

PARASHAT BO

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Bo



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

Exodus 10:1-13:16

Parashat Bo / פרשת בא

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The story of the Exodus is peak drama, not just for the Bible specifically, but culture generally. While many people are still familiar with the account of Israel's rescue from Egyptian slavery, few of them understand the story's role in the "metanarrative" of Scripture.

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

It's time to take a closer look at a specific restriction that the Lord gave when He introduced the Passover feast to Moses and Aaron: no "visitors" or "hired servants" could participate. Interesting. At first glance, these exceptions seem random or severe, but upon closer examination, they point to the essence of our status in God's Kingdom.

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

As the Ten Plagues reached their climax, God prepared Moses: the conclusion was going to be unforgettable. Various English translations of God's words to Moses vary wildly...why? Join us as we take an even deeper dive than usual to discover God's mighty power in human history.



OVER VIEW

Bo in Hebrew is the command form of "go," or "come." It is the title of this Torah portion because it's the first significant word in the *parsha*. In our fifteenth weekly Torah portion, we read about the last three plagues on Egypt, culminating in the dreadful appearance of the "Death Angel." With that awful final plague, however, came the institution of that most precious and deeply symbolic event: the first Passover.

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Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Bo* / פרשת בא | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Staff Contributor

COMMENTARY

Parashat Bo wraps up the final three plagues of the Exodus: Locusts, Darkness, and Death of the Firstborn. It is a story that many people are familiar with, even in this era of declining biblical literacy. This awareness is probably due, in no small part, to Charlton Heston's depiction of Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, as well as other popular dramatizations. Despite their general knowledge of the narrative, most probably are unaware that the Exodus saga serves as a primary motif for the redemption of God's people throughout the Bible. In fact, the Book of Revelation mirrors the Exodus, only on a global scale.

In Exodus 14:8, we read, "So God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Sea of Reeds, and *Bnei-Yisrael* went up out of the land of Egypt armed." In this verse, there is a Hebrew word that doesn't quite seem to fit; it is *vachamushim* (וַחֲמֻשִּׁים). Some translate it as "armed" (as the TLV does here), while others translate it as "battle formations." Rashi, the famous French Medieval rabbinic commentator, suggested that this word means "that one out of five (חמשה) went out, and four-fifths remained." This theme of division and separation would become significant within Rabbinic tradition and pops up in the New Testament regarding a great falling away.

■ "Because lawlessness will multiply, the love of many will grow cold." – Matthew 24:12

■ "Now the *Ruach* clearly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, following deceitful spirits and teachings of demons." - 1 Timothy 4:1

Now that we've gotten the depressing item out of the way, let's move on to a more positive note:

■ They are to eat the meat that night, roasted over a fire. With *matzot* and bitter herbs they are to eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled with water, but only roasted with fire—its head with its legs and its innards...You are to observe this service during this month. For seven days you are to eat matzah, and the seventh day is to be a feast to *ADONAI*. *Matzot* is to be eaten throughout the seven days, and no *hametz* is to be seen among you, nor within any of your borders. - Exodus 12:8,9; 13:5-7

Yeshua transposed these details into a promise of redemption when He hosted the seder before His Passion:

■ "Take, eat; this is My body." And He took a cup; and after giving thanks, He gave to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the removal of sins. But I say to you, I will never drink of this fruit of the vine from now on, until that day when I drink it anew with you in My Father's kingdom." - Matthew 26:26b-29

Now consider the Book of Revelation:

■ Then the angel tells me, "Write: How fortunate are those who have been invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb!" He also tells me, "These are the true words of God." - Revelation 19:9

The parallels between the Testaments are plentiful. It is crucial to remember that when the Gospel writers were creating their inspired accounts and the Apostles were wrestling with these redemptive themes, their Scriptures did not include what we today refer to as the "New Testament." Nonetheless, they discerned the theme of redemption stretching from the Garden of Genesis to the Garden-City of Revelation. The Church's early leaders reached this foundational conclusion: the God who redeemed still redeems and is ultimately committed to redeeming all of creation.

