

# Let My People Go — A Hoax or a Mission?

## A D'var Torah on *Parashat Bo* (Ex. 10:1 – 13:16)

By Alan I. Friedman

*“Vayomer Adonai el-Moshe bo el-Par’oh....”*  
*“And God said to Moses, ‘come [with me] to Pharaoh....’”*

*Parashat Bo* derives its name from the opening line, *“Vayomer Adonai el-Moshe bo el-Par’oh....,”* which is usually translated as, “And God said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh....’” But *bo* does not mean *go*; it means *come*.

So what is this passage saying? To understand, remember that Moses was a reluctant leader. When God “offered” him the assignment of liberating his people and leading them into the Promised Land, Moses didn’t want to accept the awesome responsibility. “Why me, God?” he argued. “Surely there are more capable people.” But God would not be dissuaded.

So when God tells Moses, “Bo el-Par’oh,” he is encouraging Moses and offering reassurance: “Come. Come with me to see Pharaoh. You will not be alone. I will be with you.”

As this parasha begins, seven plagues have already befallen Egypt. But God has hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and the last three plagues — locusts, darkness, and slaying of the first-born — are about to descend on Egypt.

The Exodus story is interrupted in the middle of the last plague to tell of the preparations for deliverance. When the story resumes and Pharaoh finally permits the Israelites to leave, they — all 600,000 of them, plus a mixed multitude — begin the journey out of Egypt. After 430 years in this foreign land, the Israelites leave in haste, without sufficient time to let their dough rise for baking bread. They do, however, find time to “borrow” gold and silver objects from their Egyptian neighbors.<sup>1</sup> This is the same gold that, later in the wilderness, the Israelites will melt and form into an idol in the shape of a calf.

Let’s take a look at some of the Torah text<sup>2</sup> and examine God’s instructions to Moses and Moses’ interactions with Pharaoh. Shortly after God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and chose Moses to free the Israelites

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word for “borrow” is *sha-al* (שאל). But *sha-al* also means to “ask” or “demand.” The latter meanings are undoubtedly more accurate, but since there was no intent to return the objects, “plunder” would probably be most descriptive. Lest the reader conclude that the Israelites were stealing, however, the Torah tells us that “Adonai disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people” — implying that the Egyptians were so happy to be ridding themselves of those plague-bringing Israelites, that they willingly gave of their precious jewelry and ornaments.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these excerpts occur prior to *Parashat Bo*.

from Pharaoh's yoke, God told him, "...say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says Adonai: Israel is My first-born son ... Let My son go that he may worship Me.'"<sup>3</sup>

Once Moses reaches Egypt, the demands that he makes of Pharaoh have a striking similarity to God's original instruction.<sup>4</sup> Five times, speaking for God, he demands, "Let My people go that they may worship Me."<sup>5</sup> At other times, again at God's direction, Moses' elaborates: "Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to Adonai our God."<sup>6</sup> "Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness."<sup>7</sup> "Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness."<sup>8</sup> And "We must go a distance of three days into the wilderness and sacrifice to Adonai our God as He may command us."<sup>9</sup>

This is amazing! While we've all been taught that "let My people go" is a plea for freedom, not even once does Moses ask Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery. Not even once does he hint at their underlying desire to return to the Promised Land. In fact, each demand that Moses makes is for freedom of religion, not for freedom from slavery. Moses never tells Pharaoh the whole truth — that he intends to lead the Israelites out of slavery into the Promised Land!

Is "let My people go" a hoax or a mission? Rashbam<sup>10</sup> argues in favor of a hoax. As preposterous as this may sound, he claims that God had Moses "fool" Pharaoh by requesting a brief, three-day journey into the wilderness even though they had no intention of returning. Rashbam supports his assertion by noting that at every stage of Moses' negotiations with Pharaoh, Moses consistently rejects any concession or compromise, insisting that everyone must go; Moses never even suggests that they plan to leave for good. And no matter how resolutely Pharaoh maintains his position, he never states a suspicion that the Israelites might be planning to leave and not come back.<sup>11</sup>

It takes ten plagues to finally convince Pharaoh that the suffering of the Egyptians at the hands of Adonai and Moses, God's servant, was caused by the inability of the Israelites to worship their God. But even after the tenth plague, when Pharaoh allows the Israelites to leave, it is only to let them

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 4:22-23

<sup>4</sup> Only once, in Exodus 6:11, does God state no reason for demanding the release of the Israelites: "Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land."

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 7:25-26, 8:16, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 3:18

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 5:1

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 7:16

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 8:23

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, 1085-1174

<sup>11</sup> Commentary by Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, 2002

worship in the wilderness. So sure is Pharaoh that the Israelites are going on a religious excursion that he even asks Moses to pray for him.<sup>12</sup>

Pharaoh never grants the Israelites freedom from slavery, or permission to emigrate. Clearly, Pharaoh's permission is only for the Israelites to worship in the wilderness. And, why not? That's all Moses ever asked for.<sup>13</sup>

Rashbam's final argument for his interpretation comes from *Parashat B'shalach*. Totally astonished at reports that the Israelites had fled, Pharaoh and his chariots give chase to recapture them. Pharaoh's reaction makes sense only if Pharaoh had *not* granted the Israelites total freedom. Otherwise, why would he be shocked to hear that the people had "run away"?<sup>14</sup>

Rashbam's interpretation of this entire scenario is very creative. He claims that God instructs Moses to deceive Pharaoh by requesting permission to worship in the desert. Considering that Moses has already shared his true intentions with the Israelites,<sup>15</sup> Rashbam makes a cogent argument that the request for a three-day journey was part of a "master plan" to sneak the Israelites out of Egypt.

On the other hand, Rashbam says that Moses did not actually lie. Instead, Rashbam refers to this trickery as *derech chochma*, a wise scheme. After all, he says, the Israelites *did* leave for a three day trip; they just never returned.

Other commentators have implied that Moses did lie but that the "sin" is excused in accordance with the halachic provision allowing one to lie for the sake of peace.<sup>16,17</sup> If Moses did speak dishonestly, the argument goes, the circumstances allowed him to do so.

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<sup>12</sup> Exodus 12:32: "May you bring a blessing upon me also."

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 6:6-8: "Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am Adonai ... You shall know that ... I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession...."

<sup>16</sup> Rashi explains that it is permissible to deviate somewhat from the facts in order to avoid harming relationships.

<sup>17</sup> Although it is permissible to deviate from factual integrity for the sake of peace, Rabbi Daniel Travis says that one should not deviate from factual integrity just to prevent possible future disputes. ("For the Sake of Peace," Torah.org website, 2001)