

Be an Influencer

Category: Bo, Shemos

Leaving with great wealth from Egypt.

Egyptian Reparations

Since we became a nation, Jews have always been involved in money. Not just by having money but by holding key positions in the finance offices of the world's superpowers throughout the ages. Take Spain for example, where Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508), a Torah commentator no less, was the national financier. And even right at the birth of our nation, Josef was the viceroy in Egypt, and through his wisdom he made Egypt the richest country of the world.

The connection between Jews and money reaches to the days before we were actually a nation. In this week's Parsha, we read that the Jews, following Moses' instructions, asked their Egyptian neighbors to lend them objects of silver and gold. G-d caused the Jews to find favor in the Egyptian's eyes and they emptied Egypt of its riches. All of this was G-d's idea. G-d asked the Jews to do this for him so Abraham wouldn't complain that G-d had fulfilled the slavery promise but not the promise that the Jews would emerge from their slavery with great wealth!

Why was it so important to G-d that Jews amass great wealth before they leave Egypt?

The simplest answer is that G-d wanted to reimburse them for their suffering. But this answer would imply that human suffering can be measured and paid out in gold and silver. The Midrash tell us that when Moses told the Jews to gather the Egyptian wealth, they thought that this was the reason and they responded, "Let us just leave with our bodies." It was like a person who was sitting in prison and the guards told him that soon he would be freed and given a big reward. This person's response would probably be, "Give me my freedom today and I'll pass on the reward."

This brings to mind the debate about whether or not Jews should accept "reparation money" from the German government for their losses in the Holocaust. Many argued that it would be a disgrace to the martyrs if we would

accept the money, for the Germans may think that all was forgiven. The Rebbe argued, "Our Torah requires that stolen property must be taken from the thief, especially if the thief continues his thieving ways. In my opinion they must do everything in their power to extract as much money as possible. This way the money will be returned to its rightful owner."

The Rebbe never viewed such money as payment for the suffering and extermination of so many Jews. The Rebbe saw an opportunity to return stolen Jewish property into Jewish hands.

And indeed, history has shown that although the Germans paid a lot of money, they still bear the guilt of the Holocaust.

This same reasoning may just have been G-d's motive in having the Egyptians fork over all of their wealth. For if they ruled over the Jewish people physically they certainly ruled over their money. The Egyptians taxed the Jews till they had no money left to pay. Then they invited them to work instead of paying. So all of that money really belonged to the Jews originally. Now G-d simply wanted the Jews to collect their possessions before they left.

The Master Financial Plan

Still, there seems to be more to this than the return of unlawfully attained property. As we see earlier in Parshas Shemos, when G-d is talking to Moses from the burning bush, He already tells him, "I shall grant this people favor in the eyes of Egypt, so that it will happen that when you go you will not go empty-handed. Each woman shall request from her neighbor...silver vessels, golden vessels, and garments... and you shall empty out Egypt."

Even earlier we find that this idea was brought up. At the covenant G-d made with Avraham, before Yitzchak was born, G-d tells Avraham of a nation that is yet to exist. This nation will inherit the land of Israel, will endure slavery in Egypt and enjoy a great redemption. Then G-d makes sure to add, "And they will leave with an abundance of wealth."

From all this it's quite clear that we're not talking about compensation for the suffering or for the distress, rather a plan from the very beginning. When G-d was laying out the plan for the Jewish people, part of the plan was that they should

have “an abundance of wealth” and that was exactly what happened when the Jews left Egypt, and even more so at the Red Sea. Moses had to move the people against their will, for the Egyptians had adorned their horses with ornaments of silver and precious stones, and the Israelite were enthusiastically gathering them at the seashore. The spoils at the sea were greater than the spoils they took from Egypt. Therefore, he had to force them to move on and continue their journey.

When Bill Gates Speaks

We now know that the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai up to their necks in wealth, and we must ask the simple question: why was it so important to G-d that the Jewish nation be so wealthy, and to be so wealthy even before receiving the Torah? Wouldn't the opposite make sense? Most religions teach that man should live sparingly, that the less you have the better. Isn't physical wealth in general a contradiction to spirituality? Yet here, at the very birth of the Jewish people, G-d makes certain that they be phenomenally rich!

This week, we read about the death of the firstborn. At first glance, it raises a question: why the firstborn? Why not the youngest, or maybe the smartest, but why the firstborn?

The answer is given in Parshat Shemot, when G-d says to Moses “Go tell Pharaoh, ‘So said Hashem, Israel is My firstborn son. So, either you send out my son that he may serve Me or I shall kill your firstborn son.’” The killing of the firstborn was in direct retribution for the refusal to set free G-d's firstborn (*midah kineged midah*).

What does it mean to be G-d's firstborn?

Being G-d's firstborn, we are expected to set an example for the younger children. It's expected that the oldest will be a role model for his younger brothers and sisters, and that he will take responsibility for them, if ever their father is absent for any reason. And this is precisely what G-d wants from the Jewish people. That we should act like an oldest brother should. In one word: Be a light unto the nations. (Ok, 6 words.)

But there is a catch.

G-d knows that in order for the Jewish people to have any influence they have to have a prominent role in society. Only then would people give them any respect. When they see that you were successful in your business they are prepared to listen to you. For example, if Bill Gates would come give a speech here, everybody would rush to hear him, even though they know that he's not going to be giving out money. He might not even be talking about money. It might even cost money to get in to hear him speak, people would still pack the hall! Why? Because this is a man who was successful, and people are struck by successful people.

The Rebbe said, "When a poor man does something, he's laughed at. But when a rich man does something, even a foolish thing, and certainly a good thing, people emulate him. So when he puts on Tefilin, everybody puts on Tefilin. When he keeps Shabbos, everybody keeps Shabbos," And so on.

The Talmud states: "Rebbi would honor wealthy people." This does not mean big donors, because why would that be big news? Everybody does that. He would honor every rich man, because they have an influence on other people.

And therefore, in order for the Jewish people to have any influence on the nations of the world, G-d is always making sure, throughout history, that Jews should hold positions of influence, and specifically in the world of business. As we know, G-d gives us success in the physical and it's our responsibility to turn it into spiritual. We must take this influence that G-d has given us and use it to impress upon the nations the importance of connecting to G-d.

Let's get rich!