New Testament Tie-In

Unsurprisingly, Passover has always held an exceptional place in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people: “Among the three feast times in the annual cycle, Passover and Unleavened Bread remained the celebration of [ADONAI’s] redemption par excellence.”¹ Through the centuries, the Passover’s celebration has anchored Jewish identity much like *Shabbat* observance has. Rabbi Jason has often shared the quote from the Hebrew writer Achad ha-Am, “more than the Jewish people kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept the Jewish people.”² Nonetheless, it’s all but impossible to overstate the significance of the Passover.

Now let’s consider God’s introduction of this seminal feast:

Then ADONAI said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the ordinance of the Passover. No foreigner may eat it, but every man’s servant that is bought for money, after you have circumcised him, may eat it. Nor should a visitor or hired servant eat it.” - Exodus 12:43-45

We should note the deep connection between this rite and identity. Outsiders who had become permanent fixtures among the Israelites were only allowed to participate after their circumcision (i.e., assume a covenantal identity). The word translated “visitor” in v. 45 is the Hebrew word *toshab*, which ranges in meaning from a mere lodger to a resident alien.³ The latter sense emphasizes a “visitor” who has not conformed to their new surroundings but instead has retained their natural identity. For instance, in Genesis 24:3, Abraham described himself as a *toshab* precisely because he never assimilated to the culture of Canaan. Likewise, Paul calls upon followers of *Yeshua* to “[not be conformed to this world](#)” (Romans 12:2). In pagan cultures, being a *toshab* is a mark of faithfulness; when dwelling among the people of God, however, it’s just the opposite.

The other category of person forbidden from participating in the Passover was a “hired servant.” By definition, a hireling only participates in a thing because of its perceived benefit. It’s a connection that only goes so far. “Passover people” are a relational people, those who’ve heeded that call to “[Love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength](#)” (Deuteronomy 6:5). God’s rescue was as comprehensive as it was personal. The Passover is a celebration not only of Israel’s complete deliverance but the personal God who delivered them. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—living, breathing human beings.

Now consider what may be *Yeshua*’s most well-known parable, the Prodigal Son. After a season of rebellion and debauchery, the younger son was destitute. He concocted a plan to solve his dilemma: “[I’ll get up and go to my father, and I’ll say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your presence. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers’](#)” (Luke 15:18-19 *emphasis added*). Of course, the son never got to finish that speech. After declaring his unworthiness, the father cut him off and said, “[This son of mine was dead and has come back to life—he was lost and is found!](#)” (Luke 15:24) Like the prodigal, our Father insists on relating to us as His children (not hired workers).

Friends, we are not “visitors,” and we’re not “hired servants.” As “[fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household](#)” (Eph 2:19), we are qualified to celebrate a *fulfilled* Passover feast. We are sons and daughters of the Father in heaven. ADONAI sent One greater than Moses to rescue us from slavery to sin in this fallen world—a fact that is very much worth celebrating!

Hebrew Word Study

alal [ʔʔʔ] / “deal with (severely)”

In Exodus 10:1-2, we read,

Then *Adonai* said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, so that I might show these My signs in their midst, and so you may tell your son and your grandchildren what I have done in Egypt, as well as My signs that I did among them, so you may know that I am *Adonai*.”

This particular translation of the Hebrew text fails to convey the complex nature of how God intended to deal with Egypt. The phrase “what I have done” is one of several different interpretive approaches scholars have taken. Here are some examples of this diversity:

- “how severely I dealt with the Egyptians” (CSB)
- “I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians” (ESV)
- “I made a mockery of the Egyptians” (NASB)
- “I have made fools of the Egyptians” (NRSVUE)
- “I have made sport of the Egyptians” (RSV)

This is not a scientific observation, but it seems like there is more discrepancy in the translation of this specific verse than any other we’ve studied thus far. One of the (Jewish) Hebrew scholars whose work we’ve referenced often is Robert Alter. He rendered this phrase, “how I toyed with Egypt.”⁴ The Hebrew word in question is *alal* (ʔʔʔ). It appears nearly 100 times in the Bible, and its tri-consonantal root is:

- *Ayin* (ʔ) / 70
- *Lamed* (ʔ) / 30
- *Lamed* (ʔ) / 30

In the following chapters, the plagues quickly shift from a matter of hardship to profound despair—the death of the firstborn. In some sense, it’s understandable to translate *alal* vaguely (a la the Tree of Life Version), as God’s actions would range from a locust infestation to darkness to death. One lexicon defines *alal* as, “to take action with respect to someone or something.”⁵ Pretty nondescript, no? Of course, the plagues were “severe” and “harsh.” No doubt, they also mocked Egyptian idolatry and made fools of Pharaoh and his leaders. The phrases “made sport” and “toyed with” are curious though. Why would a linguistic scholar make that choice?

