



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo

February 4, 2017

Bo

**Trump & Boundaries:
Border Control Lessons
from Mitzrayim**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo > Trump & Boundaries: Border Control Lessons
from Mitzrayim February 4, 2017

SHEMOT

Bo

Trump & Boundaries

ABSTRACT

Today I would like to discuss the topic of boundaries and borders. But not the way you expect.

Yes, the catalyst for this talk is the uproar over the executive order signed by President Trump’s last week banning citizens of seven terrorist-prone countries – Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia – from entering the United States for ninety days.

But I don’t want to discuss this controversy per se. I want to look at it through the eyes of the Baal Shem Tov. When we witness – see and hear – so much talk and passion around border controls, the Baal Shem Tov tells us that this is a sign and indicator that we need to learn from this.

Let us leave it for the pundits to fight out whether this ban is constitutional or not ... whether this is simply a political/partisan debate, pitting the pro-Trump and anti-Trump factions against on another ... whether these hostilities will mark the next four years ... or whether what Trump did is any different than what Obama did when he placed a six-month ban on Iraqi immigration.

Instead, let us focus on the bigger issue of boundaries – boundaries between countries, nations, peoples and communities.

What lessons can learn from this boundary debate?

We find the fascinating answer, my friends, in this week’s Torah portion, which contains – believe it or not – the first case study of borders and boundaries.

By looking at the story of Mitzrayim (Egypt) – which very name means boundaries – we can learn some fundamental lessons about the issue of borders and boundaries, which can perhaps lend some civility to the present polarizing, and frankly distasteful, debates about American border control.

TRUMP & BOUNDARIES: BORDER CONTROL LESSONS FROM MITZRAYIM

1. Criminal Record (Joke)

An official at Sydney Airport asks a gentleman going through Australian customs if he has a criminal record.

The man replies, “No. I didn’t know that was still a requirement.”

2. Occupation (Joke)

The German Chancellor visits France. The French customs agent asks, “Occupation?” The German Chancellor replies, “No. Just a visit.”

3. The New Immigration Policy

Today I would like to discuss the topic of boundaries and borders.

But not the way you expect.

Yes, the catalyst for this talk is the uproar over the executive order signed by President Trump’s last week (Friday before sundown, in case you were wondering) banning citizens of seven terrorist-prone countries – Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia – from entering the United States for ninety days.

The administration’s case for doing this is based, they argue, on security: They want to use these ninety days of “extreme vetting” to tighten the United State’s immigration and border policies, to protect its citizens and make America safe from escalating Islamic extremism and terrorism, which has been plaguing Europe and has been part of daily life in the Middle East.

The opposing opinion argues that this ban is plain discrimination against Muslims and is antithetical to the moral fabric of the United States, which was founded by and upon immigrants and has always been a refuge for the persecuted.

But I don't want to discuss this debate per se. I want to look at this debate through the eyes of the Baal Shem Tov.

4. Everything is a Lesson

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, teaches us that everything we see and hear has a lesson for our lives.

When we witness – see and hear – so much talk and passion around border controls, the Baal Shem Tov tells us that this is a sign and indicator that we need to learn from this.

Let us thus look at the recent heated controversy around borders as a wake-up call; a reminder to us about how we need to understand the issue of borders and boundaries from a far broader perspective – and one that hopefully can inform today's debate, and perhaps even turn it respectful.

Let us leave it for the pundits to fight out whether this ban is constitutional or not ... whether this is simply a political/partisan debate, pitting the pro-Trump and anti-Trump factions against on another ... whether these hostilities will mark the next four years ... or whether what Trump did is any different than what Obama did when he placed a six-month ban on Iraqi immigration.

Instead, let us focus on the bigger issue of boundaries – boundaries between countries, nations, peoples and communities.

And indeed, the border control issue today is far more than one about immigration and international relations; this debate about borders has ironically exposed how our own internal borders of healthy discourse and conversation are under attack. Some voices seem to have lost the ability to respect diverse opinions which come as a natural result of healthy boundaries. Some are violating those boundaries, and either seeking to eliminate them on extreme, or intensify them to the point asphyxiation on the other extreme.

