

Parashat Bo

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“REQUESTING” THE EGYPTIANS’ PROPERTY

- Why does God command the nation to request from the Egyptians their property?
- What is the significance of leaving Egypt “with great wealth”?
- Where is it mentioned that the people left Egypt wealthy, and why is this repeated four times?
- Did the nation act unethically by requesting from the Egyptians their property with no intention of returning it?

Abram had already been promised at the Covenant between the Parts that the nation of Israel would leave Egypt wealthy. Ultimately, the wealth that the nation took with them from Egypt was acquired by requesting clothing and vessels of silver and gold from the Egyptians – which of course the people had no intention of returning.

In several different places, the Torah devotes a number of verses to the subject of leaving Egypt with great wealth. This repetition indicates that this is a significant point and a vital aspect of the process of redemption. We will expand upon this below; we will also discuss the ethics of the nation’s seemingly devious strategy for attaining the wealth and explain why it was necessary.

A. The Command to Request the Vessels before the Plague of the Firstborn

Please speak in the ears of the nation, and let each man request from his fellow man and each woman from her fellow woman vessels of silver and vessels of gold. (Ex. 11:2)

דְּבַר נָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וְיִשְׁאַלְוּ אִישׁ מֵאִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעִיתָהּ כָּלִי כֶסֶף וְכָלִי זָהָב. (שמות י"א, ב)

Asking the Egyptians for their property seems to be a minor point within the broader narrative of the exodus from Egypt. Yet God commands the nation to request the vessels, as opposed to letting the nation decide itself whether to do so.

“Please Speak” – A Request, Not a Command

Generally, the Torah uses the following phrase to indicate a command: “Speak to the children of Israel...” Here however there is a small yet significant change: “Please speak in the ears of the nation.” The word “please” changes the command to a request.¹ The phrase “in the ears of the nation” is also unusual – it

1 The phrase “Please speak” does not appear anywhere else in the Torah. However, it does appear twice in the Prophets, where it indicates pleading. In one case, Tamar pleads with Amnon: “And now, **please speak** to the king, for he will not keep me from you” (II Sam. 13:13). The same phrase is used by Hezekiah’s ministers to ask Rabshakeh not to weaken the nation by speaking in Hebrew within earshot of the people: “**Please speak** in Aramaic to your servants, for we understand it, and do not speak the Jews’ language to us in the ears of the nation” (II Kings 18:26).

seems to indicate that the nation must be encouraged and persuaded to do so.²

This understanding of the verses is somewhat puzzling. It is natural for slaves on their way to freedom to want to take their former masters’ property. Here however, the text describes the opposite: the idea to take the Egyptians’ property comes from God, not from the nation. Moreover God does not simply command them to do so – He asks Moses to ask the nation to request vessels from the Egyptians. The *midrash* states:

“Please speak in the ears of the nation, etc.” – the school of Rabbi Yannai said: **Please is only used for requests**; God said to Moses: **Please, I ask of you**, go and tell the nation of Israel: **Please, I ask of you**, request vessels of gold and silver from Egypt...³ They said

”דבר נא באזני העם וגו’” – אמרי דבי רבי ינאי: אין נא אלא לשון בקשה, אמר ליה הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: בבקשה ממך, לך ואמור להם לישראל; בבקשה מכם, שאלו ממצרים כלי כסף וכלי

2 The phrase “speak in the ears of” appears in a number of other places in the Torah to indicate that the message conveyed has been absorbed and accepted: “And God said to Moses, ‘Write this as a memorial in the book and **put it in the ears of Joshua**’” (Ex. 17:14); the *Sifri* notes: “And Moses spoke all of the words of this song **in the ears of the nation**” – this teaches us that it sunk in to their ears” (*Sifri* on Deut. 32:44 [*piska* 29]).

3 We will discuss the reasons for this unusual request below, including the explanation suggested later in this *midrash*: “So that the *tzaddik* [Abraham] would not say: ‘And they shall enslave them and torture them’ (Gen. ch. 15) – this He fulfilled for them; ‘and afterward they shall leave with great wealth’ – this He did not fulfill for them...”

to him: If only we ourselves could leave. This is likened to a man who was bound in a prison, and people said to him: tomorrow you will be taken out of the prison and given a great deal of money, and he says to them: Please, I ask of you, take me out today and I shall not ask for anything more. (*Brachot* 9a-b)

זהב... אמרו לו: ולואי שנצא בעצמנו. משל לאדם שהיה חבוש בבית האסורים, והיו אומרים לו בני אדם: מוציאין אותך למחר מבית האסורין ונותנין לך ממון הרבה, ואומר להם: בבקשה מכם, הוציאוני היום ואיני מבקש כלום. (ברכות ט', א-ב)

According to this *midrash*, the people's desire to leave Egypt was so strong that they were willing to forgo the promise of leaving with great wealth. God had to plead with them to request property from the Egyptians.⁴ **Why is it so important to God that the nation leave with the Egyptians' property?** Aren't there other ways for God to give the nation wealth?

Break in the Dialogue with Pharaoh

This point becomes even more puzzling when we consider the context in which God's request appears:

Following the plague of darkness (Ex. 10:21-23) Pharaoh is still unwilling to free the Israelites, and he drives Moses out of his presence. But before he

4 Below we will discuss other explanations for the nation's passive role in devising the plan to request the Egyptians' property.

does so, when Moses is still standing before him⁵ and warning him of the Plague of the Firstborn, the Torah interrupts the scene to describe Moses' prophecy regarding the Plague of the Firstborn (Ex. 11:1-8). This prophecy contains two verses which seem out of place. One states God's command to request property from the Egyptians (11:2); the other describes the Egyptians' attitude toward the nation and defines Moses' status in the eyes of both the Israelites and the Egyptians (11:3):

And God said to Moses, "One more plague I shall bring upon Pharaoh and Egypt, and afterward he will

ויאמר ה' אל משה עוד נגע אֶחָד אָבִיא עַל פְּרַעֲהוּ וְעַל מִצְרַיִם

5 Ibn Ezra writes regarding this point:

"ויאמר ה'" – היה ראוי שתהיה דבקה בפסוק הזה פרשת "ויאמר משה כה אמר ד", ונכנסה ביניהם פרשת "עוד נגע אחד"...

