

REPARATIONS FROM G-D

Category: Devarim, Re'eh

Should America give reparations for past slavery? What does the Torah have to say on the topic?

Reparations

In the recent decades, there's been an ongoing debate in the United States regarding reparations—not reparations from Germany to Holocaust survivors but payouts for those who were slaves in the United States before the civil war.

Now, even though slavery no longer exists in developed countries and has not existed in the United States for 150 years, there are descendants of slaves today who claim that the United States got rich off their ancestors' backs—off the hard slave labor of their forebears.

As an example, they cite great cotton plantations that made a lot of Southerners quite wealthy— while the people out in the field doing the hard work by hand were slaves who never got a penny for their work. On their backs did America get rich, they argue—and as such, they, their living descendants, deserve compensation.

To prove their arguments, they actually cite the example of the payments that the State of Israel has gotten from Germany since World War II, arguing that America should likewise take responsibility for the crimes committed in previous centuries.

Now, economics professors estimate that that we're talking about billions of dollars here— money that the United States doesn't exactly have. Others suggest that every descendant of slaves be granted a free education and free healthcare for the next 100 years.

The problem is that many members of today's African-American community are not descendants of the actual slaves but rather “Johnny come lately”—so why, some ask, should they benefit from any such reparations? For example, President Barack Obama himself, America's first black president, is not the descendant of

slaves (while First Lady Michelle Obama, on the other hand, actually is).

What's more, there are black historians who also blame slavery on black leaders in Africa at the time for selling their brothers and sisters into slavery in America—so perhaps, it is argued, reparations should be demanded from *their* descendants?

Finally, research into American public opinion has shown that the overwhelming majority of white America does not support the idea of reparations. Only eighteen percent favor it.

So, what does Judaism say about it? Well, let's take a look at this week's Torah portion.

The Consolation Prize

In this week's Parshah, the Torah portion of Re'ei, the Torah (Devarim 15:12) discusses the laws of slaves: "If your brother, a Hebrew man... is sold to you, he shall serve you for six years, and in the seventh year you shall send him forth free from you."

In Judaism, we have the concept of *avadim*. The word generally translates to "slaves"—but given the many laws of humane treatment, it translates far closer to "servants" or "workers." (The word "slaves" invokes starvation, beatings, imprisonment, overwork, torture and death— and in Judaism, *avadim* involves no permission for any of that.)

For example, in Judaism, you might have a case of a man stealing money from another—with no way to pay his victim back. In the era of the Tanach, the Jewish court had the legal power to sell the Jewish thief as an *eved* (singular of *avadim*) to another Jew for a sentence of six years—with the money from the "sale" going to the victim of his crime.

So there, the Torah goes on with a very important instruction (Devarim 15:13-14): "And when you send him forth free from you, you shall not send him forth empty-handed...You shall surely provide him from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your vat, you shall give him from what the L-rd, your G-d, has blessed you."

In plain English, when the *eved* completes his sentence of “community service” (and that’s what it really is) and goes free, the Torah forbids sending him away empty-handed. Instead, the boss must give him “provisions”—a significant gift as a sign of appreciation for his work, thus appeasing him for having had to be a “slave” for six years.

When G-d Gave It To Us

Now, why would the “master” need to give his “slave” such a substantial gift?

The Torah explains and continues (Devarim 15:15): “And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,” which Rashi explains by adding, “And I loaded you up [with spoils], and then did so a second time, from the spoil of Egypt and from the spoil at the Sea [of Reeds]; so too should you load him up, and then do so a second time.”

That refers to the fact that the Jewish Nation lived in exile in ancient Egypt for 210 years, of which 80 consisted of real slavery—and so, when the Jews finally left Egypt, G-d saw to it that they would get “consolation prizes” for all the suffering and hard labor that was their lot.

The Rebbe points out a sicha that G-d paid the Jews not once but twice: “And I loaded you up [with spoils], and then did so a second time.”