One Hebrew resource offers insight into the complexity of the original language here:

[*Alal*] is difficult because it cannot be consistently translated with any one word. The context must determine the nuance of meaning. Further homonyms meaning “to play the child” (in Isa 3:12) and “to thrust” (in Job 16:15) are easily confused with this root.^{vi}

In various biblical contexts, then, we discover that *alal* does have negative connotations. In Lamentations 3:51, we read, “My eye **torments** [*olelah*] my soul because of all the daughters of my city.” At the end of his life, King Saul asked his armorbearer to kill him “otherwise these uncircumcised Philistines will come and pierce me through, and **abuse** [*vehit'allelu*] me” (1 Samuel 31:4). But *alal* also connotes mastery and superiority in relationships. This sentiment was present in the (rather ironic) complaint Ballam uttered: “Balaam said to the donkey, ‘**Because you’ve made a fool of** [*hit'allalt*] me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now!’” (Numbers 22:29). In that story, the ass clearly had the upper hand!

Perhaps all of these dimensions of *alal* accurately describe what transpired in the Ten Plagues of Egypt. God acted in ways that justly brought misery to the land. Still, at the same time, these events displayed His vast superiority over an empire that the Hebrew slaves may have presumed was invincible. How great was their God! Their Deliverer’s dealings with the world’s mightiest kingdom weren’t much different than an adult toying with a child.

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HEBREW WORD STUDY

עלל

עלל / alal: v. **to deal with; glean; act or deal wantonly.** *To take action with respect to someone or something.*

The crucial passages in this area are Ex 10:2 and I Sam 6:6 where the Lord is the subject of this verb and the Egyptians are the object. Is it proper to suggest that the Lord makes sport of anyone? Did he deal ruthlessly with Egypt? The ASV has chosen in these two instances to give a neutral rendering “wrought” and “wrought wonderfully” while allowing in the margin for the translation “mocked.” While the thought of mocking is startling, both the contextual and the etymological situation demand a negative type of treatment. God treated the Egyptians severely because...they hardened their hearts.

taken from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- It's easy to see (and celebrate) God's redemptive power in history. We can even testify of the Lord's deliverance in our own lives. But sometimes the future is daunting. So many unanswered questions. The lingering “what if...?” The role of Passover throughout Scripture reminds us that our God is committed to complete and utter redemption through the end of human history. Are you facing a challenge or wrestling with worry over the future? Ask the Lord to fill your heart with hope this week—He will redeem all!
- Have you ever attended an event and could just feel that you weren't welcomed there? Or maybe you were on the back up guest list and it was evident that your presence was more of an afterthought. Ouch! We've all been there. The good news is, God welcomes us to the most important celebration in the universe—His table! We are seated there as sons and daughters of the King!

GLOBAL

NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Beshalach* / פרשת בשלח

TORAH

Sunday / Exodus 13:17-14:8

Monday / Exodus 14:9-14

Tuesday / Exodus 14:15-25

Wednesday / Exodus 14:26-15:26

Thursday / Exodus 15:27-16:10

Friday / Exodus 16:11-36

Saturday / Exodus 17:1-16

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

Judges 4:4-5:31

New Covenant Reading:

Matthew 14:22-33

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *Tree of Life Version*.

¹ Alexander, T. D., & Baker, D. W., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP InterVarsity Press, 2008), 310.

² "Shabbat Kept the Jews Quote: Emotions." The Rabbi Sacks Legacy, May 4, 2022. <https://rabbisacks.org/quotes/shabbat-kept-the-jews/>.

³ Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), 412.

⁴ Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 252.

⁵ Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

⁶ Carl Schultz, "1627 וַלֵּל," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 670.