"And God said" – this verse should have begun with the section, "And Moses said, 'Thus said God,'" but in between them came the section, "One more plague"... (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 11:1)

Similarly, Nahmanides writes, quoting Rashi:

"ויאמר ה' אל משה עוד נגע אחד" – בעמדו לפני פרעה נאמר לו זה, שהרי משיצא מלפניו לא הוסיף ראות פניו, לשון רש"י. וכן אמרו רבותינו (שמות רבה י"ח, א) קפץ עליו האלהים, כביכול נכנס בפלטין של פרעה. בשביל משה שאמר לא אוסיף עוד ראות פניך שלא ימצא בדאי.

"And God said to Moses, 'One more plague'" – this was said to him as he stood before Pharaoh, for we know that when he left [Pharaoh] he did not see his face again; this is Rashi's interpretation. And our sages said that God jumped upon him, so to speak, entering Pharaoh's palace on Moses' behalf, so that his statement: "I shall not see your face again" would not be found false (*Shemot Rabba* 18:1). (Nahmanides on Ex. 11:1)

Rashbam, Rabbi Yosef Bechor-Shor and *Hizkuni* (ad loc.) suggest similar explanations.

release you from this; when he releases you, he shall surely drive you out from this. Please speak in the ears of the nation, and let each man request from his fellow man and each woman from her fellow woman vessels of silver and vessels of gold.” And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and the man Moses was also very great in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh’s servants and in the eyes of the nation. (Ex. 11:1-3)

אֲחֲרֵי כִּי יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה בְּשִׁלְחוֹ כָּל־הָגֵרֶשׁ יִגְרַשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה: דִּבֶּר נָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וְיִשְׁאַלְוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב: וַיִּתֵּן ה' אֶת חֵן הָעָם בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם גַּם הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה גָדוֹל מְאֹד בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּעֵינֵי פְרַעֲהוּ וּבְעֵינֵי הָעָם. (שְׁמוֹת פֶּרֶק י"א פס' א-ג)

Why does this prophecy appear in the middle of Moses’ conversation with Pharaoh? The mention of Moses’ prophecy regarding the Plague of the Firstborn can be interpreted in two ways:

1. Moses might have received the prophecy at that very moment, as Pharaoh prepared to drive him and Aaron out of his presence.
2. Moses may have heard this prophecy beforehand,⁶

6 Ibn Ezra explains that the prophecy regarding the Plague of the Firstborn was actually given to Moses when he left Midian:

...ונכנסה ביניהם פרשת “עוד נגע אחד” והטעם להורות זה, שאמר כה אמר ד’. ומתי נאמר לו. וזה נאמר לו במדין “עוד הנה אנכי הורג את בנך בכורך” (שמות ד’, כג).
 ...And the section of “One more plague” was inserted here to teach [that this was said in the name of God], for he said “Thus says God.” And when was this said to him? When he left Midian, [where it is written] “Behold, I shall kill your firstborn son” (Ex. 4:23). (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 11:1)

and it is mentioned here as a preface to the statement beginning “Thus said God.” This introduction serves to remind us that Moses is not speaking on his own initiative; he is transmitting God’s words.

Requesting the Vessels and the Plague of the Firstborn

But why does the directive to request the Egyptians’ possessions (verse 2) appear here? How is it related to Moses’ dialogue with Pharaoh? This prophecy was meant for the Israelites alone and it clearly should not be mentioned before Pharaoh!⁷

However, the prophecy regarding the nation’s requesting the Egyptians’ property was not given here; it was mentioned much earlier, during the encounter at the burning bush.

7 According to the explanation that the prophecy of the Plague of the Firstborn was given at the last moment, before the command that “You shall not see my face again” – what need is there for the prophecy regarding the nation’s request for the Egyptians’ property? The second explanation – that Moses received these two prophecies at two different times – is even more baffling: why are the two prophecies joined here if Moses only needs one of them at the moment?

Ibn Ezra continues to explain that a connection was forged between these two prophecies at the burning bush:

ובבוא מכת בכורים צווה מאת השם בהר סיני שישאלו איש מאת רעהו...

And when the time of the Plague of the Firstborn came, he was commanded by God at Mount Sinai that each man would request of his fellow man... (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 11:1)

While this connection is not explicitly stated in the text, it is alluded to:

וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת יָדִי וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹל נִפְלְאוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אַעֲשֶׂה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַחֲרֵי כֵן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם: וְנִתְּתִי אֶת חֵן הָעָם הַזֶּה בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם וְהָיָה כִּי תִלְכּוּן לֹא תִלְכּוּן רִיקָם: וְשִׁאֲלָה אִשָּׁה מִשְׁכֵּנֶתָהּ וּמִגֵּרַת בֵּיתָהּ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְכָל־יְהִי וְהָב וּשְׁמַלְתָּ וּשְׁמַתָּם עַל בְּנֵיכֶם וְעַל בְּנֹתֵיכֶם וְנִצַּלְתֶּם אֶת מִצְרַיִם.

