

What does it mean to “Seek First the Kingdom of Heaven?”

In this week’s reading from *Parashat Bo* (*Shemot / Exodus 10:1-13:16*), we learn about the last plagues that God brought upon Egypt and causes Pharaoh to drive the Children of Israel out of Egypt. The Lord tells Moshe, -אָתָּה לִבּוֹ וְאֶת- א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-לִבּוֹ וְאֶת- לִבְ עַבְדָּיו לְמַעַן שְׂתִי אֶתְּתִי אֵלָה בְּקִרְבּוֹ: 10:1 “... ‘*Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them.*” (NASB) The Lord’s hardening in part is for the purpose of performing these signs to deliver Israel with a mighty hand. These Scriptures describe to us the final plagues the Lord brought upon Egypt, (i) locust (*10:3-19*), (ii) darkness (*10:22-23*), and (iii) the death of the first born (*10:24-11:10*). It is at this point the Lord’s Passover (*12:1-11*) is established. Studying the Torah from a historical perspective, this point in Israel’s history is the beginning of months, the beginning of the salvation of God, the beginning of a new covenant, and the beginning of a new relationship with the Lord God Almighty because the Lord is bringing the people out of bondage and into a new place, a place of peace, truth, and life. The unique thing about the Passover is its connection to New Beginnings (*of months and of the salvation of God for Israel*). The blood of the lamb is used as a sign upon the door posts such that the angel of death would pass over the house and the first born would not die. The Scriptures tell us that the Lord declares this to be an everlasting statute that it is to be remembered and not forgotten (הִזְכֵּר לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם) (*12:17*).

This week’s reading records a very important time in Israel’s history regarding the mighty deliverance of God. In addition, it is interesting how the Lord works in the hearts of men, of both the righteous and the unrighteous, for His purposes. He speaks to Moshe about Pharaoh, and having hardened his heart saying, “*ki ani hichbadti et libo*” (כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי (אֶת-לִבּוֹ)). What is the significance of this phrase for us today that the Lord states to Moshe regarding the heart of Pharaoh? How is this connected to seeking first the Kingdom of Heaven?

ספר שמות פרק י Shemot / Exodus 10:1-3

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-
פַּרְעֹה כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-לִבּוֹ
וְאֶת-לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי
אֵלֶּה בְּקִרְבָּו: ב וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפָּר
בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן-בְּנֶךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתִּי-
עַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-אֶתְתִּי אֲשֶׁר-
שָׁמַתִּי בָּם וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה:
ג וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל-פַּרְעֹה
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
הָעִבְרָיִם עַד-מָתַי יִמְאַנְתָּ לָעֲנֹת
מִפְּנֵי שְׁלַח עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדְנִי:
10:1 Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to
Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart
and the heart of his servants, that I may
perform these signs of Mine among them,
10:2 and that you may tell in the hearing
of your son, and of your grandson, how
I made a mockery of the Egyptians and
how I performed My signs among them,
that you may know that I am the Lord.’
10:3 Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh
and said to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the
God of the Hebrews, ‘How long will you
refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let
My people go, that they may serve Me.
(NASB)

The word “*Bo*” (בֹּא) is the Hebrew command “*go,*” or “*come,*” and is the first significant word in this week’s Torah portion found in the opening verse *Shemot / Exodus 10:1*. The Lord tells Moshe, א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-לִבּוֹ וְאֶת-לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֵלֶּה בְּקִרְבָּו: 10:1 “... ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them.’” (NASB) The Lord tells Moshe “*ki ani hichbadti et libo*” (כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי) (אֶת-לִבּוֹ) saying “*I have hardened his heart.*” The Scriptures tell us that the Lord’s hardening in part is for the purpose of demonstrating the power and might of God to deliver Israel. It is at this point in the Scriptures that Pharaoh recognizes that both he and his people have sinned before God, but yet the Lord hardens his heart so that he can bring these final plagues against Egypt. The Lord hardening the heart is significant and the rabbis have a lot to say concerning this statement the Lord makes to Moshe. Rashbam states the following concerning these words.

