

BREAKING THE YOKE OF SLAVERY

A commentary on *Parashat Bo*

By Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

What does it feel like to be a slave? We do not need to research the testimonies of slaves, who toiled in the Americas in the 18th and 19th century to find answers to this question. According to the Global Slavery Index, 45.8m adults and children are enslaved across the world today.¹

While modern slavery encompasses human trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced labour, the fundamental definition of slavery remains unchanged across millennia: the absolute denial of personal liberty – usually, accompanied by cruel treatment. We read in the Book of Exodus: *“The Egyptians made the Israelites serve with rigour. They made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field”* (Sh’mot, Ex. 1:13-14)

The Exodus tale gives us a sense of what it feels like to be a slave. When the Pharaoh who had imposed slavery on the Israelites died: *“The Israelites groaned from their bondage, and they cried out...”* (Sh’mot, Ex. 2:23). Why? The Spanish medieval commentator, Nachmanides (1194-c.1270), explains that the Israelites were fearful that the new king would be even crueller than the previous one. Much later in the story, after Moses had reluctantly assumed the task of challenging Pharaoh, and went to the Israelites to tell them that G-d was planning to liberate them: *“They did not listen to Moses because of shortness of spirit – mikotzer ru’ach – and hard bondage”* (Va-eira, Exodus 6:9). The experience of slavery may crush the spirit as well as subjugate the body. Indeed, the Torah narrative makes it clear that the Israelites needed convincing that redemption was at hand.

After the first four plagues – blood, frogs, lice and flies – had wreaked havoc everywhere, when it came to the plague of cattle disease, *“All the cattle of Egypt died; but not one died of the cattle of the Israelites”* (Ex. 9:6). And so it was, for the remaining plagues of boils, hail, locusts, darkness and death of the firstborn:

the Israelites were protected. The tale of those final three is related in this week’s *Parashat Bo*. However, the Israelites were not automatically saved from the final plague. In order to ensure that the Eternal would pass over their houses, each household had to slaughter a lamb, and smear the blood on the door-posts and the lintel: *“And the blood shall be for you as a sign upon the houses where you are; so when I see the blood, I will pass over you (u’phasacti), and there should be no plague upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt”* (Ex. 12:13). In order to be saved, the Israelites had to mark out their houses for deliverance.

The Torah teaches us important lessons about the journey from slavery to freedom. Even those who are enslaved are not passive victims. They can, and perhaps they must, participate in their own liberation. The Torah relates that, finally, the Israelites left in haste – such haste that there was no time for their dough to rise; hence *matzah*, unleavened bread, is the bread of freedom (Ex. 12: 39). We also learn that liberation was not confined to the Israelites: *“And a mixed multitude – erev rav – went up also with them”* (Ex. 12:38). When the opportunity arose, all the slaves made a dash for freedom.

And so, the Exodus narrative of slavery and liberation has universal meaning. Indeed, the laws of the ordinance of Pesach for future generations also apply to the *geir* – the sojourner: *“One law shall be to the home-born and to the sojourner that sojourns among you”* (Ex. 12: 49). The tale of the Exodus is a clarion call of liberation for all those who are enslaved.

Ultimately, it teaches that all slaves everywhere must go free and that we are all obligated – those who are enslaved and those who are free, alike – to break the yoke of slavery.

The tale of the Exodus is a clarion call of liberation for all those who are enslaved.

1. <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>