

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Bo

This week's Torah Portion, Parshat Bo, is the climax of the Exodus. The Torah relates the final three plagues and the preparation for the great deliverance that followed. In order to appreciate the enormity of the events, it is worthwhile examining an excerpt of the Book of Psalms. Chapter 136 has made its way into the Shabbat morning prayers, and also into the Passover Haggadah. The first Passover Seder is actually described in Chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus so it seems apropos to look at the Psalm in the context of a traditional Passover Seder.

After we finish the meal and say the Grace after Meals on the night of Passover, we then recite Hallel, which literally means 'Praise.' In this section, we repeat the same verses of the Hallel we typically say as part of the morning services on Festivals, but we add other excerpts from Psalms as well. The Talmud (Pesachim 118a) describes one of these sections from Psalms as the "Great Hallel." The Talmud cites different opinions as to the exact starting point in Psalms for this "Great Hallel," but everyone agrees it includes Chapter 136. The Talmud then asks, "Why is it called 'the Great Hallel?'" Rabbi Yochanan cryptically answers, "Because G-d sits in the highest part of the world and distributes sustenance to every creature." Rashbam (12th Century France) explains Rabbi Yochanan is referring to the end of the chapter, where King David proclaims "He gives bread to all flesh," and since this is a great thing, the whole chapter is therefore called the "Great Hallel."

The statement of Rabbi Yochanan seems difficult, for the line describing G-d providing all creatures with their sustenance is only one verse out of 26. The rest of the chapter deals with how G-d runs the natural world and the miracles He did to take the Jews out of Egypt and bring them to the Land of Israel. Why does this single verse define the other 25 verses as well, to the extent that the whole chapter is called the "Great Hallel?" If this is the main verse that interests us, perhaps we should only mention it and skip the rest of the chapter, like we do in the first blessing of the Grace after Meals? The answer must be that the other verses somehow intensify our recognition of Hashem's kindness in providing the world with food. Let us examine the parts of this "Great Hallel" to better understand what Rabbi Yochanan means.

The chapter starts with a call to give thanks to Hashem, pointing to His ongoing creation of the natural wonders of the world, such as the heavens and the dry land, the sun, moon, and stars. Then King David shifts, thanking G-d for smiting the Egyptian firstborn and delivering the Jews from Egypt with, metaphorically, a strong hand and an outstretched arm. He mentions the splitting of the Sea and the defeat of the kings who stood in the way of the Jewish people as G-d paved their way to the Land He promised would be their heritage. Finally, he ends, "He gives nourishment to all flesh, for His kindness endures forever. Give thanks to the G-d of the heavens, for his kindness is forever."

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The structure of the chapter clearly shows us the direction of David's praise. We see the physical world constantly being renewed, and we recall the history of our nation, as G-d miraculously redeemed us from Egypt and brought us to Israel. These two pieces are connected, because the miracles of the Exodus showed the Jewish people G-d's mastery over nature and His direct involvement with the world. Therefore we find the first of the Ten Commandments says "I am Hashem your G-d Who took you out of Egypt," and not "I am Hashem who created the world," because the miracles the Jewish people saw with their very own eyes strengthened their conviction in G-d's existence more than the story of creation which they never witnessed. King David wants to thank Hashem for constantly providing the creatures of the world with their needs, the last two verses of the chapter. So he starts the chapter by expressing his gratitude for the daily wonders of the world, and then goes on to talk about the miracles of the Exodus and the trek to the Land of Israel. The history of the miracles reinforces our belief that Hashem constantly renews creation and intervenes with the creatures of the world. Then David can thank Hashem with even greater conviction for food, the most practical, basic need He constantly provides for us.

One of the most crucial pleas of our daily Shemoneh Esrei is the request for rain, the thing which makes our ecosystem tick, and without which we would not have food to eat. We see this from the law that if we do not pray for rain, we must repeat the whole standing prayer. But before we even start the Standing Prayer, we first bless G-d for creating the luminaries and for redeeming the Jewish people from Egypt. These two factors, G-d governing the laws of nature and G-d doing supernatural wonders to take us out of Egypt, form the basis of our belief in Him. Once we have focused on these two things, we can approach G-d and ask Him to provide us with our needs. Likewise, when King David thanks Hashem for sustaining the world, first He creates a perspective by thanking G-d who we relate to both as the Creator and the Redeemer. Finally, after this long introduction, He goes on to thank G-d for the current act of kindness, exclaiming "He gives bread to all flesh, for His kindness endures forever."

Shabbat Shalom!

