

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Bo Exodus 10:1-13:16

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Parashat Bo Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Israel's God Reigns Supreme

Theme 2: The Obligation to Remember—Marking the Exodus in and after Egypt

Introduction



Parashat Bo contains the last three of the ten divine acts designed to persuade a reluctant Pharaoh to release his Israelite slaves. Although these acts are most often referred to as “plagues,” the biblical text more commonly uses the words “signs” (*otot*), “marvels” (*mof'tim*), and “wonders” (*nifla'ot*) to describe these heavenly exhibitions of power. Pharaoh's defiance of God's command to let the people go brings terrible consequences for the Egyptian people. The preceding parashah (*Va-eira*) describes the first seven of these divine displays: the Nile turns to blood, frogs swarm over Egypt, dust turns to lice, swarms of insects invade the land, pestilence attacks Egypt's animals, boils cover animals and humans, and hail destroys Egyptian livestock and fields. In this parashah God displays the final signs: locusts, darkness, and the slaying of the first-born. As their exodus from Egypt becomes imminent, the Israelites receive instructions for the passover sacrifice and the Feast of Matzot, rituals preserving the memory of God's redemption for the Israelites as well as for their descendants.

Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 355–56 and/or survey the outline on page 356. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: Israel's God Reigns Supreme



The awesome demonstrations of God's power in *Parashat Bo* target three audiences: Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the emerging Israelite people. The final three signs are designed to convince Pharaoh that his earthly powers pale in comparison to those of the Israelites' God. Although Pharaoh's regency brings the Israelites to slavery, it is God's commanding sovereignty over all the earth that brings redemption. The final three signs, culminating with the catastrophic deaths of all the first-born of Egypt, convince the Egyptian people—as well as Pharaoh—that the Israelites must go. Through God's saving power, the Israelites remain untouched by the destruction around them, even receiving resources for their journey from their Egyptian neighbors.

1. Read Exodus 10:1–6, which describes how God hardens Pharaoh's heart prior to imposing the eighth sign.
 - a. The word translated as “hardened” (v. 1) literally means that God “made [Pharaoh's heart] heavy” (from the root k-b-d, “to be heavy”). Compare the use of the root in this verse with its use in Exodus 7:14 and 8:11, where it is translated as “stubborn.” How does the use of this root in 7:14 and 8:11 add to your understanding of its use in 10:1?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary on 10:1, how might the image of a “heavy” heart relate to Egyptian conceptions of the afterlife? What does this add to your understanding of this image in the text?
 - c. What are the purposes, according to 10:1–2, of God hardening Pharaoh's heart?
 - d. In 10:3 Moses and Aaron ask Pharaoh, in God's words, “How long will you refuse to humble [from the root ‘n-h] yourself before Me?” Read Numbers 12:3, which uses the same root in reference to Moses (see note 3, p. 859). What does the use of this root in these texts tell us about the differences between Moses and Pharaoh as people and as leaders? What does this root tell us about their relationships to the God/gods they worship? In Exodus 10:3, what point does God make by contrasting Pharaoh's unwillingness to humble himself before God with what the Israelites will do when they are free?
 - e. In Exodus 10:5–6 Moses and Aaron warn Pharaoh of the eighth sign God will bring if Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go. What is the impact of the litany of verbs in this passage (“shall cover,” “shall devour,” “shall eat away,” “shall fill”) on you as the reader? How does this list of verbs emphasize Moses' and Aaron's message to Pharaoh?
2. Read Exodus 10:21–29, which describes the ninth sign: darkness.
 - a. Verses 21–22 describe the onset of the ninth sign as Moses holds his arm toward the sky. Compare this with Exodus 8:14–15, which describes the failed attempt of Pharaoh's magician-priests to reverse the sign of lice. What accounts for Moses' success in bringing about the sign of darkness compared with the failure of the magician-priests in Exodus 8?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary on 10:23, how would an ancient audience

understand the contrast between the complete darkness touching the Egyptians and the light in the dwellings of the Israelites? What does this contrast show about the differences between Israel's God and the gods of the Egyptians?

