

Mental Health Shabbat
Parashat Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:16)



Parashat Bo opens with the final three of the Ten Plagues brought upon the Egyptians. First, locusts consume all crops and vegetation, then darkness takes over the land, and finally the plagues end with the killing of all first-born Egyptians. Pharaoh has a change of heart and begs the Jewish people to leave the land immediately. The people are given their first commandment from G-d—to establish a monthly calendar based on the moon's cycle. In addition, the Jewish people are instructed to bring a Passover offering before the Exodus out of Egypt.

The darkness that befell Egypt was described as so heavy and thick that one could not move. The physical darkness was enough to plunge anyone into deep despair. However, there was also a spiritual darkness that plagued the Egyptians, where there was a lack of direction, a loss of hope. This plague of darkness can mirror the experience of mental illness, of depression, of isolation. It can feel constricting both mentally and physically. Hopelessness and social isolation can consume a person so deeply, where they feel incapable of moving forward. This is especially true during the dark, cold, isolating months of the winter. It is also said when one is oblivious to the needs of others, it is seen as a type of darkness. But if one uses their own lived experience of darkness to have empathy for others, this turns the darkness into light.

The enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt could also be described as a period of darkness. Throughout those 210 years in Egypt, they were stuck. They could not leave the land and they were forced to do as the Egyptians decreed. But they stuck together, giving each other the hope that they would one day be free. Ultimately, that hope, that spark of light, is what kept them going through the darkest times. When we turn to each other and provide that hope, we may be able to bring a little light into the darkness.