

Amidst all the drama of this momentous parashah one vital common thread winds its way from beginning to end. We may not even notice its presence, but once we do, we realize that it is precisely this thread that has woven itself indelibly into the tapestry of Jewish identity: ASKING QUESTIONS. The tradition of asking questions and questioning everything is quintessentially Jewish. Abraham bargaining with HaShem over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses arguing with HaShem about his suitability for the task, asking how he is supposed to stand up to Pharaoh, wondering how to lead this fractious group of people, and pleading for them after the incident with the Golden Calf. Jeremiah's sorrowful questioning why the wicked prosper while the good must suffer. The entire Book of Job with its plethora of questions both between humans and between humans and HaShem. The discourse of the TaNaKh is punctuated by questions, as is the Talmud. Because our covenant makes no mention of blind obedience, we dare to ask questions. Without this, we also would not have the chutzpah to challenge HaShem as we do. I was one of countless Jewish children whose parents never asked what we had learned at school each day; instead, my parents wanted to know if I had asked any good questions. And if I said no, they asked me why not, implying I ought to think harder. Like most animals, human beings are born curious, and if encouraged, babies explore everything they encounter, peppering everyone within earshot with a veritable barrage of questions from the time they can talk. Tragically, children's natural curiosity is all too often nipped in the bud by impatient adults or by the culture into which they are born. But from the outset, Jewish culture fosters questioning. Jewish parents usually set their children on the path of learning from the time they are born. One of the most common sentences in my parents' house was "Let's look it up." Today we have the internet at our disposal, but back then I spent many hours on the floor surrounded by reference books, first with my parents, and later, channeling my parents, with my child. No wonder so many Jewish people wind up in the sciences and the arts – our curiosity leads us there! Parashah Bo is full of questions. Moses and Aaron ask Pharaoh in the name of HaShem, "*ad matai* – How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?" (10:3) Pharaoh's servants chime in with an *ad matai* of their own: "How long will this one be a stumbling block to us? ... Don't you yet know that Egypt is lost?" (10:7) Like all despots, Pharaoh is stubbornly impervious to reasoning, even in the face of certain disaster. When he seems to waver for a brief moment, his only question is, "... who and who are going?" (10:8) His tragic lack of curiosity eventually seals his fate and the fate of his subjects. Through the plagues of locusts and the darkness, Pharaoh continues to break his word until he is finally brought to his knees by the death of Egypt's firstborn. The last verses of the parashah contain detailed instructions to the Israelites, first for taking precautions before the final plague and preparing for their journey, and then for preserving and observing the memory of this pivotal event for posterity. For the latter, the Torah makes an astute observation: children will ask questions and it is our duty to anticipate this and make ourselves able to answer them and stimulate further questioning. As our parashah emphasizes at the outset, "and in order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son's son ..." (10:2) In other words, even when children are still too young to really understand, the repetition will have made them so familiar with the story that when the time comes, they will be curious about it. This is the child in our Pesach Haggadah who does not yet know how to ask. Hearing the story from birth, the child will eventually ask questions, and then instruction can begin in earnest. And we are to continue to repeat the story until it becomes so engrained that our children will pass it on to their own children. This is the essence of our *shema Yisrael* – perpetuating our story *ledor vador* – from generation to generation. "And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you' ..." (12:26) "In the days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' ..." (13:14) And later, in Deuteronomy, "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws that the Lord our God has commanded you?' ..." (6:20) Indeed, Judaism is unique in that it is founded on asking questions and answering them in a way that the one who is asking will always want to know more. The *shema* tells us to discuss our story, which implies allowing for questions. As we grow older the nature of our questions changes; we gain new insight, which generates new questions, which in turn offer different perspectives that give rise to their own questions. Every time we finish reading our Torah and turn it back to the beginning to read it again, we open the way for new questions and different answers. If our natural curiosity is encouraged from the beginning, we will have the joy of lifelong learning. Truly, there are no stupid questions and there is always something new to learn. In the spirit of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our Teacher, we should take every opportunity to ask questions, and when we are asked, we should always be careful to answer in a way that encourages further questioning. Pesach is still a few months away, but reading Parashah Bo now is an excellent way to begin preparing for new answers to old questions.

Shabbat shalom!