

This is truly a week of beginnings and endings! I am writing this on the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. In the ensuing years, as Germany slowly began to deal with its past, it became a truly exceptional leader in the practice of *teshuvah*. I have participated in countless commemoration events, and am always moved by the unstinting efforts of so many people to learn from the past, teach these lessons to the next generations, and do their part to create a better future for us all. Their work is especially valuable now, in the face of rising antisemitism and ultra-nationalism. It is upon us to join them in continuing this healing and prophylactic work that rose from the ashes of unspeakable tragedy. How timely that our parashah, in which the Israelites' enslavement ends and their new life in freedom begins, coincides with this momentous anniversary, as well as with Rosh Chodesh Shevat, a veritable harbinger of hopeful new beginnings. Talmud Tractate Rosh HaShanah teaches that the new year for trees falls in the month of Shevat, the 11th month. Of course the schools of Shammai and Hillel disagree on particulars. Shammai declares the New Year for Trees to be on Rosh Chodesh Shevat, while Hillel advocates the 15th. But they concur that even though winter is only half over, most of the year's rains have already fallen by the beginning of the month, and thus any crops that grow from then on will be taxed in the new year. Agreeing with Hillel as usual, we honor the trees on Tu B'Shevat, the 15th of Shevat. In Deuteronomy 1:3, we read that Moses begins reviewing and explaining the Torah to the Israelites "on the first day of the 11th month," i.e., Rosh Chodesh Shevat. He continues until his death 37 days later, on the 7th of Adar. Because of this, our sages find it particularly advisable to study Torah and perform *mitzvot* during this time. Our parashah also contains the very first *mitzvah* we receive from HaShem: the commandment of declaring the New Moon (12:1-2). It is the month of Nisan, the first month of our liturgical year, and the month of Pesach, our first festival. From then on, the Israelites, who as slaves had no control over their time, are to both literally and figuratively observe each new moon and create a calendar based on its cycles. This means that although they will be free to use their time as they choose, they are still obligated to recognize that it is HaShem Who ensures their survival by creating specific seasons for planting, harvesting, and resting. Therefore, they are commanded to create a calendar that sets aside times for ceremonies of gratitude. They are emerging from slavery "in the month of spring" (12:14), when barley, the first crop, is ripening. Later, we will honor this with the *mitzvah* of the *Omer*. This week, as we mark Rosh Chodesh Shevat, we can already see a few tiny signs of spring here in central Germany. The first yellow winter aconites are popping up, flower bulbs are sending out their first little shoots, and trees are awakening. And in our parashah, Pharaoh is moving in the opposite direction. He is now too narcissistic to realize that a power he cannot begin to fathom is mocking him. Like so many other autocrats who have brought disaster upon themselves and their people, he has locked himself into a prison of hubris and denial, impervious to all warnings and blind to the suffering of even his own people. After three plagues bought about by Aaron, three by Moses, and one by Moses and Aaron together, the last three plagues now come solely from HaShem, and they plunge Pharaoh into a darkness that will finally drive him to the bottom of the sea. The 8th plague, the plague of the locusts, is unique. It is the only plague with the words, "... in order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son's son how I have mocked Mitzrayim ..." (10:2) Into the ears is exactly what the first paragraph of the Shema Yisrael means when it instructs us to instill Torah in our children until it becomes part of their identity. We retell the story of our beginning every year at our Pesach Seder, and we allude to it multiple times in our liturgy. The story of the end of our involuntary enslavement to Pharaoh and the beginning of our lives as free individuals choosing to serve HaShem is recalled every time we wrap *tefillin*, a *mitzvah* that appears for the first time in the final verse of our parashah: "It will be a sign on your arm and reminder-sign between your eyes that HaShem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand" (13:16). It is also present in the *mitzvah* of redeeming the firstborn and in the *mitzvot* of Pesach, all of which appear for the first time in our parashah. It is truly a parashah of many beginnings and endings, full of promise. Like the end of World War II and the month of Shevat, Parashah Bo ushers in a new, hopeful era. But as we know, such times are also fraught with danger. Spring frosts, droughts, and floods can severely damage the year's harvest. After the euphoria of the Exodus, the Israelites will experience many painful, tragic setbacks as they slowly learn that freedom is not entitlement. They will be responsible for their own actions, and they must also consider the wellbeing of everyone. Sadly, we are still grappling with this today, especially in the USA, where the freedom to bear arms all too often clashes with the freedom to live without fear of being murdered. And our postwar and post-Soviet world is still full of pharaohs and aspiring pharaohs, whose unbridled ego and insatiable thirst for power robs them of reason and morality. They attract hordes of followers, who out of conviction, fear, or complacency, will blindly justify and glorify everything they need to do to stay in their good graces. With HaShem's help, and inspired by generations of courageous people, we must continue to speak out against their rampant greed, injustice, and oppression. It is our duty as Jews, and as human beings.

Shabbat shalom!