

Torah Thoughts Bo

5778:

In parshat Bo this week, the Israelites step into a time machine. Between the ninth plague, that of darkness, and the tenth, the killing of the firstborn throughout Egypt, the Torah pauses and takes a long digression through the laws of Pesakh. Instead of finishing the story of the plagues at the same rapid pace at which it has described the first nine, the text lingers over the Israelites preparations for their deliverance, and then tells of the final blow to Pharaoh and Egypt. In terms of hearing the tale, we are forced to wait for the denouement, pointing up the drama of the moment. And it changes the focus from the effect of the plagues on Egypt to the observance of Pesakh among the Israelites, both present and future.

The effect of mixing its description of what is happening at that moment and how that moment will be remembered later is to collapse past and present into one. The text brings the participants to life in our imaginations, and at the same time brings us to life in theirs. God tells Moses, who in turn tells the people, how they will always remember this night: with the eating of a shared meal, including unleavened bread and bitter herbs; these are practices that were ordained to be observed for all time, as we still perform them, seeing the night in the text as the first observance. At the same time, the Israelites perform acts that we no longer do: They daub blood on their doorposts to ward off the tenth plague, which was a one-time act; they also roast whole lambs for their families, a practice that fell into disuse in the early rabbinic period after the destruction of the Temple. We feel ourselves transported back into a time when current practices began and when ancient ones had not yet been abandoned.

In the moment in the text between the ninth and tenth plagues, the past and present, they and we, are suspended in time. They knew, and we know, the significance of what they (and we) are experiencing. They and we engage in a form of time travel, of imagining ourselves in their present and then imagining the future they are establishing. It is the moment when they step into the future after hundreds of years of immobility and stagnation in Egypt, and when we are transported back to re-experience the exodus with them, to understand the origins of our liberation and redemption. As at every moment of significant transition, all who go through it feel its momentousness and understand its significance. Experience and understanding meld, time melts, and we know who we are and why.

Shabbat shalom