The first time was the “spoils of Egypt,” when G-d charged Moshe, “please speak in the ears of the people” that every woman “request” of her (Egyptian) neighbor silver and gold utensils, and clothing.

But G-d was not satisfied with that. Instead, after the Splitting of the Reed Sea, when the Egyptians had been drowned in the Sea, all the gold and jewelry that they had been wearing washed up on the seashore, with the Jews collecting it and benefiting a second time.

Thus, in our Parshah, G-d demands from the Jew that he, too, act accordingly and provide for his “slave” twice. As the Sifri puts it: “Just as I gave you with a broad hand, so too shall you give to him with a broad hand” (Likutei Sichos Vol. 24, pg. 87.)

In fact, the Midrash tells us that during the reign of Alexander the Great, the

Egyptians took the Jews to a court case presided over by Alexander the Great himself. They claimed that because it said in the Torah itself that the Jews “requested” silver and gold utensils “and emptied Egypt,” they now were asking for their silver and gold back.

Representing the Jews at this court case was an eccentric Jew named Geviha Ben-Pesisa. Well, he got up and said, “We had 600,000 ancestors living in Egypt who were enslaved by the Egyptians to produce brick and mortar and all sorts of other work for free, for 400 years. So, if our work was worth one selah a day, let’s figure out how much our work was worth!”

So the court mathematicians started crunching some numbers—and they didn’t even get to 100 years of work before they calculated that all of Egypt should belong to the Jews, and the Egyptians “left in embarrassment” (Midrash Tanchuma Chap. 3; Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 91a; Bereishis Rabbah, *ibid.*)

Where Else Are Reparations?

So we thus have it that the explicit Jewish position regarding the “reparations” at the Exodus is that it is compensation for slavery in Egypt.

Not only that, but who is “the first Jewish slave” in the Torah?

Well, we all remember the saga of Yosef, who was sold as a slave—“and there with us was a Hebrew lad, a slave of the chief butcher” (Shmos 41:12). But even with Yosef, the Rebbe would quote his own father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneersohn, who taught that Yosef was given a gift by the Pharaoh in the fact that he was appointed as viceroy to the king. Not only that, but Yosef also got a present from his master, Poti Phera—as the Torah tells us, the Pharaoh “gave him Asnas, the daughter of Poti Phera” as a wife (Bereishis 41:12).

We thus have it that Judaism maintains that a slave, whether a servant or worker or a real slave, who goes free must be provided for by his master.

This obligation is incumbent upon the master—and if he doesn’t give him that gift for whatever reason, then the company that employed him is morally and humanely obligated to see to it that he gets a “gift” for all the years of work, and thereby appease him.

But now the question is: is that company obligation only towards the actual workers themselves—or also towards their descendants, even descendants who live 150 years later? Are those descendants deserving of such “provisions”?

There are some opinions in the Talmud that hold that just as there are inheritance laws that come into play with every other thing, so too are there inheritance laws that come into play here. And so, if the “slave” dies before his boss or company gives him the “severance gift,” then it is to be given to his survivors. And in like manner, if the boss dies before he is able to give his employee his “severance gift” upon going free, then the living descendants of the boss are now legally obligated to give the employee that gift out of their inheritance money.

As for the verdict regarding U.S. reparations to descendants of slaves, we’ll leave that to the politicians and elected leaders. But nowadays, when we don’t have the stereotypical servants and masters of yesteryear—how are to keep this mitzvah today anyway?

The Rebbe once quoted the Chinuch who says that when a Jew does work for you, you need to give him a “provision”—or what we’d today call a tip—as a sign of recognition and appreciation for his work; this in reflection of the Torah’s command for the slave’s provisions (Likutei Sichos Vol. 19, pg. 155).

And when we give such tips to our fellow Jews for work they do for us, G-d reacts in kind, “paying” us for the work that we do—not just the “regular pay” that we’ve earned but a “tip,” too.

The bigger the tip we give others, the bigger the “tip” G-d gives us.

Good Shabbos!