


*Some Comments on Parashat Bo: Between Moses' 10th Plague Warning and What Evidently Happened*  
 Rabbi Eliot Malomet      January 20, 2024    10 Shvat 5784

Exod. 11:8	Moses' Warning to Pharaoh	Exod. 12:31	The Torah's Report of What Happened	קומו צאו. אמר: לשעבר הייתם עבדי פרעה, מכאן ואילך אתם עבדי ה', באותה שעה היו אומרים הללויה הללו עבדי ה'! עבדי ה' ולא עבדי פרעה. תלמוד ירושלמי
וַיֹּרְדוּ כָל עֲבָדָיךָ אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי לִי לֵאמֹר צֵא אִתָּהּ וְכָל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלֶיךָ וְאַחֲרָי כֵּן אֵצֶא.	<i>Then all these your servants shall go down to me, they shall bow to me, saying: Go out, you and all the people who walk in your footsteps! And afterward I will go out.</i>	וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן לְיִלְהָ וַיֹּאמְרוּ קוּמוּ צְאוּ מִתּוֹךְ עַמִּי גַם אַתָּם גַּם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלָכוּ עֲבָדוּ אֶת ה' כְּדִבְרֵכֶם. גַּם צֹאנְכֶם גַּם בְּקִרְכֶּם קָחוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם וְלָכוּ וּבְרַכְתֶּם גַּם אֹתִי.	<i>He called Moshe and Aharon in the night and said: Arise, go out from amidst my people, even you, even the Children of Israel! Go, serve God according to your words: even your sheep, even your oxen, take, as you have spoken, and go! And bring-a-blessing even on me!</i>	Arise and go out: Pharaoh said, "In the past you were servants to Pharaoh. From now on, you will be servants of God." At that moment, they said: Halleluyah, Servants of God! (Ps.113:1) We are servants of God now not servants of Pharaoh. TP Psachim 5:5
				

כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּתוֹכָהּ הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם.	<i>Thus says the Lord: In the middle of the night I will go forth throughout the midst of Egypt,</i>
וּמֵת כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכוֹר פְּרֹעָה הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל כִּסֵּאוֹ עַד בְּכוֹר הַשִּׁפְחָה אֲשֶׁר אַחֲרֵי הָרְחִים וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה.	<i>and every firstborn shall die throughout the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the maid who is behind the handmill, and every firstborn of beast.</i>
וְהָיְתָה צִעָקָה גְּדֹלָה בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר כָּמֹהוּ לֹא נִהְיְתָה וְכָמֹהוּ לֹא תִסָּף. וְלֹכֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִתְחַרֵּץ קֶלֶב לִשְׁנוֹ לִמְאִישׁ וְעַד בְּהֵמָה לִמְעַן תַּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יַפְלֶה יְהוָה בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל. (11:4-7)	<i>Then shall there be a cry throughout all the land of Egypt, the like of which has never been, the like of which will never be again. But against all the Children of Israel, no dog shall wag its tongue, against either man or beast, in order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. (11:4-7)</i>

The plagues of locusts and darkness have left devastation in Egypt. Even prior to the plague of locusts, Pharaoh's personal entourage of servants expresses their despair:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדֵי פְרֹעָה אֵלָיו עַד מָתַי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים וְיַעֲבְדוּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲבֵדָה מִצְרַיִם.	<i>Pharaoh's servants said to him: Until when will this one be a snare to us? Send the men free, that they may serve Ado-nai their God! Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost? (10:7)</i>
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Even after some negotiation, Pharaoh remains obstinate. Without warning, Moses brings the plague of darkness. Pharaoh relents but says that they have to leave their animals behind. Moses insists that they bring their animals

for sacrifices. Pharaoh then refuses to let them go. Then Moses warns Pharaoh of the final plague. Moses says: In the warning, Moses describes a night of complete terror and death. There will be screaming all over Egypt. In the midst of that mayhem, Moses warns Pharaoh, *all these your servants shall go down to me*. That in itself is an astonishing statement. Then, even more astonishing, *they shall bow to me*. In effect, what is Moses saying to Pharaoh? He is saying: *When all this happens, you are not going to be in the picture. At this pinnacle moment, the people who serve you are going to act with deference to me. There will be a momentary transfer of allegiance. Your power will be suspended, and I will have power over them.* Let's not forget, that all of this will be taking place as the Israelites are sequestered in their homes, preparing to eat their special meal of roasted lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs.<sup>1</sup> But that's not what happens. Instead, Pharaoh *calls Moses and Aaron* and says to them, *Arise, get out!* Did he summon them, and did they honor the summons? Or did he simply *call them* and have someone else then *relate to them* the message? After all, Pharaoh had already told Moses he was never *going to see his face again* (10:28). If it was indeed a summons, then Moses had a real choice of leadership at this moment: was he going to abide by the exact words of his warning, and his honor, and insist that they come to him, and that Pharaoh's servants *bow down to him*, or was he going to obey the summons, and appear before Pharaoh? If we say that they went, then he obeyed the summons. The message: *My honor is not the issue here. This is not about me. This is about God, the promise, and the people. I will forsake Egyptian deference for the sake*

<sup>1</sup>I say "preparing to eat" because the text is very clear in pointing out that they left Egypt with *their dough before it had fermented, their kneading-troughs bound in their clothing, upon their shoulders*. (12:34). It's not until **the following day** that they baked it into matzah because, miraculously, it had still not fermented. *Now they baked*

*the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into matzot cakes, for it had not fermented* (12:39). They left on an empty stomach, and, presumably, they were not even able to eat the lamb that was roasting. What was meant to be a type of celebratory sacrifice ended up as a completely burnt offering.

of a swift departure. This was not the moment for maximalist and humiliating demands. This was a moment for expediency and immediate practical results.