And I shall reach out My hand and strike Egypt **with all of the wonders that I shall do within it**, and afterward he will send you out. And I shall give the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt, and it will be that when you leave you shall

**Giving Favor
and the
Plague of the
Firstborn**

The next verse (3) adds further details that are irrelevant to the current dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh:

And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt, and the man Moses was also very great in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the nation. (Ex. 11:3)

ויתן ה' את חן העם בעיני מצרים, גם האיש משה גדול מאד בארץ מצרים בעיני עבדי פרעה ובעיני העם.

This point is related to the fact that the nation will later request property from the Egyptians⁸ – it

not leave empty-handed. And each woman shall request from her neighbor and from those who dwell in her house vessels of silver and vessels of gold and clothing; and you shall place them on your sons and daughters, and you shall take advantage of Egypt. (Ex. 3:20-22)

Still, our question remains: why does the Torah juxtapose these two prophecies while Moses stands before Pharaoh?

- 8 As God states during the encounter at the burning bush: “And I shall give the nation favor... and each woman shall request from her neighbor...” (Ex. 3:21-22), and subsequently: “And they requested from the Egyptians... and God gave the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt and they requested from them...” (Ex. 12:35-36). **Ibn Ezra** suggests a similar explanation: “The text states that God fulfilled his promise to Moses – ‘and I shall give the nation favor.’ And the reason for ‘And so too the man Moses’ is that many of [the Egyptians] agreed to lend [their property] out of respect to Moses” (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 11:3).

The following *midrash* makes a similar point:

“וישאלו איש מאת רעהו ואשה מאת רעותה” – וכי מצרים ריעהם של ישראל היו, שהכתוב אומר “איש מאת רעהו ואשה מאת רעותה?” אלא מלמד שאחרי המכות נהיו המצריים כריעים וכאובים לישראל, כדי להשאיל להם כלים, וישראל היה אומר לו למצרי ריעי ואהובי השאילני כלי זה, או מלבוש זה, כלי כסף וכלי זהב זה, ולא היה לו למצרי פנים למונעו ממנו, שנאמר ויתן ה' את חן העם בעיני מצרים...”

“And let each man request from his fellow man and each woman from her fellow woman” – and were the Egyptians

explains why the Egyptians agreed to give over their belongings to the Israelites. But this description of the Egyptians' favorable view of the nation can also be interpreted independently of their requesting the Egyptians' property.⁹ Nahmanides writes:

For the people of Egypt did not hate them for the plagues, but continued to love them

שלא היו אנשי מצרים שונאים אותם על המכות, אבל מוסיפים בהם אהבה

the Israelites' fellow men, that the text should say, “Each man request from his fellow man and each woman from her fellow woman”? Rather, this teaches us that after the plagues the Egyptians became as friends and admirers of the nation of Israel so that they would [agree to] lend them their belongings. The Israelite would say to the Egyptian, “My beloved friend, lend me this vessel, or this article of clothing, this silver vessel and this gold one,” and the Egyptian could not refuse him, for as it says: “And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt...” (*Pesikta Zutreta (Lekach Tov)* on Ex. ch. 11, *siman 2*)

This *midrash* addresses the commentators' question (see the end of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Ex. 11:1) regarding the discrepancy between God's command at the burning bush: “And each woman shall request **from her neighbor and from those who dwell in her house,**” and the command in chapter 11: “And let each man request from **his fellow man** and each woman from **her fellow woman.**” This discrepancy was a result of the closeness that developed between the people of Israel and the Egyptians, and the Egyptians' admiration of the nation.

- 9 Had the verse describing the Egyptians' admiration (verse 3) preceded the one describing the request for property (verse 2), the two verses could have been understood simply as relating to the same topic, as Ibn Ezra interprets them (see note 7). Indeed, as we shall see below, there is a connection between the two points. However, since the verse describing the request for property appears first, the fact that the Egyptians favor the Israelites seems to stand alone as an independent point (as Nahmanides points out in response to Ibn Ezra's commentary – see note 10). We will discuss this issue below.

and favor them, saying: We, too, the wicked, perpetrate evil, and it is appropriate that God favor you. And so too the man Moses was great in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and people, and in the eyes of the nation of Israel.¹⁰

ונושאים חן בעיניהם
לאמר: אנחנו הרשעים גם
עושים חמס, וראוי הוא
שיחונן אתכם הא־להים.
וגם האיש משה, המביא
עליהם המכות, גדול מאד
בעיני עבדי פרעה ואנשי
ריבו, ובעיני העם ישראל.

At this point there is a significant change in the Egyptians' attitude towards the Israelites. Not only do they not hate them for the plagues – they respect them and feel that their enslavement is unjust.

Pharaoh, on the other hand, has not changed his feelings towards the Israelites so he drives Moses out of his presence.

Verse 3 might serve to emphasize the contrast between the people's changed attitude toward Israel with Pharaoh's own stubborn hard-heartedness that motivates him to drive Moses and Aaron out of his presence. The placement of verse 3 now seems appropriate – this contrast should be stressed during Moses' warning to Pharaoh regarding the Plague of the Firstborn.

At this point, the only remaining question is

¹⁰ Later in his commentary, Nahmanides explains that the Egyptians' admiration of the Israelites is unrelated to the request for the vessels: "And one cannot interpret 'And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt' to refer to favor [which allowed them to] request, for now, during the promise [regarding the property], it does not say 'And God gave...'"

regarding the placement of verse 2, which mentions the command to request property from the Egyptians.