5. Borders Revisited: The Torah Approach

What lessons can learn from this boundary debate?

We find the fascinating answer, my friends, in this week's Torah portion, which contains – believe it or not – the first case study of borders and boundaries.

This week's Torah reading – Parshat Bo – describes the final days of the long and painful Egyptian exile. Finally, after 210 oppressive years, the Jewish people leave the prison called Egypt.

Indeed, Egypt in Hebrew is Mitzrayim, which is rooted in the word meitzar u'gvul, whose meaning is (surprise!) “boundaries and borders.”

By looking at the story of Mitzrayim – boundaries – we can learn some fundamental lessons about the issue of borders and boundaries, which can perhaps lend some civility to the present polarizing, and frankly distasteful, debates about American border control.

6. Are Boundaries Good or Bad?

The first thing we learn from Mitzrayim is the answer to the core question, which lies at the heart of all border related issues: Are borders and boundaries good or bad? Why are borders necessary? Why do they exist?

Do we need boundaries in the first place? And if yes, how do we maintain healthy boundaries, which allow immigrants but protect us from destructive forces?

Beyond all the rhetoric, this is the question that has challenged not only this administration but all administrations for the last two centuries: How to balance the American ideal of taking in the oppressed with the security and needs of its existing citizens?

Everyone agrees that a country needs secure boundaries, but the big dilemma is to know when are boundaries meant to be opened up and when are they meant to be closed? Locked boundaries or no boundaries is always a problem. How do you find the proper balance?

7. Mitzrayim: Unhealthy Boundaries

The story of exodus from Mitzrayim offers us critical insight into this matter.

Mitzrayim, Egypt, embodied the ultimate boundaries. As indicated in its very name, Mitzrayim, a country whose name means boundaries and borders.

But Mitzrayim personified unhealthy borders. The borders of Mitzrayim were a prison – the harshest form of prison: not allowing anyone out. As the Midrash tell us that “no slave was able to escape from Egypt.”¹

Which is why the Egyptian exodus was such a monumental event, celebrated until this day: It is the story of the ultimate exodus and freedom from these sealed borders.

But does that mean that all borders are traps and all boundaries are confining? Absolutely not.

The Egyptian Boundaries were clearly toxic and asphyxiating. It did not allow the Jewish people to breathe, let alone to fulfill their dreams and aspirations, and to serve G-d as they saw fit. The Egyptians “made the lives of [the Israelites] miserable with harsh labor... All the work they made them do was intended to break them.”² The Jews could not even listen to Moshe when he came to tell them about their imminent exodus due to their “broken spirit and hard work.”³

Mitzrayim, by definition and nomenclature, represented slavery in its rawest form, complete and utter captivity.

Yet, in stark contrast to the incarcerating Mitzrayim, there are other types of boundaries and borders that are healthy.

Does not the Torah itself describe the borders of Israel? And, within the Land itself, are there not very defined boundaries between one tribe and another?

¹ Yalkut Shemoni 269.

² Exodus 1:14.

³ Exodus 6:9.

So what then determines whether boundaries will be healthy or unhealthy?

We can find the answer in an intriguing verse about the role of borders in the future of the world.

8. Walls and the Final Redemption¹

The Prophet Zachariah describes what the times of Final Redemption will look like:

Jerusalem shall be inhabited like a city without walls ... But I, Myself - says the Lord - will be a wall of fire all around it, and I will be a glory inside it.⁴

Here we see something paradoxical: on the one hand, the walls will crumble altogether, (Jerusalem shall be inhabited like a city without walls). But, on the other hand, G-d will be a wall of fire (But I, Myself - says the Lord - will be a wall of fire all around it.)

So which one is it, will Jerusalem be without walls or will G-d be its walls? Will the Final Redemption see no boundaries, borders and walls, or will there be borders and walls? Are walls redemptive or not? Are border good or not?

9. Healthy and Unhealthy Boundaries

We all know that there are healthy boundaries and unhealthy ones.

The very structure of life and existence is as dependent on healthy boundaries as it is on the union of forces - boundaries between water and land, between the food pipe and the wind pipe, between words and letters, and of course between individuals.