Rashbam on Exodus 10:1, Part 1

כי אני הכבדתי את לבו, *during all the preceding plagues we do not find that G'd had told Moses that it was He Who*

had stiffened Pharaoh's heart. However, since we have reached the stage where Pharaoh himself had said that "G'd is just whereas he and his people are the sinners," (9,27) and still he had reneged and sinned deliberately, a phenomenon which must have seemed incomprehensible to Moses, G'd explains the psychology behind this, i.e. that it was not as hard to understand, as He Himself had to stiffen Pharaoh's resolve causing him to renege. ואת לב עבדיו, as we are told in 9,34.

Rashbam says that the interpretation of these words on the hardening of his heart, God is simply explaining to Moshe what was happening, especially in light of all the plagues and Pharaoh's continued hardened stance against letting the people go. The Lord had hardened his heart purposefully so that He would continue to work miracles to show Himself to be sovereign, powerful, and ruler over all. All of these things are performed for the purpose of the Lord revealing Himself in a new way by His name YHVH. Rashbam has additional comments saying the following.

Ramban on Exodus 7:3, Part 1

לבו כי אני הכבדתי את לבו, during all the preceding plagues we do not find that G'd had told Moses that it was He Who had stiffened Pharaoh's heart. However, since we have reached the stage where Pharaoh himself had said that "G'd is just whereas he and his people are the sinners," (9,27) and still he had reneged and sinned deliberately, a phenomenon which must have seemed incomprehensible to Moses, G'd explains the psychology behind this, i.e. that it was not as hard to understand, as He Himself had to stiffen Pharaoh's resolve causing him to renege. ואת לב עבדיו, as we are told in 9,34. Ramban on Exodus: And I will harden Pharaoh's heart – they said in the Midrash Rabbah (5:6) that [God] revealed to him that [God] would in the future harden [Pharaoh's] heart so that judgment would be done on him for enslaving them with hard labor. And we read more there (13:4) because I made his heart

heavy (Shemot 10:1) – from this verse, said Rabbi Yochanan, the minim say that he had no chance of doing teshuvah. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish answered: ‘let the mouths of the minim be closed, rather He laughs at mockers (Mishlei 3:34), he was warned once, and twice and three times and he did not repent, and He closes the door of teshuvah so to extract [retribution] from him what he sinned. So with the evil Pharaoh, God sent [warnings] to him five times and he did not listen to [God’s] words, God said to him: ‘you stiffened your neck and you made your own heart heavy, behold I am going to add impurity to your impurity.

Rashbam makes the observation that it is at this point even Pharaoh recognizes that he and his people have sinned before God, however the Lord hardens his heart so that the judgment of God would be complete upon Egypt for her sins. As a result of this, Pharaoh had no chance of doing Teshuvah, and the point is that the Lord God offered him five chances to repent but he failed to do so, and so the opportunity to repent ceased with the Lord hardening his heart. This illustrates for us the importance of not “*living in sin*” because of one day there will be no coming back due to the effect of sin upon one’s heart. Sin has the capability of changing the motivations of our heart. The motivation should be for seeking the Kingdom of Heaven, however, sin causes one to draw away from that endeavour.

Other rabbinic commentaries such as Shney Luchot HaBrit on Parashat Bo, Torah Ohr, Part 62 brings out the mystical dimension of *Shemot / Exodus 10:1* saying, למען שייתי אתי אלה בקרבו, “*In order that I can place these My signs in its midst.*” The Lord God performed all these miracles in His capacity as י-ה-ו-ה. Both Shney Luchot and Midrash Rabbah Shemot Parashat 13, Part 3 comment upon *Shemot / Exodus 10:1* saying, כי אני, “*For I have hardened the heart of Pharaoh,*” and the commentary quotes Rabbi Yochanan who says, “*Here the Torah seems to provide an opening for the heretics to say that Pharaoh was not guilty because G’d prevented him from repenting. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish replied that on the contrary we can use this verse to stop such heretics in their tracks. Solomon tells us in Proverbs 3:34 ‘At the scoffers He scoffs, but to the humble He shows grace.’ G’d warns a person up to three times.*