B. Requesting the Property during the Haste of Leaving Egypt

Later in the chapter, the nation fulfills God's request by requesting the Egyptians' property. After the Plague of the Firstborn, in an ambiance of urgency and pressure as the Egyptians are described as hurrying to "send them out of the land, for they said, 'We shall all die'" (Ex. 12:33) and as the Israelites leave in such haste that their bread has no time to rise (Ex. 12:34), the request regarding the vessels is mentioned:

And the Children of Israel did as Moses said, and they requested from the Egyptians vessels of silver and vessels of gold and clothing. And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt, and they requested from them and they took advantage of Egypt. (Ex. 12:35-36)

ובני ישראל עשו
כדבר משה וישאלו
ממצרים כלי כסף
וכלי זהב ושמלת:
וה' נתן את חן
העם בעיני מצרים
וישאלום וינצלו את
מצרים. (שמות י"ב
לה-לו)

However, according to Rav Sa'adia Gaon, the request actually took place earlier¹¹:

¹¹ The original Hebrew verse indicates this by placing the subject before the verb ("VeHashem natan"), which Rashi understands as expressing the past perfect tense:

“They did” – beforehand, as Moses commanded them. “עשו” – או, כמו שצווה להם משה.

Still, this does not explain why the Torah chose to mention the request for the vessels at this point when it could have been mentioned beforehand¹² or

“And Adam had known [*veha’adam yada*] [his wife Eve]” – before the events mentioned above; before he sinned and was driven out of the Garden of Eden. (Rashi on Gen. 4:1)

Mizrachi comments:

דאס לא בין זידע אדם מיבעי ליה, כמנהג הכתוב בכל מקום לכתוב הפעולות זו אחור זו על הסדר עם תוספת וי”ו בראשה. כמו “ותהר” ואחריו “ותלד”, ואחריו “ותאמר קניתי” ואחריו “ותוסף ללדת” ואחריו “ויהי הבל”. אבל “והאדם ידע” שהקדים השם לפועל משמע שהוא ספור מה שעבר, כמו “ויוסף הורד מצרימה” שחזור לענין ראשון וכן “והנחש היה ערום” שכבר היה ערום, אלא שהסמיכו כאן ללמד מאיזו עצה קפץ הנחש עליהם, כמו שכתב הרב שם

For were it not so, it should have been written “And Adam knew [*vayeda ha’adam*],” as it is the usual way of the text to list the actions one after another with a *vav* prefixed to them. Such as “And she became pregnant,” then “And she gave birth,” then “And she said, ‘I have brought forth,’” then “And she gave birth again,” and then “And Abel was.” But “And Adam had known [*veha’adam yada*], in which the subject precedes the verb, indicates that this is telling of previous events, similar to “And Joseph had been taken down to Egypt [*veYosef hurad Mitzrayima*],” which returned to an earlier matter. So too “And the snake had been cunning [*vehanachash haya arum*]” – it was cunning already, but this was mentioned in order to teach us the reason that the snake came upon them, as [Rashi] commented there. (*Mizrachi* on Gen. 4:1)

See the continuation of his commentary for further discussion. Malbim and *HaKtav VeHaKabbala* discuss similar aspects of the verse in Exodus.

12 *Ba’alei HaTosafot* comments on this point:

“ובני ישראל עשו כדבר משה וישאלו ממצרים” – היה לו לכותבו לעיל גבי “דבר נא באוני העם”, דכתיב שם “וה’ נתן את חן העם וכו’”. אלא לפי שהיו כסף וכלי זהב של מצרים צוררים בשקיהם של ישראל, וכשבאו המצריים לשאול כליהם היו אומרים להם צוררים הם בשקינו, המתינו ונתיר ונתן לכם, והם אומרים לא נמתין כל כך, שנאמר “ותחזק מצרים על העם”, ולכך כתב אצל צרוות בשמלותם ובני

afterward (as part of the description of the nation leaving Egypt with wealth and property).

In fact, the placement of this verse reveals the importance of this point: despite the impatience on all sides for the nation to leave Egypt, the Israelites still did not forget to request the Egyptians’ property.

That the command to request the Egyptians’ property is mentioned during Moses’ prophecy regarding the Plague of the Firstborn and that it is carried out during the Israelites’ hasty departure from Egypt, emphasizes the importance of requesting the property.

C. Description of Requesting the Property at the Burning Bush

The commandment to request the Egyptians’ property appears in God’s speech to Moses at the burning bush

ישראל עשו.

“And the Children of Israel did as Moses said, and they requested from the Egyptians” – it should have been written earlier, by “Please speak in the ears of the nation,” since it is written there: “And God gave the nation favor, etc.” But since the Egyptians’ vessels of silver and vessels of gold were bundled in the Israelites’ sacks, and when the Egyptians came to ask about their vessels, [the Israelites] said to them, “They are bundled in our sacks, wait and we will unpack them and return them to you,” and [the Egyptians] said, “We shall not wait that long,” as it says: “And the Egyptians urged the people to leave,” and this is why “And the Children of Israel did” is written near “bundled in their garments” (Ex. 12:34). (*Ba’alei HaTosafot* on Ex. 12:35)

(Ex. ch. 3). After God commands Moses: “And now, go and I shall send you to Pharaoh, and take my nation, the Children of Israel, from Egypt” (Ex. 3:10), Moses asks God: “When I come to the Children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your forefathers has sent me to you,’ and they shall say to me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” (Ex. 3:13). In response, God presents Moses with a number of signs (“I shall be as I shall be,” “I have surely come to their aid”¹³). Later, God describes the stages of the process to Moses: Moses will speak to the elders and go with them to Pharaoh, they will request permission from Pharaoh to serve God in the wilderness for three days, Pharaoh will refuse, God will bring the plagues upon Egypt, Pharaoh will agree to let the nation leave, and finally:

<p>And I shall give the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt, and it will be that when you leave you shall not leave empty-handed. And each woman shall request from her neighbor and from those who dwell in her house vessels of silver and vessels of gold and clothing; and you shall place them on your sons and daughters, and you shall take advantage of Egypt. (Ex. 3:21-22)</p>	<p>וְנָתַתִּי אֶת חֵן הָעַם הַזֶּה בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלְכוּן לֹא תֵלְכוּ רֵיקָם: וְשָׂאֵלָה אִשָּׁה מִשְׁכֵּנֶתָהּ וּמִגֵּרַת בֵּיתָהּ כְּלֵי כֶסֶף וְכֵלֵי זָהָב וְשִׂמְלֹת וְשִׂמְתֶם עַל בְּנֵיכֶם וְעַל בָּנוֹתֵיכֶם וְנִצַּלְתֶם אֶת מִצְרַיִם. (שְׁמוֹת ג', כ"א-כ"ב)</p>
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13 See our lesson on *Parashat Vayeshev* for further discussion of the sign: “I have surely come to their aid,” which was passed down from Joseph.

