasingly complex notions of darkness and the vital need to move us toward the light, and toward rebirth into freedom.

Locusts and darkness and the smiting of the first-born--this story leaves us with more than the four Passover questions. And most of our questions cannot be answered. And that, too, leads us to awe.

Some darkness is absolutely beyond our comprehension, and we are left with the unknowing, with silence, with the "zot", the "this-ness", the mystery of the eternal indwelling presence of the Divine.

The Zohar begins its discourse on Bo with a statement about Job:

"...authorization is granted to the Other Side, authorization over matters of the world being given to one to whom it should not be given. All these ways are concealed before

the blessed Holy One, and we must not pursue them, for they are laws of the blessed Holy One and human beings are not permitted to scrutinize them—except for those...who walk in the way of wisdom..." (Matt translation, p. 137, Vol. IV)

It is not through scrutiny that there will be understanding, but through the silence, which can absorb the unanswerable questions. It is through the cultivation of awe that we come to wisdom.

In mystical Judaism, in the Zohar, there is a basic understanding that God, and the universe, and the Soul do not lead separate lives.

The personal, the universal, the mystery all touch each other...so how we live is vital to ourselves, the universal and the Divine mystery.

We can use this time of silence and contemplation to let stir a new understanding of awe and mystery and light and freedom. Let us come and see.

Chant: rayshit chochma yirat adonai - the beginning of wisdom is awe

Silence

Part I: Locusts

"The locusts ascended over the entire land of Egypt, and they alighted within all the border[s] of Egypt, very severe; before them, there was never such a locust [plague], and after it, there will never be one like it.

They obscured the view of all the earth, and the earth became darkened, and all the vegetation of the earth and all the fruits of the trees, which the hail had left over, and no greenery was left in the trees or in the vegetation of the field[s] throughout the entire land of Egypt."

(Ex 10:14-15)

Here is the plague of Locusts--darkening the world, covering the earth. They are consuming everything in their path.

--with the darkness of the swift descent of the locusts, everything is consumed....and we can recognize how this is like the addictive elements of our appetites--greed, lust, jealousy, gluttony--all our desires can become like locusts and bring that felt sense of darkness

(Itsbizta p. 124)

The locusts live within each of us.

Where do we turn to during the onslaught of our addictive natures?

If we are fortunate, the desire for the Good moves us to turn for help, to make a plea to what is larger than us. Like Pharaoh, we entreat God to remove this deadly devouring darkness of our own natures, at least for this moment.

Here is the cultivation of personal awe, for knowing the need to do the right thing, and how helpless we can be when confronted by our our appetites and our capacity for being self-consuming, self-destructive.

And as we do our work on our natures, the level of truth that is revealed is eternal and not about our own personal dramas.
(pp. 93-96, Sefat Emet)

**Chant: I'cha amar libi bakshu fanai – to You my heart says “seek my face”
(Psalm 27:8)**

Silence

Part II: Darkness

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch forth your hand toward the heavens, and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, and the darkness will become darker.

So Moses stretched forth his hand toward the heavens, and there was thick darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three days.

They did not see each other, and no one rose from his place for three days, but for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings."
(Ex 10:21-23)

Here is the plague of palpable Darkness, seen, heavy, and disrupting the basic structure of time. But the children of Israel have light in their dwellings. There *can be* light within the darkness. And we must put forth effort to know this.

The Itsbizta says that this darkness is like our own arrogance. We elevate ourselves above others, oblivious to the humanity and wisdom of others, and the presence of the Divine.
(Itsbizta p. 124)

This darkness is palpable, and isolating, and makes movement impossible.

Now there is light in the homes of the children of Israel these three days. There is light among them. The children of Israel created neither the light nor the darkness.

Here we can learn awe in the presence of that which is far bigger than us. What is outside our sense of personal control? Our arrogance can be dispelled, as we enlarge

our habits of narrow perception, and come to know the presence of what is other than the smallness of our own singular view.

This is Awe in the presence of the Divine. This includes the fear of, true understanding of, all that we have no control over in our world.

Providence above does not appear unless an action pertaining to it appears below. (p. 159, Zohar).

We must act in order to know the presence of the Divine.

What do we need to do, to remember, so there is light between and among us?

The Sefat Emet says:

Truth is present, concealed by the darkness. First we must set right the physical and the natural; we must act with integrity, and then we can clarify truth. Truth is then revealed as eternal.

(pp. 93-96, Sefat Emet)

Chant:

Yotzayr or uvoray choshech, oseh shalom u'voray ha kol.

Who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates all things (liturgy, Isaiah 45:7)

Silence

Part III: Smiting of the first born

There is incomprehensible darkness--around midnight, the slaying of the first-born.

The Zohar asks:

“Why didn’t this happen during the day, so that the miracle would be publicized? And why did all those weaklings behind the millstones and those little lambs die, rather than the commanders and mighty warriors...?” (p. 168, Zohar)

[God] passed over both His ways of judgment and compassion to avenge Israel. [God] crossed [God’s] own line. (p. 165, Zohar)

It is the night of vigil.

This plague is one of darkness and terror, imprisonment and blood...with a promise of redemption.

We sacrifice the lambs and roast them whole—with their heads and legs and innards. We smear blood on our door-posts. We wear our loin-cloths and our sandals. There is a proscribed blind haste and we are on the verge of a panic.

At mid-night the screams begin.

Night cannot know the day.

God leaps over our homes.

The undifferentiated and incomprehensible Divine; In foolishness we create differentiation, and expectations of the nature of the Infinite.

We cannot know by day what you know in the night...(p. 165, Zornberg)

So what are we left with?

from the Zohar:

"Through Zot, this, the one who reigns at midnight...

It is just "this", *zot*, for "all", *ha-kol*, everything is *zot*, just this, at mid-night. Where Heaven meets Earth, where compassion meets justice, at mid-night, just "this". There is no "that", only "this"; Undifferentiated and incomprehensible "this", "all". (Zohar, p. 170)

So with the smiting of the first-born we have the Awe of Mystery. It is more than we can ever know or comprehend. All we have are the unanswerable questions

--the serpent is present in the Garden of Eden

--God let Evil test Job

--God has crossed the line with the smiting of the first born, and we cannot understand it

--Day and night, dark and light both exist

With "zot", in silence, we wait

--and in this night, an opening is created, a doorway anointed with blood, for the birth of our nation, to go from slavery into freedom, from the known to the unknown, and there is no going back.

--we keep making that journey of the mystery of faith--we know God and we know Evil and we return to the Good. (p. 165, Zornberg)

--we keep making that choice of moving toward light from darkness, over and over again.

This is awe in the presence of the Infinite, in what is far bigger than we can possibly witness, or we can possibly know.

And we gather as a people to ask questions about this story, light candles, drink some wine, have a leisurely meal. And re-enact this journey from darkness to light, slavery to freedom, and cultivate awe.

Chant: נַחַמֵּנוּ נַחַמֵּנוּ עַמִּי

Nachamu, Nachamu Ammi (Isaiah 40:1)

Comfort, comfort my people!

Silence

Rhonda Karlton Rosen, text

David Goldstein, chant