After a person ignores three such warnings and fails to repent, G'd makes such a person's heart unresponsive to thoughts of repentance in order to now pay him his just deserts. This is what happened with the wicked Pharaoh. G'd gave Pharaoh five chances [during the first five plagues no mention is made of G'd hardening the heart of Pharaoh. Ed.] and Pharaoh failed to respond. Then G'd said to him: 'Since you have insisted on being obstinate, and have made your own heart unresponsive, I shall now add more impurity to the impurity you have already heaped upon yourself.' This is the meaning of 10,1: 'I have hardened Pharaoh's heart'” Sforno states that on this phrase (כי אני הכבדתי) that “Pharaoh continued to oppose God's will in spite of the fact that he found it impossible to cope with the plagues, Moses had come to the conclusion that warning Pharaoh of an impending plague was an exercise in futility. This is why G'd had to tell him at this stage that already during the sixth plague (9,12) He had stiffened Pharaoh's heart so that ordinary rules of psychology could no longer be applied to this man. The purpose was to enable G'd to demonstrate more miracles so that maybe some Egyptians would be moved by what they experienced to become penitents. If so, the Israelites in the future would be able to tell their children of the greatness of G'd's miracles. This in turn would convince mankind that G'd loved His creatures and was very patient with them, giving them opportunities to mend their ways. This is why the warning to Pharaoh was in place although it would prove ineffectual.” The point was that logic and reason were not possible for such people who desire sin as opposed to the ways of God. What we find here is that if sin reigns in your life, even being present in the midst of the miracles of God, there is a partial hardening that will affect one's understanding and perception of the truth. Pharaoh did not seek after God's Ways, and this is related to what it means to seek the Kingdom of heaven. Let's next discuss what it means to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven. The rabbis have some to say concerning this according to Midrash Tehillim 84.

Midrash Tehillim 84, Part 3 opens with the Dibur Hamathil (דיבור) (המתחיל) saying, “Blessed are they that dwell in Your house. They will again praise You, and forever (Tehillim / Psalms 84:5).” The homiletic introduction to the midrash states, “Rabbi Joshua son of Levi taught, He who is in the habit of entering houses of prayer and houses of study in the world to come, as is said, Blessed are they that dwell in Your house.” The

Homiletic introduction states something very interesting. The Rabbis say. *“He who is in the habit of entering houses of prayer and houses of study in the world to come, as is said, Blessed are they that dwell in Your house.”* The concept here is that in the world to come, one will be entering into the houses of study and prayer. This is a very important concept because this describes what will be taking place in the World to come (Olam Haba). The significance of this rabbinic statement is found in *Matthew 6:33* when Yeshua said, *6:33 ‘But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (NASB)* Notice how Yeshua links the Kingdom of Heaven to the righteousness of God. What does it mean to seek the *“Kingdom of Heaven?”* In the Apostolic writings, we find the authors use both the *“Kingdom of Heaven”* and the *“Kingdom of God”* interchangeably. What is the difference between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven? Studying the Apostolic Writings, the Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven are referring to the same thing. The phrase *“kingdom of God”* occurs 68 times in 10 different New Testament books, while *“kingdom of heaven”* occurs 32 times and only in the Gospel of Matthew. The book of Matthew appears to have an exclusive use of the phrase. In addition, due to the Jewish nature of his Gospel, some Christian commentators have concluded that Matthew was writing concerning the millennial kingdom while the other New Testament commentators say this is referring to the universal kingdom. However, a closer study of the use of the phrase reveals that this interpretation is in error.

