



### LAST STEPS TO REDEMPTION

**A**T LAST THE JEWS WERE READY TO LEAVE EGYPT. NINE PLAGUES HAD TAKEN place, and just one, the smiting of the Firstborn, was yet to come. Then the great moment of the Exodus would arrive.

But the Sedra<sup>1</sup> tells us that there were two last instructions before they left. One was to roast the Pesach lamb, and eat it in a family group. The other was that all males had to undergo circumcision. G-d's instructions to Moses made clear that anyone uncircumcised would be forbidden to eat from the Pesach lamb<sup>2</sup>.

One of the reasons for these Commandments was to give the Jewish people the spiritual merit (*zechut*) that would enable them to leave Egypt. The merit was achieved by the fact of obeying G-d's commands, each of which created a bond with the Divine.

The Sages tell us that at that time of slavery and exile the Jewish people were at a very low ebb spiritually. More than two centuries among the depraved Egyptians had taken effect. True, the time of redemption had come. G-d had promised Abraham that eventually his children would go free. Yet it was still necessary for the Jewish people to make some step forward themselves. They needed the spiritual merit of G-d's Commandments in order for the redemption to take place. Hence they were given the command of the Paschal lamb and circumcision.

Our Sages teach us always to ask questions. So we can ask: why particularly these two Commands? An explanation is as follows. There are two aspects to service of G-d: withdrawal from negative things,

which are against G-d's Will, and dedication to G-d through positive actions. The effect of the Pesach lamb was to withdraw the people from the negativity of their Egyptian environment. Before the redemption the Jews were sunk in idol worship, like their neighbours. The lamb was one of the main idols of Egypt. By taking the lamb as a sacrifice for G-d they showed their rejection of idolatry.

This was even more striking because they took the lambs in full view of the Egyptians, and then they roasted them. The scent of roast lamb wafting through the Egyptian streets was a clear public statement that the Jewish people withdrew from idolatry. Through this action they gained the merit needed for redemption, in terms of withdrawal from the negative.

The second Command, circumcision, was to provide merit in the positive dimension. Circumcision is an act expressing positive dedication to G-d, linking each male to the special Divine Covenant (Brit) with G-d which distinguishes the Jew. The Sages tell us that a Jewish woman is considered circumcised from birth. But we can see her as making the step towards G-d by giving her young baby to the Mohel to be circumcised at eight days old. For the Jews leaving Egypt, as sometimes today for men and boys in or from the former Soviet Union, the step of circumcision is made as an adult and with full consciousness of what one is doing.

Thus the Jewish people gained the merit needed in order to be redeemed, in both dimensions: withdrawal from the negative and dedication through the positive. These two modes are the basis of the 248 positive and 365 negative Commandments of the Torah, 613 in all.

Today too is an epoch when we seek to help every Jew connect with his or her heritage, through any and every Mitzva: Tefilin, Shabbat candles, Mezuzah, kashrut, for example. Our plea to G-d is that through these Commandments we should gain the merit required for *our* redemption, which will bring peace and spiritual unity to the entire world<sup>3</sup>.

1. Exodus 10:1-13:16. 2. The same rule applied in Temple times: an uncircumcised man could not eat the Pesach lamb at the Seder. 3. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 16, 114-121.

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### SEDRA BO

#### **THE NEW MONTH**

Mr. Stern looked up and down the rows of boys sitting in front of him. He shuffled his papers, waited for complete silence and then started his lesson.

"Boys," he said. "Who knows what this week's Torah portion is called?"

A few boys raised their hands.

"Yes Sammy?"

"Bo."

"Good!" Mr. Stern smiled at him. "And now can you tell me something special about this portion? Please each of you write something about it on your individual whiteboard, and hold it up for me to see."

For a few moments some boys were writing with felt-tips, while others pretended to do so. Some of them held up their whiteboards, and Mr Stern asked them to read them aloud.

"The last three plagues," said David. "True, and the Gematria, numerical value, of *Bo*, spelled Beit and Alef, is three" said Mr Stern.

"The Jews left Egypt," Zack said. "Yes, and what helps us remember that from generation to generation?"

“Pesach and the Seder nights” said Benjy.

“And where are the laws for that written?”

“In the Torah”. “Yes, but where? In which Torah portion?”

“In this one!” said David.

“Good! What other law is in the Sedra for something we do every month?”

The boys thought hard. Various suggestions were made. Then Mr Stern drew a thin crescent moon on the big interactive whiteboard. Everyone looked blank. Then he wrote ‘Hallel’ in Hebrew and English. Boys looked at each other. “I know, the laws of the New Moon!” shouted David.

“Yes,” said Mr Stern. It’s the first commandment in the Torah given specifically to the entire Jewish people. Rosh Chodesh, the head of the month, like Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year. G-d wanted the Jews to mark the beginning of the month of Nisan, when they went free from Egypt, and after that, of every month of the year.”

“On Rosh Chodesh we say Hallel and there’s an extra bit in Grace after Meals,” said Benjy.

“Yes, and in the Amidah prayer. And guess what?” Mr. Stern added. His eyes twinkled. “Do you know what the date is today?” “The 21st of January,” Zack said automatically.

“The Jewish date,” Mr. Stern reminded him. They all looked at a corner of the board where it was written. “The 1st of Shevat!”

“That’s right!” Mr. Stern smiled back at him. “Today is the 1st of Shevat which means that it’s Rosh Chodesh. Today in the Synagogue they say Hallel!”

“And we remember getting this law in Egypt, thousands of years ago...” said Benjy with a smile.

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