

A Rock and a Verse: Thoughts for Parashat Bo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“But against any of the children of Israel not a dog shall move its tongue...” (Shemot 11:7).

When I was a little boy growing up in Seattle, I would sometimes be confronted by a barking dog in the neighborhood. I told my Uncle, Rabbi Solomon Maimon, of my dread of this dog and he gave me advice. He told me to recite a verse *ulekhol yisrael lo yeherats kelev leshono* (Shemot 11:7) and that would calm the dog down.

The verse refers to the Torah’s statement that when the Israelites were leaving Egypt, the dogs remained entirely silent. This was a sign of the miraculous nature of the exodus. Even the dogs were awe-struck by the multitude of Israelites on their way to freedom.

I memorized the verse and recited it often. I am not sure if the menacing dog was impressed, but the verse gave me confidence to walk past the dog without fear. So all in all, it was an effective solution to my problem.

There’s a story in Sephardic folklore about a little boy who also was afraid of a barking dog in his neighborhood. He asked his rabbi for advice and the rabbi—like my Uncle Solomon—told him to recite the verse. The next day the boy came running to the rabbi: “the dog barked at me, I recited the verse, but the dog kept barking and chased me down the block.” The rabbi asked: “when you recited the verse, did you have a rock in your hand?” The boy said he didn’t have a rock in his hand. The rabbi then said: “when you recite the verse you need to have a big rock in your hand. Then the dog will get the message and leave you alone.” This story was memorialized in a proverb: “*piedra y pasuk*,” a rock and a verse.

This strategy is not only relevant when dealing with barking dogs. It also relates to dealing with dangerous human beings. Theodore Roosevelt was fond of a West African proverb: “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” It’s important to have the right words, but it’s also important to demonstrate the strength to back up the words.

When confronting those who wish to harm us, we need to offer words of peace and understanding. We need to seek to defuse antagonism by engaging in reasonable conversation. But at the same time, we need to be strong and courageous. We need the antagonists to know that we are ready and able to defend ourselves.

In Psalm 29:11 we read: “The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace.” We pray not only for physical strength but for the spiritual strength to achieve peace. We need the piedra and the pasuk, the rock and the verse...and the courage to utilize both effectively.