

Bo 5768 — Shifting Paradigms

For my entire sophomore year of college, I took an Astronomy course. While this was certainly an introductory class, it wasn't the celestial equivalent of "Rocks for Jocks," or "Physics for Poets." It was essentially an intro level astrophysics class. And I loved it. My astronomy class taught me that I really did understand physics. In our lab meetings, I learned how to use a telescope, and a Geiger counter. I found myself looking up at the sky far more frequently than I had in the past, trying to see constellations and planets amid the ubiquitous airplanes constantly flying around New York City. What I loved most about this class, however, was how learning about the makeup and origins of the universe helped me find meaning in seeking out my own place in it. One of the more perplexing things we learned in Astronomy was that neutrinos, these strange particles

that could be found in the solar wind, had no mass. They existed, but the only way to access them was in a supercollider. And even then, you'd be lucky to catch one whizzing by—having no mass makes something hard to catch. Imagine my surprise that summer when I read in the paper that neutrinos had been discovered actually to have mass. Even more surprising was the title of the article that revealed this in the New York Times: **“Elusive Galactic Particle Found to Have Mass: Universe May Never Be the Same.”** My immediate response to this headline was to look at it cross-eyed and say, “What?! The universe has always been the same—we just know different stuff about it now.” What the headline was really trying to convey was that our perception of the universe—whether based on a year of introductory Astronomy or decades of high-level research—had changed. We had experienced a paradigm shift.

The term paradigm shift actually came to us from the world of scientific revolution, as in the paradigm shift from the Ptolemaic cosmology with the earth at the center of the universe, to the Copernican cosmology, which puts the sun at the center. Over time, it has come to be used in describing not only the change from one governing scientific theory to another, but a change in any kind of worldview—religious, political, emotional or other. We hear these kinds of uses of “paradigm shift” all the time—a quick Google search yielded 1,760,000 entries for the term. Paradigm shifts start with one event—like the discovery of neutrinos’ inherent mass—that eventually brings down the old system and leads to the construction of a newer worldview, one that is radically different from the one that came before it.

In our parasha this week, Parashat Bo, the Israelites experience the beginning of their own paradigm shift. Having been slaves for hundreds of years, they are about to become free people. Having lived for so long without the sense that God has heard their cries and their suffering, they are about to see the proof of God's dedication to their cause. Having endured nine plagues against the Egyptians, none of which convinced Pharaoh to let them go, they are about to witness a final plague, which will, in its terribleness, finally secure them their freedom. All told, this is a big change.

We often speak of the transition from slavery to freedom as though it were a natural, easy change to make. We recall it around our *seder* tables; it has become a constant fixture in our liturgy and in our religious history. But it required a true paradigm shift: a massive reworking of a worldview in which

God is absent, Pharaoh is the ultimate ruler, and backbreaking, forced labor is the norm, into a worldview in which God is a benevolent rescuer, deserving of praise and worship, and freedom is a reality. Such a change in worldview couldn't possibly happen overnight—even though the Israelites' journey from slavery to freedom did.

Fortunately, God was attuned to this problem.

Immediately before the tenth plague, the catalyst for B'nei Yisrael's freedom, we read of the laws for Pesah—the *matzot*, the paschal sacrifice, the proper attitude and mode of observance.

The first mitzvah in this section of instructions, at the beginning of chapter 12 of *Shemot*, is different. We read: “Adonai said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים [hahodesh ha-zeh lakhem rosh hodashim]—This month shall mark

rosh hodashim], “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months,” reframing the words of the Torah as: “From this point forward, the months will be yours, to do with as you please. However, during the days of enslavement, your days were not yours, but were rather to do the work of others at their will. Therefore, this shall be the first of the months of the year for you, for in this month, your autonomous reality began.” In Sforno’s rendering, the Torah is reminding B’nei Yisrael that their lives have been irrevocably changed, and that marking their months—on their own, not at the instruction of any overseeing body—is the first step to learning how to live in a way that is consonant with their new situation. Freedom was going to happen to them, whether or not they were ready for it. This mitzvah set the paradigm shift in motion, encouraging them to see themselves as the free people they were about to become.

In order to experience their newfound freedom, B'nei Yisrael had to shift their worldview, and begin to see themselves as truly autonomous. By exercising their power to mark their months, they would eventually become fully integrated free people. The first step toward real freedom is making meaning in time.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his work *The Sabbath*, notes that this is not the only place in our tradition where time is, as it were, of the essence. He says: "Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms of time, as *architecture of time*. Most of its observances—the Sabbath, the New Moon, the festivals, the Sabbatical and the Jubilee year—depend on a certain hour of the day or season of the year." (*The Sabbath*, 8) Our tradition's essential paradigm—stemming as we

have seen from this first mitzvah in our parasha—is one of sacred moments that only we have the power to mark.

This idea of time as the symbol of our autonomy does not always fit with our experience of time. We're always running out of time, and trying desperately to get things done on time. If I don't get to sleep, or to my next meeting on time, there may be dire consequences. Rather than us construing our time, it's in control of us. In many ways, we are slaves to time.

Our parasha teaches us that this doesn't have to be the case. Learning to take control of our own time is an internal process, one that didn't happen automatically to our ancestors when they were freed from slavery, and one that equally requires our engagement and attention. For B'nei Yisrael, their paradigm shift began with learning how to make meaning in

time. I'd like to invite us all to try out our own little paradigm shift, following their example. We can carve out some sacred time for our families, for our friends, and for ourselves. And, following the words of Rabbi Heschel, we can also mark the sacred moments of our tradition—Shabbat, holidays, Rosh Hodesh.

החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים [*hahodesh ha-zeh lakhem rosh*
hodashim]—This month in our Parasha, we began learning how to be a free people. In this different kind of New Year, let us follow that example and continue to seek out opportunities to bring meaning to our own time—with our community, with our families, and with ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.