

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

### (Portion of Bo)

#### *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality* From Rav Binny

Walk in to any Jewish home and ask yourself: what distinguishes it as a Jewish home? There is actually no ritual, biblical obligation concerning the Jewish home, save one: the *mezuzah*. One would expect to find this symbol, therefore, in the center of our homes, the living room or dining room. Yet we place our *mezuzot* in the doorway at the entrance to the home, a place we only pass through, never really stopping to focus on much of anything.

Imagine a close friend gives you an incredible gift: an original painting by Monet. And the next time he comes to visit he is shocked to discover you have hung the painting... outside your front door! He would probably be horrified! Why do we place our *mezuzah* in the doorway, rather than hanging it somewhere special inside our home?

*Rav Ephraim Oshri, the last Rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania, in 1941, was once asked a fascinating question.*

*One of the Jews in the ghetto believed that the yellow star the Jews were all forced to wear to was somehow a consequence of the laxity with which the Jews of Kovno had related to the mitzvah of Mezuzah, the mark of a Jewish home, before the war. He wanted to know if there was a mitzvah to place a mezuzah in a home in the ghetto, given the horrible conditions the Jews were forced to live in. Would such a place constitute a home, requiring a mezuzah? His intent, in the event there was such an obligation, was to make it his mission to share with every Jew the beauty of the mitzvah, and to teach them the blessing.*

*Amazingly, given the danger inherent in such a practice, and the fact that public Jewish ritual in the ghetto was often punishable by death, there was no question as to whether they should try and hide the mitzvah somewhere inside the home, as opposed to the front door. It was a given that a mezuzah only makes sense on the front door.*

To understand this strange mitzvah we need to take a closer look at the origins of the mitzvah of mezuzah, whose sources are to be found in the exodus from Egypt, in this week's portion, Bo'.

After two hundred and ten years of slavery, and nine plagues, G-d announces that the end is finally at hand; the Jewish people will finally be redeemed.

Hashem will bring one more plague upon Egypt, and this one He will do Himself.

But there are a number of rather strange conditions to this plague. A week before the Jews will be redeemed from Egypt, on the tenth day of Nissan, each family (actually, each 'home') must take a lamb, and tie it up in front of the house. (Exodus 12:3)

Then, on the fourteenth day of Nissan, they must slaughter this lamb in the middle of the afternoon, (12:6). What is the purpose of this strange sacrifice? Why does this seem to be a necessary pre-requisite to the Exodus from Egypt? And if it is somehow an important part of the redemption of the Jews, why must they then wait four days before actually sacrificing this lamb? Why not either take it and sacrifice it on the day they leave Egypt (the fifteenth, or at least the fourteenth of Nissan), or, even better, considering the Jews have already picked out the lamb on the tenth day of Nissan, why not let the Jewish people leave Egypt *then*? The

entire Jewish people, enslaved by the most sadistic and evil society in history, are made to wait for four whole days before being redeemed. And for what? So the lamb can remain tied up in the front yard?

But that's not all. Even stranger is what happens *after* the lamb is slaughtered: the Jews have to collect the lambs' blood and paint their doorjambs with it!

Imagine that the very night preceding the Exodus you have a friend who has been living in down-town Cairo. And you have been telling him how much Judaism has to offer. So he finally decides he is interested in exploring his Jewish identity, and comes to visit that afternoon. And he sees your dad painting the front door; only the paint has a strange smell. Curious, your friend enquires and your father gleefully explains he is painting the door with lambs' blood! Your friend would probably run as fast as his legs could carry him in the other direction! What gives?

And strangest of all is the explanation G-d gives (12:13) for this bizarre ritual. Apparently, the blood on the doorpost will serve as a sign for G-d when He passes through Egypt at midnight. Wherever G-d sees blood on the doorjamb, He will pass over that house and spare the family from the plague of the first-born...

What is going on? Is G-d nervous he will be wandering through downtown Cairo and might get lost? Is He afraid not all the Jews will have easily recognizable names like Goldberg and Cohen? I have this image of G-d, in a big red suit, with a long white beard, flying through Egypt with a sled and camels hitched up, singing "Ho, Ho, Ho," at the top of His lungs! Is this the same G-d who will split the sea? Who created the world? Why does G-d need a sign to implement the tenth plague? And why is this sign is so important that it is designated as the key to preventing 'the destroyer' from entering the Jewish homes that night? Indeed, the Torah tells us (12: 24-25) we need to safeguard this ritual for our children, and our children's children, forever!

Incredibly, this condition is somehow so crucial to the story of the exodus from Egypt, that the very name of the festival we celebrate to commemorate these momentous events, *Passover*, takes its name from this part of the story. Why does this represent the essence of the exodus?

It is also interesting to note that the night we choose to commemorate as the celebration of our exodus from Egypt is this night, the night of the tenth plague, *before* we actually got out of Egypt. We sit at our Seder tables to celebrate our freedom from Bondage, though on this night we were still slaves in Egypt! We didn't actually leave Egypt until the next day! And all this is actually the basis for the mitzvah of mezuzah which we have preserved to this day. This story is the critical message, and really the only message the Torah tells us which must be physically represented in every Jewish home! Is this the equivalent of keeping a red stocking over the fireplace all year round, or is there something deeper being communicated here?

