

**SIDRA OF THE WEEK : גא**

1. Despite the Plagues that HaShem brought upon the Egyptians for defying His command to them to let us go free, the Egyptian people, with Par'oh their king at their head, continue to refuse to obey the command of HaShem. After each of the first five Plagues, Par'oh had hardened his heart and stayed obstinately disobedient, and he had taken the punishment for his disobedience. But after the first five Plagues, Par'oh would not have been able to persist in his refusal were it not for the extra strength that HaShem gave him so that he should be able to exercise his freedom of choice. Only with this special strength could Par'oh and the Egyptian people continue to choose to defy the command of HaShem.
2. Now HaShem tells Mosheh to go again to Par'oh to warn him of the Eighth Plague. HaShem tells Mosheh that He has hardened the heart of Par'oh and the heart of his servants so that they shall be an object-lesson of the Almightyness of HaShem to us, the Jewish People, and indeed to the whole world, for all time. HaShem has chosen to demonstrate His mastery over the world by means of the systematic Ten Plagues of Egypt, and now Mosheh is commanded to warn Par'oh of the Plague of Locusts which, continuing the system of the Plagues, is to demonstrate HaShem's mastery over all air-borne life forms. When Par'oh still refuses to let us go unconditionally, HaShem brings the Locusts and they devastate the whole land of Egypt, devouring all the vegetation that was spared from the previous Plague of Fiery Hail.
3. Par'oh hurries to call Mosheh and Aharon and he begs them once again, as he did with the previous Plagues, to remove this Plague, too. Immediately after they prayed to HaShem, He causes the wind to reverse and the numberless swarm is blown into the sea — not even one locust remained in the whole land of Egypt. But then, with the extra strength from HaShem, Par'oh again chooses to withhold his permission for us to leave his country.
4. After three weeks' respite, without any warning to Par'oh, HaShem tells Mosheh and Aharon to bring the Ninth Plague — Darkness. This Plague is to demonstrate HaShem's mastery over the natural order of day and night and will show that HaShem is Master not only over the phenomena of the world of nature and its laws as manifested on a local scale — that lesson had already been taught — but indeed that He is Master over these laws of nature as they operate globally. For the order of day and night is the example *par excellence* of the permanence and immutability of the laws of nature — even the idolaters knew that their gods could not change the order of day and night. Thus, this Plague demonstrated HaShem's global Almightyness for as the order of day and night is global and beyond the borders of Egypt and is under the control and mastery of HaShem

so too everything anywhere in the whole realm of all of nature is likewise subject to HaShem's Will and under His control. Although this Plague was to teach that the unlimited mastery of HaShem extends even beyond the borders of Egypt, nevertheless its effect was limited to Egypt only (and indeed only to the Egyptians there for it did not effect the dwellings of the Hebrews — such is the precision of HaShem's mastery and control!) because it was the Egyptian people specifically who were being taught these lessons as it was the Egyptians who had dared to defy HaShem's word. And so, for three days and nights there is a thick, palpable darkness, during which the Egyptians and the other non-Hebrews could not move from their places and were terrified, even to death. Only the People of Israel had light in their dwelling-places.

5. At the end of the days of Darkness, Par'oh calls for Mosheh and he gives his permission for the Hebrews to go — but on condition: they must leave behind their possessions. When Mosheh tells Par'oh that we will not go without all our possessions (for the Jewish People are to utilize all that we have in the service of HaShem) Par'oh threatens Mosheh that he will have him killed if he comes before him again — the empty threat of a scared man who has lost the struggle of ideas. Mosheh tells Par'oh that he has indeed spoken well. From now on, Par'oh will come to Mosheh.
6. Before Mosheh departs from Par'oh, however, HaShem tells him to inform him of the Tenth Plague. This Plague, the Killing of the non-Hebrew Firstborns, was in fact foretold to Par'oh before all the others. This Plague will demonstrate HaShem's mastery over all life and death, and how He makes a distinction between all humankind and the Hebrew People (HaShem's "firstborn son," that is, the first People to acknowledge HaShem as the One and Only True G-d of All and, as it were, His favourite children). While he is in front of Par'oh, HaShem tells Mosheh to later instruct the Hebrews to ask the Egyptian people for their valuable possessions, for not only will we leave Egypt with all our own belongings, but we will take with us all the wealth of Egypt, too. With all this, Par'oh still refuses to give his permission for us to leave, for HaShem has strengthened his heart, and Mosheh and Aharon depart from his presence for the last time.
7. After Mosheh and Aharon had left the palace of Par'oh and were back again amongst their people, HaShem then commanded Mosheh and Aharon, the most senior Elders of the People, concerning the institution of Rosh Chodesh, that is, the Sanctification by the Beis Din of each new month following the testimony of witnesses who see the new moon.
8. *The fact that this is the first Mitzvah commanded to us as the People of HaShem gives us some indication of the importance that the Torah attaches to the lessons it teaches. Furthermore, the fact that this Mitzvah was commanded at this point in our history is even more noteworthy when we consider how it is also so bound up with the Laws of the celebration of Pessach, the Yom Tov which commemorates our becoming the People of HaShem, and also with the laws of the Korban Pessach itself. The Torah, it seems, views these two Mitzvos as twin foundation stones of our Nationhood, of such importance that they were commanded to us even before we left Egypt — indeed, even before Par'oh the*