Moses' Warning	The Torah's Report
Moses' prediction of what Pharaoh's servants will say:	What Pharaoh himself, not his servants, actually said:
Go out, you and all the people.	Arise, go out from amidst my people.
Go out from this place.	Go out from this people.
Sever your geographic connection to this place.	Sever your social connection to this people.

**Go out from my people** has the sense of pollution and purgation. It makes it seem as though Israelite population is intermingled with the Egyptians and that there needs to be a complete expulsion of the Israelites from the Egyptians, not just Egypt. And yet, while Pharaoh expresses his desire to rid Egypt of Israel, he subtly recognizes their peoplehood and their God. Notice that Pharaoh does not say *Go worship your god* but *Go worship Ado-nai*. For Pharaoh to actually name God *Ado-nai*, that's a big deal. Then there is the curious addition, **according to your words**. Throughout the entire story, from the Burning Bush until now, the petition to leave Egypt has always been expressed with a predicate: **Send free My people so that they will worship (serve) Me**. Is this a deception or is this something they are actually committed to doing? On the one hand, we know that Moses has no intention of bringing them back to Egypt to resume their slavery. Therefore, we may construe every time that Moses mentions **so that they will worship Me** as a ruse. The **three-day journey** is simply a ploy to afford them enough lead time to escape. Pharaoh's responses to these petitions may be an expression of his skepticism, but the unrelenting catastrophe that has been unleashed on Egypt has boxed him in. By finally acceding to their request, he states **according to your words** as a way of exerting the last vestige of power over them. *You said you were going on a three-day journey. Okay you can go. But I expect you back here right afterwards*. But they have no intention of coming back. Pharaoh interprets their departure as an **escape**, **ויגד למלך** - and he will **chase** them **ויחזיק אחריו בני ישראל** to the Sea of Reeds. Was this intended to be a **deception** all along? We note that **deception** is a key motif in the Bible. *The clear contradiction between the plan to deliver the people from Egypt and the instructions to ask for a mere three-day journey is not an editorial slip... Rather, it is essential to a deceptive plot that would eventually release Israel, giving them the wealth of Egypt and destroying the enemy in the process.*<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, to say that **so that they will worship me** in the lead up to the Exodus was a total

**deception** doesn't quite make sense either. At the very beginning of the story, again, back at the Burning Bush, God says to Moses, *and this is the sign for you that I myself have sent you: [when] you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will [all] worship God by this mountain*. (3:11). In other words, there was always a **worship** predicate to the Exodus. We could take this argument one step further by citing the first lines of the Ten Commandments: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slavery. You are not to have any other gods before Me*. Meaning, *I took you out of Egypt so that you would worship no other gods but Me* - exactly what Moses was saying all along. The entire goal of the Exodus was to dismantle a system of subservience to a tyrannical human power, and to replace it with establishing God as the ultimate moral Power, and a system of adherence to God. In slavery, human beings have no intrinsic value, in the a relationship with God, they have total dignity.

Slavery to Pharaoh	Service to God
Greatest indignity.	The ultimate dignity.
Humans have zero worth.	Humans have infinite worth.

Lastly, when Pharaoh says, *And bring-a-blessing even on me!* it is very confusing. Rabbi Barry Chesler says that we should interpret **יברכתם** euphemistically as its opposite: *even as you are cursing me*. We find that usage in the book of Job where Job's wife says in a moment of exasperation: **עֲדָה מִחַיִּיק בְּתַמְתָּהּ בְּרַח אֱלֹהִים וּמָת** - *You still keep your integrity! Curse God and die!* (Job 2:9) As intriguing as that is, it assumes too much self-awareness on Pharaoh. Pharaoh is a narcissistic despot, who is only looking out for his own best interest. Now that he is releasing the Israelites on their stated journey, he would like to exploit their sacred moment and wrest some personal benefit from it, in the form of a blessing. With the Israelites on their way to meet God they will become blessed, and Pharaoh was just looking for his cut. Alternatively, we could see this as a plea for amnesty or resolution between foes: a petition for grace or forgiveness on his part in order to create a new equilibrium in post-slavery relationship, the same way fierce competitors shake hands after a match, (ie. Jacob asked for a blessing from the mysterious assailant after their bout). Notice that Moses will have none of it. His non-answer to Pharaoh is an expression of contempt. Pharaoh is by no means a "noble-foe." Pharaoh is a contemptible genocidal despot who deployed the cruelest means of exploiting a people. Pharaoh is

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 עם ישראל חי! שבת שלום!  
 Shabbat Shalom! Am Yisrael Hay!

<sup>2</sup> Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch*, Studies in Biblical Literature 117 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 63–71. Shadal comments: *There is no doubt that this request was made deceptively, for they had no intention of returning, but*

*since [Pharaoh] had been holding them and enslaving them for no just cause, it is not surprising that God would command fooling him with trickery*. See Zev Farber, *Exodus Through Deception: Asking for a Three-Day Festival* at TheTorah.com.

not worthy of even the possibility of amnesty or the dignity of divine blessing. His fate and the fate of his nation awaits him.