As part of the nation’s liberation from Egypt, they will be favored by the Egyptians¹⁴ which will result in the Egyptians agreeing to lend the Israelites their belongings.

Why is this such a crucial aspect of the process of redemption?

D. The Promise of Wealth at the Covenant between the Parts

This matter is emphasized further at the Covenant between the Parts when God reveals both the nation’s enslavement and their subsequent liberation and great wealth:

“And afterward they shall leave with great wealth”

<p>And He said to Abram, “Know surely that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and tortured, for four hundred years. And then the nation under whom they labor I shall judge as well, and afterward they shall leave with great wealth. (Gen. 15:13)</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם, יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה וְרַעַךְ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעֹבְדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה: וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דֵּן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרָי כֵּן יֵצְאוּ בְרִבְשׁ גָּדוֹל. (בראשית ט"ו, יג)</p>
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Why is Leaving with Property so Important?

The matter of “leaving with great wealth” is apparently not just a secondary benefit of leaving Egypt – it

14 As Nahmanides explains – the Egyptians changed their attitude toward the Israelites and recognized the injustice they had perpetrated, and therefore did not hate the nation for bringing the plagues upon them.

seems to be a fundamental stage in the journey of the nation from enslavement to redemption. It is part of a historical paradigm, which is the reason it is mentioned during each step of the redemption: at the Covenant between the Parts (the vision), at the burning bush (the message), during the warning regarding the Plague of the Firstborn (the turning point), and finally, at the heart of the hasty exodus from Egypt (the realization).

Once again, the question arises: **why is requesting the Egyptians' property central to the process of redemption?**

Reservations about Taking the Property

Not only do we feel that taking the Egyptians' property should be dwarfed by the enormity of the redemption itself, but the very fact that it is mentioned at this uplifting moment is discomfiting:

- A. The redemption itself is so enormously significant – why would anyone be thinking of money at this point?¹⁵
- B. The focus on property seems somewhat greedy and unnecessary. Is material wealth so important that

15 As mentioned in the *midrash* quoted above:

אמרו לו: ולואי שנצא בעצמנו. משל לאדם שהיה חבוש בבית האסורים, והיו אומרים לו בני אדם: מוציאין אותך למחר מבית האסורין ונותנין לך ממון הרבה, ואומר להם: בבקשה מכם, הוציאוני היום ואיני מבקש כלום.

They said to him: If only we ourselves could leave. This is likened to a man who was bound in a prison, and people said to him: tomorrow you will be taken out of the prison and given a great deal of money, and he says to them: Please, I ask of you, take me out today and I shall not ask for anything more. (*Brachot* 9a-b)

God needed to promise it to Abram hundreds of years earlier? Was this what Abram was concerned about upon hearing that his descendants were to be enslaved in a strange land for four hundred years?¹⁶ Is the promise “And afterward they shall leave with great wealth” meant to comfort Abram for the slavery his descendants are destined to endure? Does the wealth somehow compensate for the slavery?¹⁷

16 This is especially puzzling when we consider the context in which Abram is promised that his descendants will be wealthy. The Covenant between the Parts took place immediately after Abram graciously refused to accept the property offered to him in the wake of the war with the four kings:

ויאמר מלך סדם אל אברם תן לי הנפש והרכש קח לך: ויאמר אברם אל מלך סדם הרמתני ידי אל ה' אלהי עליזן קנה שמים וארץ: אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקח מכל אשר לך ולא תאמר אני העשרתי את אברם.

And the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the people, and take the property for yourself.” And Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have raised my hand to the Lord, the highest God, Maker of the heavens and the earth; from the thread to the shoelace, I shall not take from anything of yours, for you shall not say, ‘I have made Abram wealthy.’” (*Gen.* 14:21-23)

17 A similar question arose in the wake of the Holocaust with regard to accepting reparations from Germany: while the Jewish people certainly “deserve” the money, can Germany truly make amends for their actions with money? Could this money ever make up for our loss? On the ninth of *Tevet*, 5712 (1952), approximately ten months before the Israeli government signed the Reparations Agreement, Menachem Begin said the following in a speech before the Knesset:

אתם קיבלתם כיסוד למשא-ומתן הודעה שלפיה הכסף הזה יינתן לכם “צור זאלישן רייניגונג איינס אונאנדליכן ליידיס” (לטיהור נפשי של סבל אין קיץ). כל אומות העולם ידעו: זהו הבסים שעליו תקבלו כסף “כתשלום בעד סבל אין קיץ”. איך ינודו לנו, איך ישימונו לבו! למי דמינו? ההסתנייגויות שלכם יהיו כתובות עברית - מי יקרא אותן? לעיני הגויים תהיה רק עובדה אחת: ישבתם לשולחן אחד עם רוצחי עמכם, הודיתם שהם מסוגלים לחתום על הסכם, שהם מסוגלים לקיים הסכם, שהם עם -

C. The fact that God commands the nation to use deception to fulfill His promise is troubling. Shouldn't the nation be given its wealth in an honest and ethical way?¹⁸ Furthermore, this is described twice as "taking advantage of Egypt": "And you shall take advantage of Egypt" (Ex. 3:22); "And they took advantage of Egypt" (Ex. 12:36). This intensifies our discomfort regarding the nation's actions.¹⁹ If taking the Egyptians' property was

עם במשפחת העמים.

