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Torah From The Holy Land

Parshat Bo

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Torah: The Power of Liminality at Camp

This d'var was written for the weekly Ramah Wisconsin mailing. It has been changed slightly.

The summer after I graduated college, I staffed a USY Poland-Israel Israel trip for high school aged students. The experience had a profound impact on me, but more than that, it had a profound Jewish impact on the teens who went on the trip. In fact, research says that there are three main experiences which, more than any other metric, predict future involvement in Jewish life: Jewish day schools, youth trips to Israel, and you guessed it, Jewish summer camps. Particularly focusing on the later two, I asked myself, what do these experiences have in common? The answer is Jewish immersion. In these environments, Judaism is infused into every aspect of the experience. At camp, chanichim learn how to live meaningful halachic Jewish lives while living with all that modern life has to offer. This liminal space allows young Jews to step out of the pressures of their everyday lives and experience the breadth of what Jewish life can be.

Parshat Bo commences with a different type of liminal experience. It's the coming of age for a people, where they transition from life under a physical master in Egypt to the Master of the Universe. In fact, the entire rest of the Torah documents this lengthy transition. Like camp, the desert provides an ideal environment for learning both faith and practice, removed from the demands of everyday life. In the desert, the people must rely solely on God for their sustenance and well being, the ultimate test of faith. In fact, the people come to rely so much on God that when it comes time to scout out the land of Israel, they bring back a negative report, afraid that the giants in the land will surely crush them. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught, however, that the spies were not actually afraid of failing, but of victory. In the desert, they had everything provided for them. God was visible, present in every moment. But they knew in Eretz Canaan that they would have to live in the real world of empirical

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space. They would need to fight wars, plant crops, and build a society. And as a result, God's intimate, miraculous presence would be diminished. The issue was that the spies didn't know how to translate the immersive experience of God into everyday life. How do we translate these seminal liminal moments to lived reality?

After Pharaoh finally releases the Hebrews, they journey to Succoth and receive their first laws, among them to celebrate Passover yearly. "And you should tell your son on that day, saying, 'It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.' And it shall be for you a sign on your arm and a reminder between your eyes - so that Hashem's Torah may be in your mouth - for with a strong hand Hashem removed you from Egypt" (Ex. 13:8-9). What does 'because of this' mean? Rashi asks. Because we must fulfill the mitzvot, we were brought out of Egypt. In these few words, we realize our entire purpose in life - to serve the Divine through the fulfillment of mitzvot.

To translate these liminal moments to lived reality, immersion must extend beyond the walls of camp, into the homes, schools and synagogues. Judaism must be lived, not only at Ramah, but by the very people children look up to most: their parents. We must place mitzvot front and center, showing our children not only in words, but also in action, that it's 'because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt'. And in doing so, may we all merit the sweet taste of Torah in our mouth and on our lips.

T'fillah: Tefillin and Servitude

At the end of parshat Bo, it not once, but twice mentions that you should put a sign on your arm and a reminder between your eyes that Hashem took you out of Egypt. "And it shall be for you a sign on your arm and a reminder between your eyes - so that Hashem's Torah may be in your mouth - for with a strong hand Hashem removed you from Egypt" (Ex. 13:9). It's no coincidence that this passage, along with one a few verses later and the two passages from the Shema which allude to tefillin, is actually contained within the Tefillin themselves. In both passages in Bo, these signs are referred to in the context of God's redemption of the people from Egypt. As was noted in the Torah commentary above, Rashi teaches on verse 8 that it's in order to perform mitzvot that the Divine takes the Hebrews out of Egypt. Therefore, the daily wrapping of Tefillin is a reminder that God didn't just bring us out of Egypt to be free, but to worship the Divine. And we do this by performing mitzvot, thereby revealing the Divine presence in the world. Rabbi Shmuel Hominer, a late 19th century Rabbi in Palestine, comments similarly in Sefer Olat Tamid on uk'shartem l'ot, and you will bind them as a sign, in the Shema. "A person should intend that they are a branded servant of the Kadosh Baruch Hu, and that they will not rebel or maintain the idea that they are a free person. Therefore, we put on our flesh a sign of the covenant (circumcision), like the way a master brands his servant to show he's a servant. The second stamp we put on us is tefillin. And on Shabbat, there is no tefillin. The day

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itself is a sign.” What does it look like to serve a higher power? How might our moment to moment interactions change if we were constantly in service to the Divine?

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