Going and Coming: Thoughts on Parashat Bo, January 23, 2010

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When God first appointed Moses to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites to freedom, He used the word "lekh"--go. The word "go" is repeated a number of times during the early phases of Moses' work. Yet, once the plagues began to afflict the Egyptians, God ordered Moses with a different word, "bo"--come. This week's Torah portion opens with God telling Moses "bo el Par'oh", come to Pharaoh. What is the significance of the words "lekh" (go) and "bo" (come)?

The word "lekh" is a strong commandment. In telling Moses to go to Egypt, God ordered Moses to overcome his inertia. He needed to rally his strength and energy, and begin to move in a new direction. The word "bo" is a softer commandment. God invited Moses to maintain his momentum, to come to Pharaoh and demand the liberation of the Israelites.

For Moses to undertake his mission in the first place, he needed to be told forcefully: go, there's work to be done, overcome your inertia. Once Moses was well into his work, though, he realized that he would not quickly or easily accomplish his goal. There was much unpleasantness and pain, complaints from the Israelites and plagues on the Egyptians. It would have been tempting to lose heart, to give up. Therefore, God gave Moses words of encouragement: come to Pharaoh, don't worry, I'll be there with you.

The words "lekh" and "bo" have relevance to each of our lives. We may have great ideas and ideals, terrific aspirations; but unless we hear the internal word "lekh"--go--we might simply remain in our own dreamworld. Lekh means we have to overcome inertia, we have to mobilize our talents, energies and resources to achieve our goals. But once we've succeeded in starting on our way, it is so easy for us to lose heart. There are always obstacles in the way, costs to be paid, nay-sayers who harden their hearts against us. So we then need to remember the word "bo"--come, maintain focus, maintain the momentum, come to the goals which we have set for ourselves.

"Lekh" challenges us to break from the status quo, to move in new directions, to undertake great challenges. "Bo" reminds us to stay the course, not to lose heart, not to surrender to frustration and setbacks.

Come, let us reason together, let us join forces to create a better Jewish world and a better humanity. Let us go in strength, let us come to our goals in happiness.

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