Yeshua speaking to the rich young ruler, uses both phrases *“kingdom of heaven”* and *“kingdom of God”* interchangeably, e.g. *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Matthew 19:23)*. In the very next sentence, Yeshua proclaims, *“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24)*. Yeshua makes no distinction between the two terms but seems to consider them synonymous. In addition, note the parallel accounts of these throughout the gospels, compare *Matthew 11:11-12 with Luke 7:28; Matthew 13:11 with Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10; Matthew 13:24 with Mark 4:26; Matthew 13:31 with Mark 4:30 and Luke 13:18; Matthew 13:33 with Luke 13:20; Matthew 18:3 with Mark 10:14 and Luke 18:16; and Matthew 22:2 with Luke 13:29*. In each instance, Matthew uses the phrase *“kingdom of heaven”* while Mark and Luke use the phrase *“kingdom of*

God.” Clearly, the two phrases refer to the same thing.

Back to the question of what does it mean to “*Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven?*” Asking this question of various persons produces various results. It seems today people have different opinions regarding what it means to seek first the kingdom of heaven. Pentecostals would say we should seek speaking in tongues, or seeking the gift of healing, or one of the other spiritual gifts. But is this really what it means to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven? The person who believes seeking the kingdom of heaven is synonymous to seeking the spiritual gifts is going to be greatly disappointed.

The rabbis comments on the psalm, “*Blessed are they that dwell in Your house. They will again praise You, and forever*” (*Tehillim / Psalms 84:5*). The midrash states, *Rabbi Joshua son of Levi taught, He who is in the habit of entering houses of prayer and houses of study in the world to come, as is said, Blessed are they that dwell in Your house.* The phrase “*world to come,*” or “*age to come,*” are eschatological phrases reflecting the belief that the “*current world*” or “*current age*” is flawed and will be replaced in the future by a better world or age which in many instances is also connected to the Messiah. The Olam HaBa (“*the world to come*”) is an important part of Jewish eschatology, although Judaism concentrates on the importance of HaOlam HaZeh (“*this world*”). The afterlife is known as Olam HaBa, Gan Eden, and Gehinom in the rabbinic literature. The rabbis in the midrash state that in the world to come one will be going from houses of prayer and houses of study. The concept here is that in the world to come, we will be engaged in prayer and Torah study. Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven is connected to prayer and studying Torah. Remember how Torah study is also connected to the concept of studying God’s word and applying it to our lives, asking how do we live our faith, obeying Torah is the definition of living righteously. It is interesting to study what Yeshua has to say concerning the Kingdom of heaven according to *Matthew 5:16-20*.

Matthew 5:16-20

5:16 ‘Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. 5:17 ‘Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to

fulfill. 5:18 'For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 5:19 'Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 5:20 'For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (NASB)

Yeshua speaks of good works that are meant to glorify the Father in heaven, and he speaks of the Torah not passing away, the Torah is something that is to be fulfilled in our lives here on earth. He goes on to contrast those who annul the command as opposed to those who teach to obey the commands. Then he concludes saying that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, one's righteous deeds must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. Notice the parallel here to what the rabbis are teaching in the midrash. Studying Torah is synonymous to obeying, or applying God's word to our lives, which is what it means to walk in righteousness before God. The Kingdom of God consists of prayer, studying God's word, seeking the Lord God in heaven, and living a righteous and holy life. This is what Yeshua meant when he spoke in *Matthew 6:33* saying, *6:33 'But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (NASB)* If we seek these things first in our life in the Messiah, then we will see the Lord working in our lives in powerful ways.

