

Parshat Bo

Let Me Tell You a Story: Questions and Answers in Parshat Bo

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Not once, but twice in our parsha, Moshe presents B'nai Yisrael with the following scenario: After you have been redeemed from Egypt and you are observing the mitzvot God gave you, if your child asks you, מה, העבדה הזאת לכם? 'What is this service to you?', מה זאת, 'What is this?', how should you respond? (Shemot 12:26, 13:14). Both times, Moshe answers that the parent should tell the story of Yetziyat Mitzrayim.

Why does Moshe find it necessary to address this case of a child asking, 'What is this all about?' And why does he present the story of Yetziyat Mitzrayim as the ideal response?

Many meforshim explain that these questions point to the ארבע בנים, the four children at the Pesach seder. The חכם, ושאינו יודע לשאל, רשע, תם, each ask a version of this question, מה, with the differences of course being intention and background. Thus, traditionally, Moshe's inclusion of this question-and-answer instruction serves as our stage direction for future sederim.

But Lekach Tov teaches that Moshe's instruction points to a much more pervasive and serious need. ויש אומרים כי בשורה רעה היא שעתידה תורה להשתכח מבניכם, 'There are those who say that this was bad tidings, that in the future Torah would be forgotten from your children' (Lekach Tov Shemot 12:26). It is striking that at the moment when God's Presence is finally obvious to B'nai Yisrael, when the promise of the brit is being fulfilled, and when redemption is imminent, this is davka when Moshe addresses the potential for disconnection and the forgetting of Torah. With Lekach Tov's teaching in mind, we hear Moshe asserting and giving chizuk: If our redemption is to last, we need to be prepared to answer doubt, fear, ignorance, curiosity, forgetfulness, and apathy.

It is striking then that Moshe advises B'nai Yisrael to tell their story in response. He does not instruct the parent to scold the child or to teach him or her the halachot of Korban Pesach and Pidyon HaBen. He instead tells the parent to make it personal-- tell the story of our people's relationship with God and our redemption from slavery.

In line with Chasidic thought, Rebbe Kalonymus Kalman Shapira celebrates the unique power of storytelling. He argues that a teacher can most directly reach the heart of a student through the use of a mashal, a parable or story (Discussion with Teachers and Parents). And in his Aish Kodesh, he argues that it is the master of aggadah, of stories, who is able to speak to people of all understandings and levels-- to touch their hearts and draw them close to the revelation of Torah (Aish Kodesh on Parshat Bo, 1942). From Rebbe Shapira's teaching, we can then understand that Moshe advises B'nai Yisrael to answer מה זאת with our people's story because a story is accessible, provides context, and is a source of connection. The חכם, רשע, תם, among us will most readily digest a response if it is in the form of our communal personal story. Thus, our story is *the* effective answer to the disconnected and forgotten question of מה זאת.

Moshe's scenario that appears twice in our parsha is one that is all too familiar to us in the 21st century. Whether we are parents trying to communicate the value of observance to our children or if we are being asked by a colleague at work why we keep kosher, we are constantly challenged to make Torah relevant so

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it is not discarded or forgotten and to explain why our עבודה matters to us. For in order to inspire others to connect to Torah or for us to respond coherently to doubt and judgement, we must be able to articulate why and how we connect to our tradition. Telling the story of Yetziyat Mitzrayim is not limited to the words in our parsha and in the Haggadah-- we also need to be able to answer מה זאת for ourselves with our own stories, our own experiences of redemption and revelation.

A few weeks ago during Tween Minyan at B'nai David-Judea, my synagogue in Los Angeles, we were discussing the moment when we return the Torah to the aron, specifically why we say, ה' אליך ונשובה, 'Turn us back, O God, to You, and we will return. Renew our days as of old'. One child answered that when we say this we are asking God to help us remember and return like new to all of the Torah learning we have forgotten or from which we have become disconnected. For me, this moment, this story, is my personal answer to מה זאת. The reason I pursued the path I have, and one of the many reasons I cherish our tradition is because it creates moments like this and people like the B'nai David-Judea tween. A life of Torah is a life that is full of meaning, searching, and striving. It is a life that is honest about past and present struggles and proactive and supportive in our process of finding meaning with Hashem in them. When we partner with God in carrying His Torah in this world, God renews, returns, and redeems us from being forgetful and disconnected.

What is your answer to מה העבודה הזאת לכם 'What is this service to you?', מה זאת 'What is this?' What is your story-- big or small? I encourage you to share it at your Shabbos table this week.

Stories connect us to each other and to our past, and in doing so inspire us to find meaning in our present. Storytelling allows us to make sense of our struggles and gives us tools to process and move forward in partnership with each other and with God. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, 'Storytelling is the great vehicle of moral education' (Covenant and Conversation, Parshat Bo). So when we fear that our children will no longer connect to the Judaism we gave them, when we begin to doubt our answer to our colleague about why we keep kosher, and when we feel disconnected from prayer and practice, we need to tell our people's story, the story of God's יד חזק in our lives, as well as our personal stories of encountering God and holiness. With Moshe's wisdom of answering the tough questions with a story, let's view סיפור יציאת מצרים, the telling and retelling of Yetziyat Mitzrayim, not just as a piece of history, but as a foundation of our present.



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