



**Torah Reflections on *Parashat Bo***  
**Exodus 10:1-13:16**

3 Shevat, 5771 January 8, 2011

Imagination is one of our great human gifts. Witness the power of hope in our lives: the human capacity to imagine a better future. And witness these heroic words—"Let My people go"—in the Torah portion called *Bo* (Exodus 10:3). What a gift: to imagine the reality of freedom amidst the brutality of slave-driven totalitarianism.

Israeli poet Abba Kovner had a good imagination. In 1941 Kovner invented the idea of Jewish resistance in the Vilna Ghetto—and carried it out in the ghetto, in the forests, and in post-war Palestine. Decades later, sick with throat cancer, he wrote a soulful book of poems that he named for the place where he sought survival once again: *Sloan-Kettering*.

"Sloan-Kettering," Kovner writes, "...is a large and growing building / and all those who come within its walls / to strip / naked, / jointly and separately, / suddenly find themselves / in a cage, captive, exposed... Sloan-Kettering is a personal encounter / with a pathless wilderness..."

And then, though still captive in his cancer cage, the old resistance fighter's imagination emerges. Writes Kovner:

How little we need  
to be happy:

a half-kilo increase in weight,  
two circuits of the corridors  
at Sloan-Kettering  
in bedroom slippers  
a morning without aspirin  
silence gentle as a pit,  
a distant  
sand dune  
behind the green bridge  
a patch of lawn  
and you beside me beginning  
to knit a new sweater.

When the plague of thick darkness immobilized the Egyptians "all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings" (Exodus 10:23). Says the Midrash: "Scripture does not say, 'in the land of Goshen,' but 'in their dwellings'—to show that wherever Jews entered, light entered with them and illuminated for them what was in casks, chests, and hidden depositories" (Exodus Rabba 14:3).

We, too, are carriers of light—a light that can illuminate the hospital corridor, shine through the shadows of illness and anxiety, and make livable the everyday rooms where each of us seeks meaning and purpose and survival. We are carriers of light when we have the strength and faith to imagine "you beside me" (Kovner) or "Thou art with me" (King David)... or "Let My people go." And this is a great human gift.

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*This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Sheldon Marder, Director of the Department of Jewish Life of the Jewish Home in San Francisco. Abba Kovner's Sloan-Kettering was published in Hebrew in 1987 by Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, B'nei B'rak, Israel; English translation by Eddie Levenston: Schocken Books, New York, 2002. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging.*

*More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at [www.JewishHealingCenter.org](http://www.JewishHealingCenter.org).*



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