*Bergen Belsen, the foreign Nationals section of the camp, 1942. A group of Jews had approached Rav Yisroel Spira, the Bluzhover Rebbe, with an incredible request. Passover was only two weeks away, and many of them, sensing this might be their last Passover, were desperate to find a way to celebrate the festival. The thought of eating chametz (unleavened bread) was anathema to them, so they came up with an idea. They would appeal to the logical German mind of their oppressors and ask to receive their rations as flour and water instead of bread, and they would ask as well to build, on their own time at night, a crude oven with which to bake their rations into matzah. After all, they reasoned, if the prisoners would start baking their own bread, this would be more efficient and economical, which would appeal to the mindset of their masters.*

*They asked the Rebbe if he would be willing to present their petition, signed by over eighty inmates, to the SS commandant of the camp, in the hopes that his merit and the merit of his illustrious ancestors would somehow protect them all and ensure a successful outcome. The Rebbe took some time to consider their request.*

*Handing the Nazis a list of Jewish names was a very dangerous thing to do, especially in a concentration camp. Yet here was a group of Jews, enslaved, starving, almost beyond hope, and yet still willing to risk everything for the sake of a mitzvah. How could he be the obstacle to the fulfillment of such a holy deed?*

*So the Rebbe asked for an audience with the camp Commandant, and through some miracle (and after a number of severe beatings,) their request was granted. Two weeks later, on the eve of Pesach (Passover) the Jews of Bergen Belsen actually baked matzah in preparation for the festival.*

*The Bluzhover Rebbe announced he would conduct a secret Seder in his barracks for those interested. Attending, never mind conducting, a Seder in Bergen Belsen was a crime punishable by death. Nonetheless, nearly three hundred Jews crowded into the Rebbe's barracks that Pesach night. When they reached the point in the Seder that spoke of their bondage in Egypt, there was a palpable air of pain and anguish that spread through the barracks.*

*“Avadim Hayinu Le'Paroah be'Mitzrayim... Atah Be'nei Chorin...”  
‘We were slaves to pharaoh in Egypt, and now we are free men...’*

*The Rebbe could hear the sobs and feel the pain in every Jew's heart, and knew he had to say something. How could a Jew recite these words in Bergen Belsen in 1942?*

*He looked around the barracks, in the dim moonlight, seeing the gaunt, hollow faces, and hopeless eyes, and he began:*

*“Why is this Seder different from all other Seders? We have no four cups of wine to bless, no tables laden with good food and fine china, no children to ask the four questions, and no vegetables to dip in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt so long ago. Our Matzah, burned, small, and barely recognizable as the same matzah we had before the war, reminds us more of where we are than of where we once were. Only Maror, the bitter herbs, are in abundance this year.*

*“But if even here, in the depths of our darkness and despair, we can nonetheless recall the exodus and celebrate Pesach, then we are truly free. Freedom, you see, isn't about **where** you are, it is about **who** you are.”*

3,200 years ago, in what was then the darkest place on earth, the Jewish people were given the opportunity to take a stand. One of the gods of ancient Egypt was the lamb. So Hashem asked the Jewish people to take this lamb and tie it up outside their homes on the tenth day of Nissan, and leave it there for four whole days. Then, they had to slaughter this lamb, and paint their doors with the blood. No Jew could hide behind closed doors. While the first-born of Egypt were dying around them, they marked their front doors with the blood of the god of their masters.

Imagine how difficult this must have been.

*Mordechai Anilewicz, in the diary he kept during the Warsaw ghetto uprising, points out how incredible it was to these embattled Jews that their bullets could kill the Nazi ‘Ubermenschen’. After nearly ten years of Nazi rule, the Jews could barely imagine their masters as men of flesh and blood, just like them.*

Imagine how challenging it must have been for the Jews in Egypt to kill the god of their masters who had enslaved them for *two hundred and ten* years. In fact, the slaughtering of the paschal lamb takes place on the eve of Passover in the middle of the afternoon, when every one could watch. And the doors of all the Jewish homes that slaughtered the Egyptian god were actually marked with the blood...

You see, before Hashem would take us out of Egypt, we had to be willing to take Egypt out of ourselves. The reason we celebrate Pesach on the night of the tenth plague when we were still in Egypt, is because it was on this night that we took a stand and set ourselves free. This tremendous act of faith was the first step in the long process of the Jewish path to freedom. It was easy for G-d to take the Jews out of Egypt. It was much harder to take Egypt out of the Jews. On that night every Jewish family was ready to place a sign on their doors, and to make the statement: through this doorway the gods of Egypt will not pass. The beginning of our emergence as a free nation was the birth of the Jewish home.

G-d did not spare the Jews by virtue of seeing the sign on their doors; the Jews saved themselves by declaring themselves, for the entire world to see, worthy of their redemption.

And this is the essence of the mitzvah of mezuzah. It is not an accident that the mezuzah is placed in the doorway; it is a sign that you are entering a Jewish home. And this is our challenge: what really makes each of our homes a Jewish home? What influences do we bring in to our homes from the world, and what message do we carry from it when we go out into that same world? Are we proud to be Jews? Are we ready to define ourselves as such for the entire world to see?

Three millennium ago, a people, written off as one more culture that was about to disappear, began an incredible journey. Against all the odds, defying every rule of history, and confounding historians and scientists alike, the Jewish people began their odyssey to make a difference.

3,200 years later, the beginning of that journey, the Jewish home, is still the secret both to why we are still here, as well as to what we have to offer the world.

So many Jews today are embarrassed about their Judaism, oblivious to its incredibly beautiful message, and unaware of the inspiring heritage we are privileged to be a part of.

In an age where so many cultures are rediscovering the beauty of their heritages and traditions, may Hashem bless us all, soon, to reconnect with who we are, and begin the journey of becoming all that we can be.

Shabbat Shalom,

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