

Parshat Bo January 28, 2023

Lucy Steinitz. Exodus 10:1 – 13:16

Begin with a description of the RESPECT activity that I do at work as part of onboarding for new international staff. (See instructions in the appendix).

Why is the take home message?

- Respect varies depending on your culture, your upbringing and your perspective
- If you want to respect someone else, you have to understand what respect means to that person, otherwise it won't feel respectful to him or her.

Why am I telling this?

There are many interesting issues in this Parshah, but I'm going to focus on one word, and that word is *bo* (בוא), meaning to "go in," or "enter." (It also means "come" – seemingly the opposite.)

The two-consonant verb *bo* (and its cognates) is the fourth most occurring in the entire Tanakh. The verb first occurs in Genesis 6:13, "And God said unto Noah, 'The end of all flesh is come (בא) before me,'" and the imperative singular form of the verb ("you go!") occurs in the title and the first verse of Parashat Bo (פרשת בא):

And Adonoi said to Moses, Go into to Pharaoh ... so that I may show these my signs in his midst (Ex 10:1)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה
... לְמַעַן שִׁתִּי אֶתִּי אֱלֹה בְּקִרְבּוֹ

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh ... so that I may show these my signs in his midst."
(Exodus 10:1)

Moses should go to Pharaoh, but Pharaoh uses the same verb, over and over. Repeatedly, Pharaoh tells Moses that he and his people should "GO and worship" although he –Pharaoh – reneges soon afterwards.

And when Moses and Aaron were brought again unto Pharaoh: and he said unto them, Go, serve the LORD your God: but who are they that shall go? Exodus 10:8

And then Moses responds and he says, We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds will we go; for we must hold a feast unto the LORD.

In fact, the verb Bo appears over 2500 times in the Tanach. But here is the point: it means both going -Go- and coming – Come. The reference to 2500 refer to shorash- or root-related words. One thinks of Go and Come as opposites, but

the same root, even the same word, is used for both --
depending on where you sit, depending on your perspective.

Some of these words include

To come in; enter (v)	בוא
Entrance (n)	בֵּיתָה
Entrance; preface (n.)	מבוא
Produce (n)	תבואה
<i>Barukh Haba</i> ; Welcome! (to a man)	ברוך הבא
<i>Brukha Haba'ah</i> ; Welcome! (to a woman)	ברוכה הבאה
The world to come (n)	עולם הבא

I think of welcoming the Sabbath bride – Bo-ee Calah, Bo-ee Calah.

It's not only Bo that give us this two-sided mirror, although that is the example I want to concentrate on.

Another word like it is Ivri, or Hebrew, which originally meant stranger but now we own it, and think of the Hebrew people as our in-group.

In modern times, too. For example, the 1950s and early 1960s, referring to persons with dark skin as black was a péjorative — something of an insult, until Black people themselves started using the

term to refer to themselves, and then it became the preferred term. As a white person I certainly couldn't use the word nigger, but people who are black often do as even in public. It all depends on where you stand, on who you are, on what your perspective is.

Let's return to the Parasha: Most English translations say in the first line, **And Adonoi said to Moses, Go to Pharaoh.** But Everett Fox, in his translation, wrote, **Adonoi said to Moshe, Come to Pharaoh!**

So, is it Go, or is it Come? **when is a going also a coming?** In today's reading we go through the last three plagues — horrors building on each other, each one causing more suffering than the next. Pharaoh waffles. He says Go and then doesn't mean it. Any family who started packing their bags to leave was called to come back. Go and come.

It's all a matter of perspective – one what side of the experience you stand when you articulate the word.

When we moved to Africa, it seemed to our friends and relatives that we were going. But for our family, we were definitely coming to a new country and to the new adventures we believed it would hold for us. Years earlier my father walked me down the aisle as part of my wedding ceremony, ceremoniously making the transition of going forth from my family of origin to a « coming to » a new family, one that consisted at its center of my husband and myself.

So when is a going also a coming? When is it both?

FIRST QUESTION:

Why do you think the word Bo has both meanings? I mean, another word that was more uni-directional could have been chosen for this parasha, but it wasn't. The Hebrew language evolved over decades – from Biblical Hebrew to modern Hebrew. Yet, why do we retain the same word with these two seemingly opposite meanings? Go to Pharaoh Come to Pharaoh. What is this telling us?

SECOND QUESTION:

When in your life have you experienced both a going and a coming at the same time or around the same event? This is a matter of perspective, depending on your understanding of the experience. Metaphorically speaking, do you look to the left or to the right as you stand in the middle of the river? Was your experience more of going or a coming at that time? And how has it changed looking back at the experience, was it more of a going or a coming as you think about it now?

In your life, when is a going also a coming? You can look back with this question and also to the future. Are we going or coming to the next chapter of our lives or whenever that is. What difference does it make if you call it a going or a coming? When is Go and Come the same thing, and when is it different?

Appendix:

1. Facilitators explain the instructions (*3 minutes*), Steps 3-6 only. (If there is a facilitator in each Break-Out room -- which is preferable -- they can guide participants in the process, while also participating. If not, place the instructions in the Chat and tell each group to identify someone to serve as the facilitator.). Ask if there are any questions.

2. Divide Participants randomly into Break-Out rooms of 6-8 persons each (including a facilitator, if available).
3. In each Break-Out room (*7 minutes with a 3 minute and 1 minute warning*), ask everyone to quietly write down 7 words that explains how they describe respect or how they show respect to others.
4. Then the facilitator asks – still in the break-out room -- How many words do you think that everyone in this group has in common?
5. One volunteer says her/his 7 words. The facilitator asks, who has none of these words? One? Two? Three?
6. Ask the person who has the least number of common words to say what the common words are. Then ask others, does everyone have these words? If the words are not on EVERYBODY's list, then the word is not universally common and does not count. Bring only the common words (that are common to everyone in the break-out room) back to the large group
7. MAIN ROOM (*10 minutes*): Ask: How many words did each group have in common? Then discuss:
 - What did you observe in this activity?
 - Did anything surprise you?
 - (*Optional*) How do you think members of the police or military might have described RESPECT? Or youth in a traditional village with strong community elders?
 - Why do you think that RESPECT means so many different things to different people?
 - What will you take forward from this activity?