You have accepted, as the foundation of the negotiations, a message by which this money will be given to you "to purify the soul of unending suffering." All of the nations of the world will know: this is the basis upon which you accept this money, "as payment in return for unending suffering." How they shall disdain us, how they shall scorn us! What have we become? Your reservations will be written in Hebrew – who will read them? In the eyes of the nations there will be only one fact: you sat at the same table with the murderers of your people, you conceded that they are capable of signing an agreement, capable of upholding an agreement, that they are a nation – a nation among the family of nations.

18 For instance, the nation might have demanded repayment from Pharaoh for their years of slavery, and if he refused they could have taken what they deserved by force – as actually occurred at the Red Sea, according to Rashi:

"ויסע משה" – הסיען בעל כרחם. שעטרו מצרים סוסיהם בתכשיטי זהב וכסף ואבנים טובות, והיו ישראל מוצאין אותם בים, וגדולה היתה ביות הים מביזות מצרים... לפיכך הוצרך להסיען בעל כרחם.

"And Moses caused the nation to journey" – he moved them against their will. For Egypt decorated their horses with jewelry of gold and silver and precious stones, and Israel found them in the sea, and their spoils from the sea were greater than the spoils from Egypt... therefore, he had to move them against their will. (Rashi on Ex. 15:22, quoting the *midrash*)

19 Indeed, the Jewish people were criticized for this throughout

justified – why wasn't it done it an honest and straightforward way?

E. The Ethics of Requesting the Egyptians' Property

The third question raised above – regarding the morality of requesting the Egyptians' property without intention of returning it – is troubling and is discussed by most of the commentators.

The Nations' Criticism of Israel

The Talmud in tractate *Sanhedrin* (91a) records an accusation made by the Egyptians against the Jewish people. In the time of Alexander the Great, the Egyptians claimed that the nation of Israel had stolen their property:

שוב פעם אחת באו בני מצרים לדון עם ישראל לפני אלכסנדרוס מוקדון, אמרו לו: הרי הוא אומר "וזה נתן את חן העם בעיני מצרים וישאלום" – תנו לנו כסף וזהב שנטלתם ממנו!

אמר גביהא בן פסיסא לחכמים: תנו לי רשות ואלך ואדון עמהן לפני אלכסנדרוס. אם ינצחוני – אמרו להם: הדיוט שבנו נצחתם, ואם אני אנצח אותם אמרו להם: תורת משה רבינו נצחתכם. נתנו לו רשות והלך ודן עמהן.

אמר להן: מהיכן אתם מביאין ראיה? – אמרו לו: מן התורה. – אמר להן: אף אני לא אביא לכם ראיה אלא מן התורה. שנאמר: "ומושב בני ישראל אשר ישבו במצרים שלשים שנה וארבע מאות שנה" – תנו לנו שכר עבודה של ששים ריבוא, ששיעבדתם במצרים שלשים שנה וארבע מאות שנה.

אמר להן אלכסנדרוס מוקדון: החזירו לו תשובה! – אמרו לו: תנו לנו זמן

history; see tractate *Sanhedrin* 91a quoted below.

שלשה ימים. נתן להם זמן, בדקו ולא מצאו תשובה. מיד הניחו שדותיהן כשהן זרועות, וכרמיהן כשהן נטועות וברחו.

Once more²⁰ the people of Egypt brought the people of Israel to court before Alexander of Macedonia. They said to him: “For it says, ‘And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and they requested’ – **give us the silver and gold that you took from us!**”

Geviha ben Pesisa said to the sages: “Give me permission and I shall go debate them before Alexander. If they defeat me – say to them: ‘You have defeated the simplest among us,’ and if I defeat them, say to them: ‘The Torah of our teacher Moses has defeated you.’” They gave him permission and he went to debate them.

He said to them: “Where do you bring your evidence from?” They said to him, “From the Torah.” He said to them: “I, too, shall bring you evidence from none other than the Torah. As it says: ‘And the people of Israel settled in Egypt four hundred and thirty years.’

Give us our wages for six hundred thousand [people] whom you enslaved in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years.”

Alexander of Macedonia said to them: “Answer him!”

They said to him: “Give us three days’ time.” He gave them time; they looked and **did not find an answer**. Immediately they left the fields they had sown and

²⁰ This incident is related as one of a series of episodes in which the nations of the world made claims against Israel.

the vineyards they had planted and fled. (*Sanhedrin* 91a)

Geviha ben Pesisa responds that the Egyptians owe the Israelites wages for many years of slavery.²¹ However, the question remains: if the Egyptians did indeed owe the Israelites their wages, why didn’t the nation officially demand payment for their slavery? Why do they take the Egyptians’ wealth dishonestly?

1. REQUESTING THE VESSELS AS PAYMENT FOR SLAVERY

“Requesting” has Two Meanings in the Bible

Our uneasiness is based on the assumption that “and each woman shall **request** [*vesha’ala*] from her neighbor” indicates “*hash’ala*,” borrowing²² – i.e., taking temporarily with intention to return. However, many commentators explain that this verse should be read as “*she’ela*,” asking for or requesting²³ something without any expectation of return or repayment. According to this interpretation, the Israelites were not acting dishonestly.²⁴ Rashbam writes:

²¹ However, Geviha ben Pesisa does not present the Israelites’ taking of the Egyptians’ property as repayment for slavery. He merely asserts that the Egyptians cannot make claims against Israel as the Israelites have a parallel claim against them that clearly outweighs the Egyptians’ demand.

