

Faith Conquers Nature – Parshat Bo

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Immediately right after the plague of the Firstborn, Pharaoh and the Egyptians surrendered unconditionally. The base of their faith in the forces of nature was revealed to be meaningless, and it was revealed that everything was controlled by Divine Providence.

This week's Torah portion is called *parshat "Bo."* Here the Torah relates the last three of the ten plagues which were inflicted on Egypt: Locusts, Darkness and the Plague of the Firstborn, which was the last plague. Hashem foresaw from the beginning that as soon as this plague would occur, Pharaoh would send out the Children of Israel immediately. Indeed, even before the plague of locusts, there were already those within Egypt that called for sending out the Children of

Israel, as is related in the Torah, “And the servants of Pharaoh said to him, ‘How long will they be a snare for us? Send out the men so that they may serve Hashem their G-d. Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?’” (Exodus 10:7). At this stage, before the Plague of the Firstborn, a civil uprising had begun. The firstborn knew that they were being watched closely and drew their swords against the nation’s rulers, the head of which was Pharaoh, demanding that they send out the Children of Israel. However, Pharaoh hardened his heart and the attempted rebellion was not successful. Thousands were killed in this battle.

The prophecy was completely fulfilled: at the exact moment of midnight on the 15th of Nissan, Hashem struck every firstborn in the nation of Egypt. This plague changed the order of creation, and in its wake, the Nation of Israel left Egypt the next morning with their heads held high, as it is written in the Torah, “And the Children of Israel went out with an upraised arm” (Exodus 14:8).

Why was it specifically the Plague of the Firstborn which was the final blow, after which Pharaoh would immediately send out the Children of Israel? From the physical aspect it is very clear why the Plague of the Firstborn caused the Egyptians to surrender unconditionally. The Egyptians understood at this point that they either had to give in or the country of Egypt would be no more. This is reminiscent of the end of WWII when America dropped the atomic bomb. After the first explosion, the Japanese still tried to keep on fighting, but when they dropped the second one, the Japanese surrendered unconditionally. They understood that there was no choice: they could either surrender or it would be the end of the nation of Japan. This is similar to what we just mentioned with Egypt: that there were those who wanted to send out the Children of Israel even before the plague of locusts: “Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” But Pharaoh still refused to send out the Children of Israel. It was precisely the plague

of the Firstborn Egyptians that caused Pharaoh and the Egyptians to give in completely. What was the spiritual aspect of the Plague of the Firstborn that caused Pharaoh and the Egyptians to totally concede and send the Children of Israel without any preconditions?

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Rebbe Natan explains:

A “*bechor*” (firstborn) is the first child to be born in a family and represents the “*raishit*” or beginning, which symbolizes “*daat*” or knowledge, as the verse says, “*raishit daat*,” knowledge is first. As is true with everything in creation, there are two equivalent and corresponding forces which give us free will: the force of holiness and the opposing force called the “*Sitra Achra*,” the Other Side (The word “*sitra*” is the Aramaic word for “side,” meaning another side, which opposes holiness.) There is a similar connection between “*daat*”—knowledge and the concept of “*bachor*”—firstborn. There is a force in holiness, and there is also an opposing force on the Other Side.

On the side of holiness, the “*bachor*”—firstborn and “*daat*”—knowledge are expressions of faith and Divine Providence, that is, faith which is the reality of Hashem and faith which is what runs the creation. Nothing happens “naturally” without being calculated—everything is under Hashem’s Providence. On the other hand, the force of “*bachor*”—firstborn of the Other Side represents the extreme opposite of faith which is a belief in the power of natural forces and a complete denial of the forces of holiness and a lack of recognition of Hashem’s control. Pharaoh and the Egyptians symbolize the faith in

forces of nature. They worshipped the Nile which watered the land of Egypt and believed only in the forces of nature and in magic. They firmly refused to acknowledge the existence of Hashem or to believe in Him, as Pharaoh said, "Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice...and he did not recognize Hashem" (Exodus 5:2).

The Nation of Israel actually represents the essence and existence of the concept of firstborn, the knowledge of holiness which is faith in Providence and the Creator's rule. Thus, the Holy One, Blessed be He, designated the Children of Israel as "My Firstborn Israel" (Exodus 4:22). The faith of the Nation of Israel is above nature and in opposition to nature. Even though nature has its own rules and order, the Nation of Israel believes in Divine Providence and miracles which are beyond nature. These ideas are related to what Rebbe Nachman said: that faith is above nature, "because nature imposes limitations, but prayer changes nature. This is a miracle. And for this, one needs faith. He must believe that there is One Who renews, and He has the ability to remake anything according to His will" (*Likutei Moharan I*, 7). Why does the Nation of Israel represent Divine Providence and the power of faith which is beyond nature?



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but prayer changes nature" (Rebbe Nachman)*

After the war between Avraham and the Kings, the Torah relates, "After these events, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision saying...And He took him outside and said, 'Gaze now toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them!' And He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be'" (Genesis 15:1, 5). Rashi explains this verse according to a midrash: "Go forth from your astrological speculations—that you have seen by the planets that you will not raise a son. Avram indeed may have no son but Avraham will have a son." Another version says, "He took him into outer space and raised him above the stars (*Bereshit Rabba* 44:12). That is to say, the Creator lifted Avraham above nature and above the fate of his astrological sign. According to nature and his astrological sign, he wasn't supposed to have children. Thus, Isaac's birth—and in fact, the existence of the entire nation—is above nature. Therefore, the Nation of Israel is generally called "My Firstborn Israel" because the root of the Nation of Israel is connected with being the firstborn in the knowledge of holiness, which is faith, which is above nature and astrological signs. Without this faith, the Nation of Israel would not exist at all.

This is what happened in Egypt when Hashem overruled the laws of nature and demonstrated his Providence through the plagues which struck Egypt and the whole world. He turned water into blood and blood into water, a staff into a snake and a snake into a staff. However, it was the Plague of the Firstborn—which Hashem imposed on the source of knowledge of the Other Side, on the source of faith in the forces of nature—that was so crushing, because here Hashem revealed that everything was exclusively under the Providence of the Creator in the aspect of "My Firstborn Israel." Thus, it was precisely through the Plague of the Firstborn that Pharaoh and the Egyptians, who believed and worshipped the forces of nature,

were completely subdued.

(according to *Likutei Halachot, Netilat Yadayim* of *Shacharit*,
2:4)