

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Bo**  
**January 16, 2016**

**פרשת בא**  
**ו' בשבט תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 10:1-13:16

This week's *parasha* tells the story of the last three plagues, the preparations that the *Bnei Yisrael* needed to make in order to leave *Mitzrayim*, and the actual exodus itself.

There is an unusual and unexpected verse right in the middle of the section when God relates to Moshe what will happen during the plague of the slaying of the first-borns. Chapter 11, verse 7 says, - "וְלֹכֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִחַרְץ-כָּלֵב לְשָׁנוֹ לְמֵאִישׁ וְעַד- בְּהֵמָה לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יִפְלֶה ה' בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל." - but against any of the children of Israel a dog shall not sharpen his tongue, against human or beast; that you may know how Hashem puts a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." The classic commentators don't seem to be bothered by this strange statement. Their only issue is whether *יחרץ*, "sharpen," refers to barking or biting. Perhaps this is because they were aware of the history of dogs in Egypt.

According to the testimony of the ancient Greeks, Egyptians loved dogs and treated them with great respect. Dogs received burial in family tombs, and family members would shave their heads in mourning at the death of a family dog.

Even in the pre-dynastic period, the Egyptians were already burying dogs in the same way they buried humans, with plenty of goods for the afterlife. In dynastic Egypt, dog mummies were made with great care and expense. Hardai, the sacred city of the god Anubis, has sprawling dog cemeteries.

When thinking of dogs as deities, few come to mind as quickly as Anubis (aka Anpu), the god most associated with funeral rites and the afterlife. While sometimes represented clearly as a dog, he appears at other times more like a jackal.

Understanding this background helps us comprehend not only the verse quoted above but also its import. Egyptians owned dogs. Ordinarily, a dog would raise a howl at the death of its master, and every house in Egypt would be affected by the slaying of the first-borns. Yet, in this case, not a sound would be heard, indicating that even the dogs would understand that something awful and awesome was taking place.

Further, just as the *Bnei Yisrael* sacrificed a lamb in part to indicate to the Egyptians that this animal has no divinity, so too, dogs not behaving in accordance with their nature would undermine the “dog god,” Anubis, the one specifically associated with death, a phenomenon which was being repeated in each house in Egypt.

We can learn a number of things from this odd verse. First of all, the plan for the Exodus was well thought out and well executed, down to the subtle messages that the people of Egypt would receive. Secondly, the author or Author of the Torah knew the socio-historical climate of Egypt at that time. Finally, through the entire episode of the plagues, Hashem would shield the Israelites from any potential harm, even a dog biting in response to its owner’s death.

The Rabbis tell us that there are no extra words in the Torah. Despite seeming extraneous at first glance, this verse reinforces this principle in the numerous ways it enhances the story of the Exodus.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Do you own a dog or other pet? How do you feel about that pet? How does the pet react to you?
- Is it good for people to own pets? Why or why not?
- What is the best pet for a child or a family? Why this particular animal?