- c. The root *'v-d*, "to serve" (translated here as "worship"), is repeated three times in 10:24–27. In your view, what is the significance of this repetition? This root can also mean "to be kept in bondage" or servitude (see Exodus 2:23, 6:5). How does the biblical text contrast service to God with service to Pharaoh?
3. Read Exodus 11:1–8 and 12:29–36, which describe the tenth sign: the slaying of the first-born.
- a. In 11:1 the word *nega* ("plague") describes the final sign God imposes on the Egyptians. A similar word, also translated as "plague," is used in Exodus 9:14 in connection with the hail. However, most often we find the terms "signs" (*otot*), "marvels" (*moftim*), and "wonders" (*nifla'ot*) to describe the calamities God inflicts on the Egyptians (see Exodus 3:20, 8:19, 11:10). What difference do you see between these three terms and the English word "plague"? What do the killing of the first-born and the hail have in common that leads to them being labeled as "plagues"?
 - b. In 11:2–3 God instructs Moses that the Israelites should "borrow" objects of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors. The word translated here as "borrow" can also be translated as "ask" or "demand." How does the meaning of this verse change if we substitute one of these translations for "borrow"? Why, in your view, might God command the Israelites to "ask" or "demand" these objects from the Egyptians, rather than borrowing them? How, according to God's instructions, are Israelite men and women to obtain these objects? What do these verses demonstrate about God's power?
 - c. The phrase "from the first-born of Pharaoh . . . to the first-born of the slave girl" (11:5) is an expression called a "merism." A merism is a figure of speech that uses two extremes to convey a whole (like "young and old"). What does the merism in 11:5 indicate about the tenth sign? A similar merism appears in 12:29. How do the two expressions differ? What might account for the difference?
 - d. In 11:6 we read that the Egyptians will utter "a loud cry." Contrast this verse with Exodus 3:7. How do these two verses relate to one another?
 - e. How does 12:31 represent the fulfillment of what God predicts in Exodus 3:20 and 6:1? What does Pharaoh's statement to Moses and Aaron in 12:31 reveal about his understanding of the Israelite God?
4. Read the comments on 11:5 and 12:29 in Post-biblical Interpretations by Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein on pages 372–73.
- a. In the first comment, how does *P'sikta D'Raw Kahana* 7:9 view "the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones" (Exodus 11:5)? How does the point of view of this midrash compare with the status of Egyptian slave women according to the Torah? In your opinion, what might be the impetus behind this midrash?
 - b. According to *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 48 in the second comment, how does the story of

Rachel, the granddaughter of Shuthelah, serve to remind God to proceed with punishment for the Egyptians (Exodus 12:29)? What, in your view, is this midrash trying to explain?

5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Suzanne Singer on pages 374–75.
 - a. What are some of the theological problems presented by God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 10:1)?
 - b. How do Erich Fromm and Fran Burgess interpret the moral dilemmas represented by God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart? What is your reaction to these interpretations?
 - c. How does the view of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg differ from that of Fromm and Burgess? What is the counter-narrative of the plague’s victims? How does this counter-narrative contrast with the master narrative of God in the Torah?
 - d. How does Zornberg propose that we deal with the dissonance between master narrative and counter-narrative in the Torah?
 - e. What counter-narrative does Singer suggest we can call forth from this text? How can this help us deepen our understanding of the text?
 - f. How do you deal with what Singer calls the troubling aspects of texts in our sacred narratives?
6. Read “This Night” by Hara E. Person on page 378.
 - a. How do the images in the poem’s first half help you to imagine the counter-narrative of Israelite women during the onset of the tenth sign, the slaying of the first-born?
 - b. What is the shift that takes place when the poet writes about the “colorless gear” of the soldiers who “defend our boundaries”?
 - c. What, in your view, accounts for the cycle of violence that continues and that results in “too many children lost on the way to freedom”?
 - d. How does the poem contrast the idea of temporary safety and true redemption? What is God’s role in this redemption? In what ways have you yearned for redemption in your own life?

Theme 2: The Obligation to Remember—Marking the Exodus in and after Egypt



Even before their departure from Egypt, with their Egyptian neighbors still reeling from the last of God’s signs, the Israelites receive instructions about how to commemorate the Exodus. The emphasis on remembrance in *Parashat Bo* illustrates the significance of the Exodus narrative to the biblical authors. The desire to make the Exodus part of Israelite collective memory before it even occurs ensures that in their new status as a free people, the Israelites will always remember that it is God’s power that made their redemption possible. The command to explain to the children what God did for the Israelites in Egypt extends to subsequent generations as well.

1. Read Exodus 12:1–13, which gives instructions for the passover sacrifice.
 - a. What is the first instruction God gives Moses and Aaron about the passover sacrifice (12:2–3)? Why, in your view, does this come before the details concerning the sacrifice itself?

