

This week's parashah, Bo, sees the final three of the plagues, and the initial ritual commandments that will later play out as the Pesach seder. This week's parashah is arguably the basic contents about what it means to be Jewish. Consider that this is the parashah in which we are commanded to start counting the months, setting our clocks from slave time to liberation time. Jewish time starts in this parashah. And every Shabbat and every holiday, when we make Kiddush, we sing, "Zecher l'yetziat Mitzrayim," "this is a remembrance of our going out from Egypt." All of Jewish ritual harkens back to the identity forming moment of liberation.

But there is one more event that happens in all of the chaos of plagues, paschal sacrifice, and leaving. Back at the burning bush, at the end of Chapter 3 of Exodus, God concludes his instructions to Moses with the comment, "And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably to you, so that you will not go away empty handed." Now in this parasha, amid all of the ritual commandments, in Chapter 11, verses 2-3, God commands Moses, "now please tell the people to ask of their neighbors vessels of silver and gold. And Hashem disposed the Egyptians favorably towards the people." We don't actually have a description of how this plays out; the commandments move on to other subjects. In Chapter 12, however, right after the description of the final plague, the death of the first born, the text mentions in verses 35-6, "The Israelites had done Moses' bidding and asked of the Egyptians objects of silver and gold and clothing. And Hashem had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they stripped the Egyptians."

There are many ways of interpreting this. Is this base looting? Are the Israelites vindictively and opportunistically taking advantage of the devastation wrought on the Egyptians to plunder their treasures? The verb that I have translated as “asked,” as in “the Israelites asked of the Egyptians,” also can be translated as “borrowed,” as in “the Israelites borrowed from the Egyptians,” and many versions do translate it that way. Thus rendered we see not only looting, but deception – the Egyptians thought that they were loaning their objects, when in fact the Israelites were taking them for good.

Some commentators justify this, certainly legitimately, as reparations for 430 years of slavery. In a fanciful midrash related in the Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Sanhedrin 91a, centuries after the Exodus, the Egyptians come to sue the Israelites in the court of Alexander the Great, for the return of their precious objects. The sage Gaviha ben Pasisa faces them and says, “In that case, pay us for the wages for the 600,000 you enslaved in Egypt for 430 years.” And the Egyptians drop their case.

I could say that the Torah makes a case for reparations with this story, and indeed, I believe it does. I could give a whole drasha on how this parashah teaches us the moral necessity of making reparations for this country’s history of slavery – and I believe it does. But I won’t focus on that tonight, for two reasons – first of all, no matter how satisfying it might be for us to agree on this, I think it’s a bit of a waste of time to spend time telling us that something needs to happen that we in this room do not currently have the power to make happen.

But I also think that focusing only on that misses a subtler moral lesson that can apply to each of us in these times. Because there is a problem with the midrash I just quoted, for all that it is morally satisfying. In describing the slavery, the Torah says that Pharaoh had the Israelites working at hard labor – that is, that they were state prisoners to Pharaoh, not chattel slaves in the homes of the average Egyptian. And yet, it is the average Egyptian who furnishes these reparations, rather than Pharaoh's palace.

The key here is the Egyptian willingness to give these gifts. Remember, the Israelites ask the Egyptians, and the Egyptians are disposed favorably – every time this is described, that phrase is used. One of my favorite teachers, Rabbi Shai Held, notes that this moment serves to distinguish between the people and their Pharaoh. He quotes Bible scholar Benno Jacob, who wrote that, "The gifts given by the Egyptians were 'a clear public protest against the policies of the royal tyrant. They demonstrated a renewal of public conscience.'" And in fact this turn of events "showed a moral change; the receptive heart of the Egyptian people was now contrasted to the hard heart of Pharaoh."

By this interpretation, the Egyptians are motivated by genuine remorse or even affection for the Israelites who lived among them for so many centuries. They do not say, "Hey Pharaoh's in charge, and we just followed his orders," or even, "Hey Pharaoh's the one who oppressed you, not us – go get gold and silver from him." They have seen Pharaoh's intransigence. They understand that they have been complicit in a great wrong, and with what capacity they have, without permission from their Pharaoh, they freely choose to right it.

It is truly extraordinary to imagine that the Egyptians, having just experienced the devastation of the plagues, would have the ethical insight to blame not the Israelites but the policies of their Pharaoh and their own complicity, and would even in such a moment of devastation, be willing to give up more than what they had already lost.

I love this interpretation, not only for what it models about how to face our own complicity in society's ills, even as we also suffer – but particularly because it is willing to ascribe that lesson, such an advanced moral sensibility to the Egyptian people, who might otherwise be thought of as evil, as enemies. Benno Jacob points out that this interpretation is supported by what would otherwise be a curious commandment that shows up in Deuteronomy 23:8, “You shall not abhor an Egyptian for you were strangers in their land.” The implication, of course, being not the usual connotation of how we were strangers – an oppressed minority – in Egypt, but rather that they took us in; that they treated us decently.

And so these literal parting gifts are a reminder that a people, even with limited power, can be better than the public example set by their leader. That in fact, even when society is crumbling because of poor leadership, from the grassroots up, a people can still do the right thing. And finally, that in the face of a mentality of scarcity, generosity itself, can be an act of defiance, of social justice. On the anniversary Shabbat of the inauguration of the current administration, I think the lesson of the Egyptian people is one we should all be holding dear. Let us live up to their spirit.