THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION: Bo, Exodus 10:1 – 13:16

OVERVIEW The dramatic contest of wills between God and Pharaoh is coming to a climax: The plagues upon Egypt become steadily more punitive, culminating with the death of the first-born. Before the final plague, Moses and Aaron are given instructions by God to make a sacrifice, and to place the blood on the doorposts of the Israelite houses. Further instructions are given to eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs; this becomes the source of our Passover traditions. The firstborn of the Egyptians are struck dead; this is the final blow to Pharaoh, who sends the entire Israelite people in the middle of the night. Commandments concerning Passover and the sanctification of the firstborn are given as a remembrance of the Exodus.

AREA OF FOCUS

10:24Pharaoh then summoned Moses and said, "Go, worship the LORD only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind; even your children may go with you." 25But Moses said, "You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to the LORD our God; 26our own livestock, too, shall go along with us--not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of the LORD our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship the LORD until we arrive there." 27But the LORD stiffened Pharaoh's heart and he would not agree to let them go. 28Pharaoh said to him, "Be gone from me! Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die." 29And Moses replied, "You have spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again!"

Pshat Pharaoh is stubborn and will not admit total defeat, even after nine afflictions upon his land and people. After the "plague" of darkness, he grudgingly allows the Israelites to leave Egypt; however, he wants them to leave their cattle behind, perhaps as the price of their freedom. Moses won't hear of it, and tells Pharaoh that they need the cattle to make sacrifices to God out in the wilderness. Pharaoh's heart is hardened once again, and he does not agree to Moses's demands.

Drash The exchange between Moses and Pharaoh at the end of chapter 10 is, on the simplest level, a battle of wills between political opponents, each trying to get the best deal for his side. Not unlike other famous negotiations in the Middle East, the two parties don't trust each other, and each tries to give up as little as he can to the other.

1. *Why do you think Moses doesn't take the offer to leave, isn't he obligated to free his people from bondage and suffering as soon as possible?*
2. *Do you think his reasoning, 'they will need the cattle to make sacrifices in the wilderness' is reason enough?*

COMMENTARY: The Hasidic master Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak from Pshi'scha, also known as the Yehudi HaKadosh (The Holy Jew), proposes a reading of the story far removed from the realm of political revolutions. The Yehudi imagines Pharaoh challenging Moses over his understanding of spirituality in worship:

Pharaoh said: "It is possible to worship God [only] in thought and in feeling. So if, in truth, you really desire to worship God--what do you need your flocks and herds for? 'Go, worship God'--with an upright heart and pure intentions, and you won't need to make any physical offerings, so 'only your flocks and herds will remain.'"

Moses answered him: "Intentions alone, without any actions connected to them, aren't important, aren't anything! The main thing is real action, and thus intentions depend on actions and are deepened through them. Therefore, 'our cattle will also go with us,' (v. 26) because 'we will take from them to worship Adonai our God.'" From actions one is aroused to worship God with great feeling and to embrace the Divine. (Source: Itturei Torah)

FOR DISCUSSION AND UNDERSTANDING

1. *Do you agree with Moses, is intention dependent on action? Can intention ever be enough by itself?*
2. *What is the modern day version of 'physical offerings' what actions are necessary for spiritual practice?*
3. *How can this new understanding of the relationship between intention and action in form your life*

DVAR TORAH Clearly, the Yehudi doesn't think that Pharaoh was all that concerned with the Israelite's spirituality--this is a parable about contemporary concerns. I understand the Yehudi to be addressing those people who want a purely internal spirituality, going deep inside themselves, spurning the physical world. The Yehudi, speaking through the character of Moses, seems to be suggesting that the proper way to deepen one's inner life is to align it with your physicality, your embodied being.

An example that comes to mind is ritual action, something often derided by those who seek a purely internal, detached kind of spirituality. (Think of the negative connotations of the word "ritualistic.") A simple ritual is making a blessing before eating, which can help bring us to feelings of awe and gratitude.

One might think that the best thing is to go directly to the proper feelings, and bypass the ritual, but I think it doesn't really work that way. The action of the blessing can bring us to a depth of emotion and spiritual understanding unreachable by thought alone; sometimes we don't even understand, on a spiritual level, what the ritual is all about until after we've done it many times.

"It's easier to act your way into right thinking than think your way into right acting." Of course, a certain amount of intellectual preparation is crucial for Jewish practice, but I think the Yehudi reminds us that religious growth can't happen only "from the neck up." It happens when we bring physical and spiritual together, when we bring our whole being into the quest, when our actions in the social and religious realms become entirely aligned with our higher goals. (Rabbi Neal Joseph Loevinger)