- b. Who is supposed to prepare, slaughter, and consume the passover sacrifice (12:3–6)? According to the Central Commentary, how does this differ from other sacrificial offerings?
 - c. In your view, what is the relationship between the passover sacrifice’s protective quality (Central Commentary on vv. 3–6) and the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt?
 - d. To what do the terms *beit avot* and *bayit* (“family” and “household” in v. 3) and *mishpachot* (“families” in 12:21) refer? Who is included in these groups and therefore as participants in the passover sacrifice? How does this compare with who is supposed to participate in the Passover festival (Deuteronomy 16:16)?
 - e. What is the role of blood in the passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:7–13)? According to the Central Commentary, what is the meaning of blood in biblical thought?
2. Read Exodus 12:14–20, which describes the regulations for the Feast of Matzot, which the Israelites are to celebrate “throughout the ages” (v. 14) in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt.
- a. What is the purpose of “this day” (12:14)?
 - b. How are the Israelites to observe this festival? How does the biblical observance compare with contemporary Passover rituals?
 - c. What is the reason for observing this festival?
 - d. According to the Central Commentary on 12:8, what is the connection between the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the passover sacrifice?
 - e. What is the significance of matzah, according to this passage?
3. Read Exodus 12:21–28, which describes Moses’ instructions to the Israelite elders regarding the passover sacrifice.
- a. What is the purpose of applying blood to the doorways of the houses (12:22)?
 - b. When and where is the passover sacrifice to be observed?
 - c. How does the root *p-s-ch* (“passed over”) in 12:27 link the festival of Passover (*Pesach*) to God’s passing over (*pesach*) the houses of the Israelites? According to the Central Commentary, how do scholars interpret the meaning of the verb *pasach* in this verse?
 - d. In your view, why does Moses give instructions to the Israelite elders in this passage, rather than to “the whole community of Israel” (12:3)?
 - e. What is the relationship between the instructions given to the Israelite elders in 12:21–23 and 12:26–27, which describe what the Israelites should tell their children about the passover sacrifice? What is the connection between entering the Promised Land and observing this rite (v. 25)?
4. Read Exodus 13:3–10, which connects the prior instructions for matzot (12:14–20) with recounting the events of the Exodus for coming generations (10:2).
- a. What term is used in 13:3 to describe Egypt? What is the literal meaning of this term? How does this depiction of Egypt foreshadow Exodus 20:2?
 - b. In your view, what is the connection in this passage between “remember” (13:3) and “observe” (13:5)?

- c. In 13:9 we read that “this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead.” Compare this with Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18. What are the differences between Exodus 13:9 and the Deuteronomy verses? How did Jewish authorities understand this language in late antiquity?
5. Read the Another View section by Naomi Steinberg on page 372.
 - a. According to Steinberg, how is sacrificial blood protective in this parashah? How does this blood serve as a symbol of the life force?
 - b. In what way does sacrificial blood symbolize the connection between past and current generations?
 - c. How does the passover sacrifice connect the past to the future?
 - d. In what ways does the passover sacrifice suggest an outline for the social structure of the family network? How does it symbolize both discontinuity and differentiation?
 - e. What is the relationship between the Passover sacrificial ritual and identity? What role has Passover played in your own identity?
 6. Read “Passover Love Song” by Hara E. Person on p. 376.
 - a. How, according to the poet, is the seder a “love song”? How does it differ from other love songs?
 - b. What is the relationship between the lines “This is how it’s done” and “Remember”?
 - c. How is the seder “more than a recipe for nostalgia”?
 - d. In what ways, in your view, is the seder an “urgent coded message”?
 - e. How does the Passover ritual described in this poem compare to what we find in the parashah?
 - f. How does the seder in your own family tell the story of the Exodus as well as the story of your family?

Overarching Questions

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 10:1) raises the question of whether or not human beings have free will and, if so, to what extent. The tenth sign, the death of the first-born, raises troubling questions about whether the death of innocents is necessary to demonstrate God's power. What are your views on these difficult questions? How has your study of this parashah added to your understanding of these challenging issues?
2. *Parashat Bo* emphasizes the importance of remembrance. In this parashah, remembrance focuses on God's redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through rituals that have come to be associated with the Passover festival. In addition to telling the story of the Exodus at your Passover seder, in what other ways does remembrance, and rituals associated with remembrance, help you to tell the story of your ancestors?

Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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