The rabbis continue their discussion on the Kingdom of Heaven in Midrash Tehillim 84, Part 4 which opens (דיבור המתהיל) saying, *"They go from company to company (Tehillim / Psalms 84:8)."* The homiletic introduction to the midrash states, *"Our Masters commented as follows, Whenever a man comes from a house of prayer and goes into a house of study, Scripture says for such as he, They go from strength to strength."* The interpretation of *Tehillim / Psalms 84:4* going from strength to strength is that prayer and studying the Scriptures are refuges of strength and not weakness. The rabbis teach in the midrash that the one who goes from houses of prayer to houses of study, he receives the privilege being taken into the Shekhinah (glory, השכינה) of God (see Midrash Tehillim 84,

Part 4). Here, the midrash speaks also of another interpretation regarding going from strength to strength, as in the days of the Messiah, the disciples of the Messiah will go from strength to strength, from houses of prayer to houses of study. The Targum states, *י זכוות אבהתנא חמי אלהים ואיסתכלל* 84:10 *See, O God, the merits of our fathers, and behold the face of your anointed. (EMC)* where the anointed one is written *משיחך* as “*your Messiah.*” The midrash states, “*Rabbi Phinehas the Priest taught, This verse implies that in the days of the Messiah the nations will still be making accusations against Israel.*” The most interesting point is that in the days of the Messiah, the nations will still bring accusation against him, just as we read in the gospel account of Yeshua. Another interesting point is how the Messiah is connected to the going from houses of prayer to houses of study, from strength to strength, and to the Kingdom of Heaven. Isn’t this similar to what Yeshua taught that if you abide in me and my word abides in you (*John 15:7*). Remember that studying Torah is synonymous to obeying, or applying God’s word to our lives, which is what it means to walk in righteousness before God (*to abide in Christ*), and these are the things that Yeshua the Messiah taught while he was here on earth.

Now, how do these things tie back into this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Bo? In the opening verses of the Torah portion, we learn how the Lord GOD works in the hearts of men, of both the righteous and the unrighteous, for His purposes. He speaks to Moshe about having hardened Pharaoh’s heart saying, “*כי-אני הכבדתי את-לבבו*” (*ki ani hichbadti et libo*). The significance of this statement is found in the idea of letting sin reign in our lives. If we let sin reign in our lives, even being in the midst of or seeing the miracles of God, there is a partial hardening that will affect one’s understanding and perception of the truth. In *Tehillim / Psalm 84*, and in the midrash (Midrash Tehillim 84, Part 4) the conclusion is to be persistent in seeking the Lord God in heaven to hear the prayer of His people (*e.g. The rabbis say His servant David and the voice of Judah.*) Rashi says, *שמעה תפלתי לבנות ביתך* meaning “*listen to my prayer, to the children of your house.*” The midrash is speaking of seeking the Lord, and specifically that the Lord would hear the prayer of His people. The point is that the Lord hears the prayers of a faithful people. If one is steeped in sin, the only prayer He will hear is the one of repentance and He watches to see if such a person is striving to turn from sin (this is the

definition of Teshuvah). This is what Rashi meant when he commented upon *Tehillim / Psalms 89*.

Rashi on Genesis 31:30, Part 1

נכספתה means *THOU DIDST LONG—It occurs many times in Scripture: (Psalms 89:3) “My soul yearneth (נכספה) yea, pineth;” (Job 14:15) “Thou wouldst have a desire (תכסוף) to the work of hands.”* (נכספת חמדת, וְהִרְבֵּה יֵשׁ) (בְּמִקְרָא נִכְסְפָה וְגַם כָּלְתָה בְּפִשֵׁי (תה' פ"ד), לְמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵיךָ תִכְסֹּף (איוב י"ד):

As the children of God, we are to be actively seeking the Kingdom of Heaven. Does your heart, does your soul yearn, crave, long (נכספתה) for the presence of God in your life? Based upon this study, this is achieved by seeking the Kingdom of Heaven, by faith in the Lord God in heaven and in His Messiah, by walking humbly before God, by devoting ourselves to prayer, and by studying Torah which is synonymous to obeying, or applying God's word to our lives, and walking in righteousness before God, loving our brother, and taking care of the poor and needy, the widows and the orphans. These are the things that Yeshua the Messiah taught while he was here on earth. These are the things that are being taught in God's Torah, according to the Psalms, all of the Tanach, and the Apostolic Writings. Do you understand the significance of what it means to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven?

