



## **Parshat Bo – Jan. 28, 2023**

### **D'var Torah by Sarah Safran Lesser**

Shabbat Shalom.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Sarah Safran Lesser

Questions, questions, questions. We Jews love a good question. Judaism places a high value on analyzing, questioning, and wrestling with texts, halachot, and even with God. Our texts, both ancient and modern, reflect a constant quest to understand and uncover new layers of what has been analyzed and expounded on for thousands of years. We are constantly asking, what new kernel of knowledge can we discover?

Asking questions doesn't start in adulthood. Our Passover service is a prime example. Kids attending seders are encouraged from an early age to recite the 4 questions and adults often joyfully join in for that recitation. And, we love the 4 children – with their questions representing four types of people and approaches, that lead us to ask even more questions as we reach for a deeper understanding of who these four children really are. Also, the Seder plate is there to get us to ask questions. Some written into the Haggadah, such as about maror, some not, like the egg.

Rabbi Sacks taught: "Most traditional cultures see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide or command. The task of the child is to obey. "Children should be seen, not heard," ... In Judaism the opposite is the case. It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow." In other words, he is saying

that rote learning alone is not the Jewish way. Our children are not simply sponges sitting quietly while the adults do the service. We want to hear their questions and thoughts.

In this week's Parsha, in the midst of the excitement, anxiety, and chaos surrounding leaving Egypt and slavery, and going towards what the people felt was an uncertain future, Moshe instructed us - not just once, but 3 times - to tell our children about what is taking place and the rituals that we are commanded to do to commemorate it. Twice, it is a response to children asking about what they are seeing the adults do.

Imagine you were Moshe at that moment. What would you focus on if you were giving an address as you prepare to lead the people out of Egypt and slavery? How would you ensure that the people would follow you out into the desert and become the nation you were charged with shepherding to a new life? Would you talk about a future of freedom? Would you try to inspire them with promises of a land flowing with milk and honey? Would you warn them of dangers ahead? Would you talk about gratitude?

Moshe looks to the distant future and understands that Jewish continuity would depend on not just ritual, but the passing of memory from generation to generation. Shared memories create solidarity and a sense of peoplehood. That memory needs to be imbued with meaning. So, when your child asks about the rituals, you personalize it - "What God did for ME when I came out of Egypt" and "God brought ME out of Egypt with signs and wonders".

This parsha considers the role of memory, and our responsibility of answering in a way to keep the memories alive. Rituals, signs, and symbols provide us with the framework to carry the memories of our people. The ritual invites questions, and our answers keeps alive the memory that is a foundation of our national identity.

Our parsha begins:

**וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה**...“Go to Pharaoh.” “For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his advisors,

**לְמַעַן שִׁתִּי אֶתְּי אֶלֶּה בְּקִרְבּוֹ:** **in order that I may display My signs among them.**that you may recount in the hearing of your child and of

your child's child how I punished the Egyptians and how I displayed **My signs - אֹתוֹתַי** - among them, **in order that you may know that I am God.**"

So, even if your kids are playing under the table at the seder and they don't seem to be paying attention during the recitation of the story (with it's extended commentary), they are hearing you. Hopefully, they will internalize the message. And what kid doesn't want to be there for the reading of those "signs" - the 10 plagues.

Before the final plague, God instructs Moshe to speak to the leaders for the community and gives the instructions for the passover sacrifice: the what, when, how and why. And even though freedom hasn't been achieved yet, God then instructs that this will be a festival to be celebrated throughout the ages, for all time. When Moshe relays this to the people, he adds something very familiar to us from the passover Seder.

**"When your children ask מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם – What is it about this ritual..."** "you respond, 'It is the passover sacrifice to God, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt" ... and saved us.

After the last plague and fleeing Egypt, Moshe again addresses the people, giving a full description of how the holiday is to be celebrated once they reach the land of Israel, starting with: **... זְכוֹר אֶת-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ...**

**"Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt..."**

Remember the day, and remember that it was God's strength that freed us.

And of course, a full description of how the holiday was to be celebrated when they reached the land of Israel, at the end of which is another familiar passage from the seder: **"And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt."**

Curiously, this is then followed with: **וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ וּלְזִכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת ה' בְּפִיךָ**

**"And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder between your eyes" – why? – "in order that the Teaching of God may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand God freed you from Egypt."**

Again, following the instructions to sacrifice the first born animals and redeem the first born child if male, Moshe predicts questions from future generations about this as well, and gives us another familiar Seder reading: And when, in the future, **your child asks** you, 'What does this mean?'

This is also followed by the instruction that it be a sign on your hand **וּלְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ** - and **a symbol/frontlet between your eyes** - as a reminder that God freed us from Egypt - this time indicating something physical.

The instructions to share the national memory of redemption with the kids gets progressively more involved:

1: recount to the children, give the reason: "So that you should know God."

2: child asks about ritual, answer with the *what and why*: "God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when smiting the Egyptians, but saved our houses."

3: remember, celebrate, and explain to the children: 'It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.' With the addition of making it a sign on the hand and between the eyes: That we were rescued from oppression by God should be ever present in our actions and the way we view the world. And also in the words we speak.

4: child asks about sacrifice and redemption of 1<sup>st</sup> born, answer by explaining the connection to leaving Egypt. And also that it is to be sign on the hand and on the forehead: In our actions and visible to all.

Later in Tanach, the kings were instructed to always have a Torah scroll in their presence so that they should reign justly and remember that while they may be the leader of the people, the true power is with God. I would offer that the tefillin are meant to have a similar effect – reminding the Jews to keep God and Judaism front and center in our minds so we see the world through a Jewish lens of justice and compassion, act accordingly, and remember to pass those lessons on to future generations. While Tefillin are not worn all the time, or by everyone, the world should be able to see the signs of our

relationship to God and our history through our actions and our words.

My mother and I were recently talking about the Civil Rights movement. While she wasn't an activist, going to rallies and such, she did take a stand in discussions regarding bussing to integrate the schools. She was active in the PTA at my brother's school and was also a teacher's assistant at the school on the other side of the tracks – just a ½ mile, but a whole world away. The other PTA ladies had heard her speak in favor of the bussing plan. When she ran for a position in the PTA at my brother's school she lost. Her neighbor quite sincerely asked "Well, what did you expect? You can't help it because you're Jewish." The "it" was speaking up for a better world for the children. In other words, she didn't lose just because she was Jewish, she lost because her Judaism taught her to be compassionate in a way that the neighbors could not accept.

Throughout our history, there have been periods of intense suffering followed by freedom. The story of the Exodus helps us endure, knowing that it is cyclical and we – as a people – will survive and rebuild each time. We have faith that God will once again save us. We keep our history and traditions alive. We wear our national redemption in our actions and our way of relating to the world. We see our responsibility to take care of others, both Jewish and not. And we keep encouraging our children to ask "why" and "what" as we show them "how."