These healthy boundaries, though they have distinct borders and parameters, yet it is their very distinct individual identities that allows them to work together in harmony. Were water and land to cross their inherent boundaries, we would have destruction. When they respect

⁴ Zechariah 2:8-9

each other's border, and do not cross the line that divides them, they work in sync. If the border between the wind and food pipes were compromised, it would cause asphyxiation. When each serves their distinct role, then they coordinate and complement each other.

The same is true in all parts of a healthy organism, and in all of nature: Healthy boundaries create for ultimate harmony.

Unhealthy boundaries, on the other hand, block and impede. They isolate and divide. They do not allow for interactions and cross-pollination. They are prisons – that was Egypt, the archetype of limitation and confinement.

What feature distinguishes between the healthy and the unhealthy boundary?

Humility. Modesty. Respect. Selflessness.

In Hebrew the word is called *bittul* – suspension of self in order to serve a higher cause.

This is also what defines sanctity, holiness – *kedusha*, which is everything that abnegates itself to the divine, G-d centric, in contrast to the unholy, which is egocentric.⁵

Walls of stone, of inanimate raw matter, divide and isolate; these walls will crumble with the Final Redemption.

Walls of G-d, walls of fire, walls of soul and spirit that help us define who and what we are, free us and actually unite us.

Healthy boundaries and borders are divine walls of fire, which preserve and enhance the diversity of life. Unhealthy boundaries and borders are stone-hearted, ones that stifle and annihilate life.

10. Fences Make Good Neighbors

Every country needs healthy boundaries, while also maintaining a give and take with other nations. Good fences make for good neighbors. As Benjamin Franklin famously said: “Love thy neighbor, yet don't pull down your hedge.”

⁵ Tanya chapter 6.

Mitzrayim with all its evils was a case study in the worst type of boundaries: those that entrap and enslave. Freedom from these imprisoning boundaries is the greatest blessing.

However, freedom from unhealthy constraints was not meant to reject all boundaries, but to embrace healthy boundaries – to balance individuality and community, creating harmony within diversity.

Can we accomplish that today in our dangerous and volatile world? Can we achieve that in our own country? And, if so, how?

11. Ego Extremes

Egos will consume one another. In a battle of survival of the fittest, egos will wage war for control and dominance, either one ego extreme will rule or the other one will, either with suffocating boundaries or no boundaries at all.

But the Torah – whose entire purpose is to bring peace and harmony to the world⁶ – teaches us that there is a middle way: We achieve balance by connecting to our higher purpose. Humility – knowing that G-d is leading us out of Mitzrayim – allows for that balance.

This was exemplified by the ten-plague process. During this process, the Israelites went from an ego-centric prison that was asphyxiating, step by humble step, until they achieved the ultimate exodus, as articulated in the second half of our Torah portion. This is what we celebrate every Passover:

Moses said to the people: “Remember this day, when you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, for with a mighty hand, the Lord took you out of here, and [therefore] no leaven shall be eaten ... And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘This the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.’”⁷

We, the Jewish people, are far too familiar with boundaries – both the unhealthy and the healthy sort.

⁶Rambam end of Laws of Chanukah

⁷Exodus 13:3, 8.

We have seen them all. We know borders, we know boundaries, we know customs.

The lesson we may learn from current events is to always build healthy boundaries and G-dly borders in our own personal lives and the lives we influence, and to tear down all the cold-stone walls that trap and limit our dreams.

We do so with humility. It is not about our egos, our leavened and risen “bread,” but about our unleavened “matzah.” Even on Shabbat, when it is a mitzvah to eat challah, we do so because it is a mitzvah that G-d commanded us to do, not because our bodies are telling us to eat.

With this approach, we are supremely confident that with persistent but humble fortitude, we will transcend the border controversies of our time, and ultimately merit to see a world where the stone boundaries will dissipate in the light of the boundaries of divine fire.

When Jerusalem shall be inhabited like a city without walls, and G-d will be a wall of fire all around it, and I will be a glory inside it, speedily in our days. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!