²² For instance: “If a man borrows [*yish’al*] from his fellow man” (Ex. 22:13); see also II Kings 4:3, 6:5.

²³ See: “Let my life be given to me as my petition [*she’elati*], and my nation as my request” (Esther 7:3). See also note 26 for additional examples cited by various commentators.

²⁴ According to this interpretation, the phrase “*Vayenatzlu et Mitzrayim*” is not translated as “And they took advantage of

“And each woman shall request from her neighbor” – as a complete and total gift, for [it is written: “And I shall give the nation favor”; this is similar to: “Request of me and I shall make the nations your inheritance” (Ps. 2:8). This is the simple understanding, and an answer to the heretics.²⁵ (Rashbam on Ex. 3:22)

“ושאלה אשה משכנתה” – במתנה גמורה וחלוטה, שהרי [כתוב] “ונתתי את חן העם”, כמו: “שאל ממני ואתנה גוים נחלתך”. זהו עיקר פשוטו, ותשובה למינים.

Rashbam brings evidence that the property was given freely as a gift and not borrowed. The Torah explains the Egyptians’ willingness to give the Israelites their property by describing the Egyptians’ admiration for them. Nahmanides’ interpretation, cited above, explains that the Egyptians’ attitude toward the nation changed and they felt obligated to repay the people of Israel for their forced labor. Rashbam also notes that the Hebrew root *sh-a-l*, which describes the nation’s actions, appears several times in the

Egypt,” consistent with the modern use of the verb *lenatzel*. Rather, it is interpreted in accordance with other instances of the word in the Bible which mean “empty out” (the word is translated by Onkelos as “*verokinu* [and they emptied out]”; see Rashi on Ex. 12:36).

25 “And an answer to the heretics” – this refers to answering Christian claims regarding the Israelites’ supposed unethical behavior.

In a number of places in his commentary to the Torah, Rashbam addresses Christian claims against the Jewish people. He sometimes indicates this by writing “and an answer to the heretics,” but not always. See also Elazar Tuitou, “*Peshat UPulmus Anti-Notzri BePeirush HaRashbam*,” *Tarbiz* 51, 5742.

Bible with the meaning “request.”²⁶

However, a question remains: why do the Egyptians agree to give their property to the Israelites as a gift? There are a number of possible answers:

Payment for Their Labor

A. The Egyptians might have been eager to see the Israelites leave and were willing to agree to anything. This is why the nation asked the Egyptians for their property specifically when they were in the midst of leaving Egypt.²⁷ According to this explanation, there is ethical justification

26 A number of other commentators agree with this interpretation. See **Rav Sa’adia Gaon**: “Request’ – receive as a gift” (Rav Sa’adia Gaon on Ex. 3:22); **Rabbenu Hananel**: “Heaven forbid that God would allow [the nation] to deceive others by borrowing from them... and not returning to them. But the word ‘request’ indicates that it would be given as a gift, as we find by Gideon: ‘I shall ask [*esh’al*] of you one request [*she’ela*], that each man give me an earring from his spoils’ (Jud. 8:24) and by Bathsheba: ‘One small request [*she’ela*] I ask [*sho’elet*] of you, let Avishag the Shunamite be given...’ (I Kings 2:20-21). Hence a gift is referred to using the word *she’ela*” (Rabbenu Hananel on Ex. 3:22, see also Rabbenu Hananel on Ex. 11:2); **Rabbi Yona Ibn Janah**: “And each woman shall request from her neighbor’ – to give her a gift. And if one claims that this phrase is not used to refer to gifts but rather to lending, we shall say to him that Hannah’s words, ‘I have given him [*hish’iltihu*] to God,’ cannot be interpreted as lending but as a gift” (Rabbi Yona Ibn Janah, *Sefer HaShorashim*, p. 491). See also **Hizkuni** on Ex. 3:22, Rabbenu Bahya on Ex. 11:2 and *Kli Yakar* on Ex. 3:22.

27 This possibility was raised by *Da’at Zekenim*:

כי כשיחזקו מצרים למהר לשלחם שאלו להם שיתנו להם כלי כסף וכלי זהב קודם שילכו והם יתנו ברצון מפני שיתיראו מן המכות.

For when the Egyptians urged them to hurry and leave, [the nation] asked them [the Egyptians] to give them vessels of silver and vessels of gold before they left, and they gave them willingly because they feared the plagues.

for taking advantage of the Egyptians in their moment of weakness – in any case, the Israelites were only taking what they rightfully deserved in return for their labor.²⁸

**The Egyptians
Gave their
Property
Willingly**

B. The Egyptians changed their attitude toward the nation of Israel, as the Torah states: “And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and the man Moses was also very great in the land of Egypt...” They understood that they had treated the nation unfairly and wanted to give them a gift to compensate for their years of slavery in Egypt. The text explicitly states: “And God gave the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt **and they requested from them** and they took advantage of Egypt”²⁹ (Ex. 12:36).

**Exchange of
Goods**

C. *Hizkuni*, in his commentary to Ex. 11:2, raises another interesting possibility: “Vessels of silver and vessels of gold’ – in place of Israel leaving their homes and fields and tools, which they could not take with them...”³⁰ In other words, this was

28 *Hizkuni* explicitly states this:

“ונצללתם את מצרים” – בשכר שעבוד עבודת פרך.
“And you shall take advantage of Egypt” – by [taking] wages for your forced labor. (*Hizkuni* on Ex. 3:22)

29 Rashbam writes:

“נתן את חן העם” – לתת להם במתנה, כדכתיב באלה שמות: “ונתתי את חן העם בעיני מצרים.”

