

I'm going to pose the discussion questions first, which David Goldston recently did, which I felt was a helpful way to focus my thinking as I listened to his drash. So I'm going to do the same, and I will repeat them at the end of my overview, as well.

Discussion Questions

1. Moses insisted that he did not know what would be required by the Israelites to sustain them when they became free and entered the wilderness. How does this idea challenge our desire for certainty and control in our own spiritual or political lives?
2. Parashat Bo emphasizes persistence—returning again and again to Pharaoh. What does persistence look like in our current moment, and where might we be tempted to stop too soon?

Now for my commentary:

The word *Bo* itself is deceptively simple. It can mean either “*go*” or “*come*.” And in this Torah portion, we witness exactly that tension. There are those who must go out of Egypt, and those who must come toward something new. Both movements require courage. Both require faith. And both are essential to the building of a people.

Parashat Bo brings us to a turning point in the Exodus story. It recounts the final plagues and the institution of Passover—both as they occurred then, and as they are to be remembered for all generations. The long exile is ending. The Israelites begin their journey to freedom. But the Torah does not present redemption as sudden or simple. It unfolds through repetition, persistence, and moral pressure applied again and again.

Last week, in Parashat Va'era, we encountered the first seven plagues. This week, the final four. And once again we hear the refrain that has echoed through Jewish history: “*Let my people go*.” It is not said once, or twice. It is repeated relentlessly. The Torah insists we hear it again and again, because freedom is never granted the first time it is requested.

Together, these two parshiot function as a kind of Genesis of Jewish peoplehood. In Egypt, we were enslaved. Again and again in our history, that story has repeated itself. Tyrants have risen. Pharaohs have changed names and faces. Again and again, we have been deprived of our humanity, our freedom, and sometimes our lives.

But that is not the whole story.

Again and again, we have stood up. Again and again, we have resisted. Again and again, we have refused to accept oppression as inevitable.

That is why Moses and Aaron are such essential figures in this parsha. They do not go before Pharaoh once or twice. They return again and again. They endure rejection. They face mockery and threats. Yet they persist. They do not give up. And through their persistence, they prevail.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld offers a powerful insight into this dynamic. Each time Pharaoh makes a concession, Moses raises the stakes. When Pharaoh agrees to let only the adult men go to worship, Moses insists the children must come too. When Pharaoh allows the people to go, Moses demands that all their animals accompany them as well.

Pharaoh sees this as stubbornness. But Moses explains: *"We do not know how we will serve God until we arrive there."* (Exodus 10:26)

Rabbi Strassfeld points out that this verse describes something revolutionary. Slaves do not choose. Slaves are told where to go, what to bring, and what to do. Ambiguity is not allowed. Freedom, by contrast, requires uncertainty. Moses says: we cannot know in advance what will be required of us. We will discover it only when we arrive. And nevertheless, we must prepare for what we don't know.

This is not just a political transformation—it is a spiritual one. The journey into freedom is a journey into the unknown. And that truth remains with us. We make plans. We seek certainty. We try to secure the future. But like the Israelites stepping into the wilderness, we do not fully know what will be asked of us until we arrive.

And still—we go.

This brings us to our own moment. *L'havdil*, there are unmistakable parallels today. One protest is not enough. One letter is not enough. One election cycle is not enough. Moses teaches us that liberation demands persistence. Showing up once is symbolic. Showing up again and again is transformational. And we must try and prepare, even for what we don't know.

We American Jews live at an unprecedented moment in history. Compared to earlier generations, we live with extraordinary safety and privilege. Antisemitism exists—and we must never excuse it—but our suffering is not the most acute in this moment. Other communities face harsher realities. New tyrants arise. New Pharaohs harden their hearts.

And once again, the cry *"Let my people go"* must be heard—not only for ourselves, but for others. For those unjustly detained. For non-criminal detainees. For fellow Americans. For fellow human beings.

Many of us protest. Many of us write letters. Many of us show up at demonstrations, knock on doors, campaign, vote, and organize. Parashat Bo reminds us that this work is not optional—and it is not finished after the first attempt. Redemption requires endurance. It is the modern-day experience of "again and again."

Our service to God, to Jewish values, and to freedom itself is an act of defiance against tyranny. The Exodus story teaches us that resistance is holy. Persistence is sacred. Memory requires action.

Also, the Torah does not promise that the road will be clear. It promises only that we must walk it. *Bo*—come. *Bo*—go. Step forward, even when the destination is unclear. Because freedom is not reached in a single moment, but built through courage, again and again.

Discussion Questions

3. Moses insists that he does not know what will be required until the people arrive in the wilderness. How does this idea challenge our desire for certainty and control in our own spiritual or political lives?
4. Parashat Bo emphasizes persistence—returning again and again to Pharaoh. What does persistence look like in our current moment, and where might we be tempted to stop too soon?