

As slaves, we earned our dignity by doing the honorable thing

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Exodus 10:1-13:16

Jeremiah 46:13-46:28

Most people don't need to be begged to take the money. But that wasn't the case here, in this strange pair of verses. In our Torah portion, we learn that after the ninth plague of darkness, HaShem tells Moses that the Jewish people should go and ask their Egyptian friends to give us some of their gold and silver utensils:

"Please speak in the ears of the people. Let each man request of his fellow and each woman of her fellow silver vessels and golden vessels. HaShem granted the people favor in the eyes of Egypt. Moreover, Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people" (Ex. 11:2-3).

The classic commentary of the Chizkuni suggests that we were to ask the Egyptians for this gold and silver as a permanent gift. The Torah mandates that when slaves are set free, they are to be offered gifts as they depart. These were the requisite gifts as a result of our slavery.

"Please speak in the ears of the people" is indicative of a request. HaShem is saying "please go and take the money." Why do we have to be begged to take the money? Why are we unwilling to accept a trifling recognition of recompense after years of being enslaved?

Further, the Torah records that we found favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Not only us, but Moses too. And HaShem commands us to take precious items from our "fellows," our friends, the Egyptians. Since when are they our friends? And why do they suddenly like us so much? We are the cause of their country's ruin! Moses and the plagues decimate Egypt, and suddenly they love us? They should hate us even more!

The Talmud in Berachot (9A-B) explains this odd command by recounting a conversation between Moses and HaShem at this point. As the Maharsha explains it, HaShem is concerned that the Jewish People will refuse to take any remuneration from the Egyptians and points out that this will cause a problem; HaShem promised Avraham that his descendants would leave the land of their foreign oppression with great wealth. If the Jews leave Egypt without gold and silver, it would violate HaShem's promise to Avraham! The people's response in this dialogue? "It would be great if we could get out with our selves." The Talmud goes on to explain that the people were most concerned about making it out alive and not with material goods. (Of course, HaShem tends to win an argument and we go and take the money because He asked.)

What does this mean? Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch offers insight into the newfound respect that the Egyptians had for the Jews. For three days, Egypt had been dark. The people couldn't see a thing, but the Torah testifies that this did not affect the Jews. We could see. After three days, the light came back and the Egyptians were startled to find that everything was still there. We didn't take a thing. Every last item was exactly where they had left it before the lights went out. Suddenly they realized that the slaves that they had been oppressing were upstanding, moral people. Also, we didn't bear a grudge after all these years of slavery. We weren't happy that they were being hurt, and we weren't taking advantage of the opportunity. No. We simply wanted to go free and live our lives.

This is why the Egyptians liked us. We had gained new respect in their eyes. We weren't a contemptible people, we were a people of honesty and integrity. They respected that, and saw us in a new light. They were then happy to give us the sorts of gifts that one offers a freed slave.

Surely this sends just as powerful a message today. There are times that we are tempted to take advantage. It seems like it's coming to us, like we never received what we deserved. "It's only fair that I should get this. I'm just evening things up." But this is not who we are. We are a people of integrity, and ultimately we need to live with the one that we see when we look in the mirror.