

**Date:** 2 Shevat 5786 (January 20, 2026)

**Torah Portion:** Bo

**Topic:** When Empires Claim Life and YHWH Reclaims Meaning

Across Scripture, power repeatedly makes the same claim: *life belongs to those who rule*. The Torah, the Prophets, and later Renewed Covenant answer with a different declaration: *meaning belongs to YHWH*. When read together, this week's Torah portion, Shemot (Exodus) 10:1–13:16, Yerumiyahu (Jeremiah) 46:13–28, and Yochanan (John) 19:31–37 form a single moral arc—one that exposes false power, judges oppression, and preserves hope through covenantal memory. The Biblical tradition gives us the language to hear this arc not as distant history, but as a living call addressed to every generation.

The drama begins in Sefer Shemot, where liberation is not sudden escape but a slow unveiling of truth. Pharaoh's power does not collapse because it is weak, but because it is **hardened**—*hizzuq ha-lev* (הַזְזִיק הַלֵּב). In biblical Hebrew, the **לב (lev)** is not merely emotion; it is the center of will and moral direction. Pharaoh's tragedy is not ignorance, but refusal. He sees the signs and still clings to control. The plagues intensify not out of divine impatience, but because resistance to truth always deepens the cost of change.

Elohim explains the purpose of this unfolding drama with remarkable clarity:

“That you may tell (*lema'an tesapper*, לְמַעַן תִּסְפֵּר) in the hearing of your son and of your son's son what I have done in Mitzrayim, and My signs (*ototai*, אוֹתָי) which I have placed among them, that you may know that I am YHWH” (Exo. 10:2).

Redemption is meant to be **told**. The biblical tradition insists that freedom survives only when it becomes story, memory, and testimony (*edut*, עֵדוּת). The Mekhilta and Midrash Rabbah teach that the plagues were *middah keneged middah*—measure for measure—not to punish blindly, but to reveal the moral structure of the world. Even darkness (*hoshekh*, חֹשֶׁךְ) becomes a teacher: when a society worships its own light, it eventually loses sight altogether.

At the heart of Shemot stands **Passover (Pesach, פֶּסַח)**—a moment where freedom is given form. Redemption is not chaos; it is order. Blood (*dam*, דָּם), commandment (*mitzvah*, מִצְוָה), and remembrance (*zikaron*, זִכְרוֹן) together create a new way of living. The Torah commands:

“You shall not break a bone of it” (*ve'etsem lo tishberu vo*, וְעֵצָם לֹא תִשְׁבְּרוּיֶבו) (Exo. 12:46).

Rashi explains—drawing from the Talmud—that wholeness matters. Redemption cannot be torn apart. Yisrael leaves Mitzrayim not as frightened fugitives gnawing at survival, but as a people restored in dignity and wholeness (*shelemut*, שְׁלֵמוּת). Ramban teaches that this command makes freedom sustainable: redemption must be practiced, not merely remembered. True freedom requires discipline (*avodah*, עֲבוּדָה), or it dissolves into nostalgia.

Centuries later, Yerumiyahu looks at Mitzrayim again and sees the same story repeating. Egypt (*Mitzrayim*, מִצְרַיִם)—a word that also means **constriction (meitzar, מִצָּר)**—faces judgment once more. The prophet announces its fall, but with piercing honesty asks:

“Is there no balm in Gilead?” (Jer. 46:11)

Empires always search for cures that do not require repentance (*teshuvah*, תְּשׁוּבָה). They look for remedies instead of transformation. Yet Yerumiyahu's message is not despair. After judgment comes reassurance:

“Do not fear, O Ya'acov My servant” (Jer. 46:27).

Yahudi commentators emphasize this turn. Abravanel teaches that divine judgment (*din*, דִּין) is never Elohim's final word to Yisrael. Preservation (*shmirah*, שְׁמִירָה) always follows. The Vilna Gaon reminds us that Yerumiyahu 46 is read alongside Shemot because history teaches the same lesson again and again: empires rise by force, but they fall by arrogance; covenant endures by memory and humility.

It is against this deep scriptural rhythm that Yochanan 19:31–37 can be read—not as replacement, but as echo. The text deliberately recalls exodus:

“Not one of His bones shall be broken” (John 19:36).

This is not incidental. It reaches back to the Paschal lamb, whose unbroken bones signified undivided redemption. The Talmud insists that breaking the bones invalidates the offering; fragmentation destroys meaning. Yochanan also emphasizes blood and witness:

“One of the soldiers pierced His side... and he who saw has borne witness” (John 19:34–35).

In Shemot, blood is not magic. It is a sign (*ot*, אות) of belonging:

“The blood shall be for you as a sign upon the houses” (Exo. 12:13).

Midrash Tanchuma explains that the blood does not change Elohim’s awareness—it marks human alignment (*hitkashrut*, התקשרות) with covenant. The Zohar describes Pesach blood as a force that gathers and preserves Yisrael. In Yochanan’s scene, these symbols reappear under Roman authority, quietly asserting that empire can wound bodies, but it cannot own meaning. Judaism does not accept theological equivalence here, yet the symbolic dependence itself testifies to the enduring power of the Exodus story.

Across all these texts, one truth shines through: **suffering alone does not redeem**. Memory does. Discipline does. Covenant does. Empires fall because they harden the **lev**; people endure because they remember. The Torah’s command remains the center of gravity:

“It shall be for you as a sign on your hand and a remembrance between your eyes” (Exo. 13:9).

Redemption must shape what we do (*yad*, יד) and how we see (*bein ‘einayim*, בין עינים). When memory governs action and vision, freedom survives. Pharaoh, Mitzrayim, and Rome all fade into history—but the exodus endures, not as a story of escape, but as a call: **resist false power, remember who you are, and live as a people reclaimed by meaning**.

Shalom.