



PARSHAS BO – DANIEL EHREICH (REPRINTED)

The Parsha begins, apparently arbitrarily, right in the middle of the episode of the ten plagues. It's important to view each part of the story in the context of the rest of the account which started back in Shemos and Vo'eiro (which incidentally starts right in the middle of a conversation!). So the first question we will seek to answer is this: what, if any, conceptual distinction exists between the plagues of Vo'eiro and of Bo.

Looking back to the beginning of the narrative one of the most striking things to notice is just how long it took for the ensuing events to unfold. From the moment Hashem proclaimed that the time had come for the Bnei Yisroel to leave Egypt we expectantly anticipate the promised redemption, only to be forced to patiently wait as Hashem turns His attention from His chosen people to their oppressors. Quite oddly, it appears that Hashem is waiting for Paraoh's permission for the Bnei Yisroel to leave. The plagues unequivocally demonstrated Hashem's omnipotence, and there is certainly no doubt that the Exodus could have come about in an instant, so what was the need to wait? To compound this, just at the moment that Paraoh's long awaited approval appears imminent Hashem 'hardens' Paraoh's heart, excruciatingly delaying the elusive inevitable.

If we cast our minds back to events that occurred many years earlier we'll remember that Hashem made a three-part promise to Avrohom. The Possuk says "vegam es hagoy asher ya'avodu don onochi, veacharei chein yeitzeu birechush godol." Promise 1: "I will 'judge' the nation that enslaves you", Promise 2: "Afterwards you will leave", and Promise 3 "with great wealth". If only we understood the significance of Promises 1 and 3, we might be able to comprehend why Promise 2 couldn't be kept independently of the others, as neither seems adequate justification for the delay.

What is the nature of the Judgement/Din that Hashem assured Avrohom? Normally it is interpreted as 'punishment', however the havoc that Hashem inflicted on the Egyptians at the Yam Suf would have been perfectly sufficient if this was merely the settlement of a primitive vendetta. A more fundamental, and in this case more satisfying, interpretation of Din is the establishment of Justice. It is certainly true that Hashem could have visited upon Egypt a trivial apocalypse, but would that have achieved Justice? Borod represented the climax of the Makkos in Parshas Vo'eiroh and perhaps the most pivotal moment of the whole story. The uniqueness of Borod was that it forced Paraoh to make a choice between his rebellion and what was undeniable common sense. Despite being given the opportunity to deftly circumvent the impact of the plague by bringing anything valuable indoors, Paraoh chose to maintain his rebellious stance and ignore the impending disaster. Finally Paraoh relented with a recognition that "Hashem hu hatzadik" but Hashem wasn't quite satisfied with that. He knew that Paraoh was acting purely out of fear and not a sense of justice. Paraoh may have been punished but his sudden adoption of a self preservationist strategy in a rare surrender to common sense does not testify to the assertion of Justice. So Hashem refused the offer saying "this time I'm going to send all my plagues el libeicho – to your heart", this time it's going to touch you, not just with the intellectual realisation that it's in your own best interest to let the Bnei Yisroel go, but so deep in your heart that you will want to let them go. Not only will you want the Bnei Yisroel to leave Egypt, but you will recognise the Justice so deeply that you'll want to shout it from the rooftops, declaring to the whole world that I am Hashem.

Now the beginning of Parshas Bo heralds a new era in which Hashem begins playing with Paraoh. And it is remarkable to observe how in Bo the games really start. This is where the negotiations over the release of the Jewish people kick off in earnest. Finally, after all the drama of Shemos and Vo'eiroh, Paraoh relents and calls Moshe back (for the first time ever), at last agreeing to let the people go. But at exactly that point Moshe ups the ante and changes the terms of the negotiation. Then, after bearing the brunt of yet another devastating attack Paraoh is forced to relinquish another component of his negotiating position and says to Moshe, "OK, the men, women and children can go, even some of the animals can go (see Kli Yakar), but leave most of the animals behind". And Moshe, answering in a way that must have been calculated to drive Paraoh into an enraged frenzy replies, "not only will our animals go, but we're taking yours as well!" And when Paraoh utterly relents, offering an unconditional surrender and demanding that Moshe take the people out immediately, we know what happens - Moshe refuses to go!

The purpose of all this must have been to demonstrate that Hashem was always in control. The Bnei Yisroel would leave when Hashem wanted them to but that required that they witness Paraoh being thoroughly undermined. He demonstrated that the redemption was not just a reaction to the slavery, but that the slavery itself was a fundamental part of the plan. We needed to recognise that Paraoh, our oppressor, was a tool to be manipulated as required. It was not enough for Paraoh to recognise Din, we had to see Paraoh recognise Din before we could be truly free. We had to see that everything we'd ever recognised as powerful was a sham. What better way for the Bnei Yisroel to recognise the Power of Hashem than for Paraoh himself to tell them. The Paraoh who at the end of Shemos refused to recognise Hashem at all had through a meticulously orchestrated series of events come to not only recognise Hashem, but to proclaim Hashem's Justice, and his own wickedness. This was a crucial element in helping Bnei Yisroel achieve a sense of freedom. This could not have been achieved through a simple demonstration of power, but had to be a result of the demonstration of fact.

Freedom is a basic foundation of our relationship to Torah and life. To be able to turn that freedom into free choice we had to appreciate that we deserved it. If we had simply been labelled a "free people" the message could never have penetrated the collective psyche of a nation entrenched in a raw slave-psychology. To be a true "Bnei Chorin" we had to appreciate and actually attain the freedom, recognise both our right to freedom and the reality of it, and not merely be granted it.