



## Maintaining Motivation • Parshat Bo

Embedded in the Exodus story in *Parshat Bo* are three strategies to ensure that the eternal message and the burning passion for freedom would reverberate throughout history. Even before the Israelites were redeemed, Moses communicated these techniques so that they could translate their transformative experience into a better future.

In several essays, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasizes the centrality of storytelling to the Exodus experience. As he eloquently develops, stories are important for both communicating values to the next generation, as well as for forming one's own personal identity. As he wrote, "We are the story we tell about ourselves." Even before the Exodus occurred, Moses framed the events of the day in terms of teaching and telling stories. The act of telling another what one has witnessed, especially to a child, also allows the storyteller to relive and revive the emotion of the original experience. Three verses obligate this narration: "For the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt" (Ex. 13:8), that God, "spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians" (Ex 12:27), and that, "With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex 13:14). The storyteller relives the emotions originally felt upon being freed and conveys those feelings in vivid ways to the listeners. The act of telling the story keeps the memories and sentiments alive in the future.

The Sages in the Haggadah utilized the aforementioned verse, "For the sake of this (*ba-avur zeh*), did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt" (Ex. 13:8), to teach that the story must be told when "*matza* and *maror* are placed in front of you." This allusion to a behavioral act is a second strategy for sustaining inspiration. By imbuing external objects with emotional significance and utilizing them as part of a meaningful ritual, the storyteller can recreate the original reaction. Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, in his commentary on the Five Books, writes that this suggestion helps not just those who left Egypt, but also future generations because, "the sense impression of the miracle faded, and we are now left with only an intellectual knowledge of the Exodus. To reinforce our conviction of the events of the Exodus, we use tangible objects, such as *matzah* and *maror*, to stimulate a sense impression."

Professor Nehama Leibowitz, in her *New Studies in Shemot*, elaborating on the importance of ritual, writes that since "Man is a prisoner of his five senses" he therefore "requires tangible... symbols to keep him to the true path." Just thinking about something is not enough. We need a "concrete token that will constitute a means prompting the desired inner thought and verbal utterance." This is not just accomplished through *matza* and *maror* on Passover, but, according to Professor Leibowitz,

is the essential element underlying the daily donning of *Tefillin*.

In a related essay in his *Sichot Mussar on Parshat Vaeira*, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, quoting the Talmud, suggests that right before redemption, the Israelites were presented with the commandment to free slaves after seven years. Even though none of them had servants or could even entertain the possibility, knowing that their experience of being slaves was still fresh and raw in their minds, God wanted them to concretize that experience with a commitment to action. If they waited until later, the emotion would have dissipated and their dedication to this value may have waned. This long-term commitment to moral action binds the Israelites and stirs them to reexperience their moment of inspiration.

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This past week, I was privileged to be part of a Yeshiva University Sacks-Herenstein Center mission trip to Israel. The lingering question on the staff and students' minds is how to preserve the flame of the powerful emotions felt while bearing witness to the destruction and tragic aftermath of October 7th. Studying Moses' strategies for memorializing redemption provides a framework for remembering and communicating evil. It helps us maintain motivation for the ongoing fight. By telling the story to others, by infusing tangible symbols with ritual significance, and by committing to change behaviors for the benefit of others, we can concretize and conserve our powerful commitments long after their initial inspiration.

**Character Challenge:** What transformative event have you undergone recently? What can you do practically to extend the impact of the experience into the future?

**Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l:** “[Moses] speaks about the questions children may ask when the epic events that are about to happen are, at best, a distant memory. He tells the Israelites to do what Jews have done from then to now. Tell your children the story. Do it in the maximally effective way. Re-enact the drama of exile and exodus, slavery and freedom. Get your children to ask questions. Make sure that you tell the story as your own, not as some dry account of history. Say that the way you live and the ceremonies you observe are “because of what God did for me” – not my ancestors but me. Make it vivid, make it personal, and make it live” (*The Story we Tell, Covenant & Conversation*).