*king of Egypt had given his permission that we should leave. It is as if our becoming the Chosen Nation of HaShem is conditional on our proper observance of these Mitzvos. Why this should be so becomes clearer to us when we study these special Mitzvos:*

9. *When HaShem commanded this Law of Rosh Chodesh, He told Mosheh our Teacher: "When you see the moon at its stage of renewal like now, then shall you consecrate your new month." In the same way as I, HaShem, created the sun and the moon, the sun to give heat and light for the earth and the moon to reflect that light upon the earth that there should be light even in darkness, and in the same way that the moon that I created is not constant in its powers of reflection but waxes and wanes — even seeming to disappear completely but then reappearing and growing in its reflection of the light of the sun — so too shall you take the new moon as your model. For just as the moon shines upon the earth from the otherwise dark sky, so shall you, My People, likewise reflect My Light upon the whole world. But there is this difference: whereas the moon's renewal is an unceasing and natural occurrence, for you it shall signal the beginning of your months only when you, My People, through your Torah leaders and at their direction, shall yourselves choose to fix the beginning of each new month. Through this, it is you, My People, who themselves shall fix also the dates of the Yommim Tovim, those holy days which afford an opportunity for you to rejuvenate your spirit and renew your closeness to Me (and consequently, through the calendar which is fixed by your Torah leaders, your national year is also regulated by your Torah leaders). Thus, just as the moon, bound by My Laws of Nature, renews itself, so too are you to rejuvenate yourselves — but of your own free choice and volition. And you, My People, are to be the model for all mankind: taking your lesson from the moon, you are to cast your light upon the nations that are in darkness, to proclaim everywhere the lesson of spiritual rejuvenation: that I, HaShem, have given Man the possibility of always being able to renew himself and that his moral fate, no less than his physical, is in his own hands. As you stand at the threshold of deliverance and redemption from bondage and darkness, ready to be transformed from serfdom to freedom and noble nationhood, know that this is to be your mission as My Chosen People.*
10. Together with this Mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, the Children of Israel are instructed to take for themselves the Paschal Lamb, one to each household group. We are told that two weeks later we are to slaughter the lamb in the evening of the fourteenth of Nissan (the first month of the Hebrew calendar) and roast the lamb whole prior to eating it. Some of its blood is to be applied to the doorposts and the lintel of the room in which each family group will celebrate the Pessach in Egypt, and no bone of the Korban Pessach is to be broken and no meat may be left over till the morning.
11. In addition, we are told that each year, on the anniversary of our Redemption from Egypt, we are to celebrate the Pessach in a similar way to this first Pessach, eating it with Matzo and Morrор as we did in Egypt. Mosheh our Teacher tells us all the laws of Pessach, the first of the three Pilgrimage Festivals, and how when we come into the Promised Land,

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we are to go up to the Mikdash of HaShem and there we are to benefit from the specialness of being in the Presence of HaShem, that our lives shall be sanctified, too. Obeying the instructions of HaShem given to us through Mosheh our Teacher, we anxiously awaited the great events that were about to happen, and at the appointed time, confined to our dwelling-places, as Mosheh had told us, we celebrate the Pessach.

12. Then, at the dot of midnight of the 14th/15th of Nissan, in the year 2448 after Creation, every firstborn in the land of Egypt, man and beast not of the Hebrews, is struck dead by HaShem Himself. Par'oh, himself a firstborn who is specially spared by HaShem, comes out of his palace frantically looking for Mosheh and Aharon. He begs them to leave Egypt straightaway, they, and all the Children of Israel, with all their possessions.
13. And so, the next morning, after altogether four hundred and thirty years (counting from the Covenant of the Pieces and exactly four hundred years from the birth of Yitzchok) we left Egypt — a free People. Placing our trust completely in HaShem, we didn't even take any special provisions for the journey other than the remainder of the Matzo-dough from our last meal in Egypt. With us, there came up from Egypt a great mixed multitude of other non-Hebrew people, who joined themselves to us and were accepted by Mosheh.
14. The Sidra continues with HaShem's command to us concerning the Mitzvah of Pidyon HaBen, the Redemption of the Firstborn Son, and Pidyon B'chor, the Redemption of the Firstborn Animals. Every firstborn son of the Children of Israel is to be redeemed from the Kohen, and every firstborn of our sheep and cattle is to be given to the Kohen. Also, every firstborn donkey (symbolically the beast of burden and the bearer of man's material goods) is to be exchanged for a lamb, and this lamb is likewise to be given to the Kohen.
15. Some of the Laws of the Korban Pessach are given in this week's Sidra. We are commanded concerning the Yom Tov of Pessach, which is to be observed by the Jewish People each year, with the Seder Night, and with the Korban Pessach, and how all Chometz is banned for the duration of the Yom Tov.
16. The Sidra ends with the Mitzvah of Tefillin, the two-fold sign of glory that the Jewish People wear on their head and arm: On the head, to remember and be ever mindful of the wonders that HaShem did for us when He took us out from Egypt to be to Him His special People, and to dedicate our minds to HaShem; and on the left arm, near to the heart, that we should remember "the mighty arm" (that is, the power) of HaShem when He took us out from Egypt, the Land of our slavery, and that we should dedicate ourselves, through our actions (symbolized by the arm and hand, the agents of action) to the Service of HaShem.

**For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra נב please go to HAFTORAHS.**