“Gave the nation favor” – to give them gifts, as it is written in *Parashat Shemot*: “And I shall give the nation favor in the eyes of Egypt.” (Rashbam on Ex. 3:22)

30 Similarly, Malbim writes:

שבלכתם מן הארץ יבקשו מאת שכניהם וגרי ביתם שהם יקחו להם בתיהם וכלי

an exchange: the Israelites would leave Egypt and leave their homes and fields, and in return they would receive property from the Egyptians which could be taken with them.³¹

2. BORROWING THE VESSELS AS A DIVERSIONARY TACTIC

However, some commentators³² understand that the Israelites did not receive the property as gifts – they did indeed borrow them and they did so dishonestly.

**Further
Deception –
Leaving for
Three Days**

Reading the *parasha*, one notices that this is not the only devious act committed by the nation during the negotiations with Pharaoh. Moses does not ask Pharaoh to set the Israelites free; he merely requests permission to leave for three days and worship God in the wilderness:

And you and the elders of Israel וּבֹאֲתָ אֶתְּהָ וְזִקְנֵי
shall come to the king of Egypt יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם
and say to him, “The Lord, God וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֵלָיו ה'

ביתם, ובעבור שווי דמי הבתים יבקשו מהם כלי כסף וכלי זהב שנוחים לשאת אתם בדרך, ובוהו ונצללתם את מצרים...

For when they left the land they asked their neighbors and those who dwelled in their homes to take their houses and property, and in return for the value of the house they asked for vessels of silver and vessels of gold which were more appropriate to take with them, and this is what is meant by “taking advantage of Egypt”... (Malbim on Ex. 3:22)

31 This interpretation is based chiefly on common sense, although it does not arise from the simple understanding of the text, as neither “borrowing” nor “requesting” can be understood as referring to an exchange.

32 See for example Seforno on Ex. 3:22.

of the Hebrews, has met with us, and now, please let us go three days' journey into the wilderness and make sacrifices to the Lord, our God.” (Ex. 3:18)

אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרָיִים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ, וְעַתָּה נֵלְכָה נָא דֶרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ. (שְׁמוֹת ג', יח)

The conversation between Moses and Pharaoh revolves solely around this request³³, although God's plan clearly does not. God reveals His true plan to Moses at the burning bush:

And God said, “I have surely seen the suffering of My people who are in Egypt... And I shall go down to save them from the hand of Egypt and bring them up from that land... And now, go and I shall send you to Pharaoh, and take My people, the Children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Ex. 3:7-10)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רָאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת עֲנֵי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם... וְאֵרֵד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלִהְעֲלֹתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא... וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת עַמִּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם. (שְׁמוֹת ג' ז-י)

Strategic Bargaining with Pharaoh

According to God, He plans to take the nation out of Egypt and fully liberate them. Why, then, does He tell Moses immediately thereafter to ask Pharaoh for only three days' absence to worship God in the desert?³⁴

In verses 14-22 God prepares Moses for the practical reality of negotiating with Pharaoh to ensure that

³³ See Ex. 5:1-3, 7:16, 8:21-24, 10:8-11, 10:24-26.

³⁴ For further discussion of this point, see Rabbi Elchanan Samet, “HaHona’a BeMasa UMatan im Par’o,” *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua*, first series, *Parashat Bo*.

he will agree to release the nation from Egypt. God instructs Moses to ask Pharaoh to leave for only three days, as part of the negotiation tactics.

Had they requested that Pharaoh set his slaves free, his opposition would have been immediate and understandable. But a three-day absence for religious purposes is a fair request which Pharaoh is more likely to agree to.

Israel's very destiny as a nation rests on their struggle for liberation from Egyptian slavery; in a sense, they are fighting a war and **in war one must employ tactics that sometimes involve deceiving the enemy.**

The Divine Plan through Natural Means

Why does God need to employ such tactics? The plagues have proven that He is certainly capable of bringing disaster upon Egypt and forcing Pharaoh to release the nation against his will.

Apparently there is significance in God's plan being carried out by natural means. Therefore, the exodus from Egypt comes about through negotiations with Pharaoh, as opposed to explicit miracles such as the nation simply disappearing from Egypt or the Egyptians suddenly dying, allowing the Israelites to escape easily.³⁵

³⁵ Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* writes about the opening verse of *Parashat Beshalach*, which reads: “And it was when Pharaoh released the nation, God did not lead them through the land of the Philistines although it was nearby, for God said, “Lest the nation repent upon seeing war and return to Egypt” (Ex. 13:17). Maimonides raises questions regarding

Ultimately, Pharaoh's stubbornness led to the need for explicit miracles. However, Pharaoh was always given the chance to choose the better path and naturally regret his stubbornness³⁶ – and so Moses

this verse's description of God's abilities, such as: couldn't God have miraculously turned the nation into brave warriors? These questions are the basis for Maimonides' categorical philosophical statement that God never causes miraculous changes to human nature:

שכל הנסים, ואף על פי שהן שינוי טבע של מצוי מאחד הנמצאים, הרי טבע אישי בני האדם לא ישנה אותם ה' כלל על דרך הנס... ולא אמרנו זאת מפני שאנו בדעה כי שינוי טבע אחד מאישי בני אדם קשה עליו יתעלה, אלא זה אפשרי והוא... תחת היכולת, אלא שלא רצה כלל לעשות זה ולא ירצהו לעולם כפי היסודות החוקיים התורתיים, ואלו היה מרצונו לשנות טבע כל אחד מבני אדם למה שירצה יתעלה מאותו אדם, כי אז היו בטלים שליחת הנביאים וכל הציווי כולו.

For all miracles, although they change the nature of some part of creation, the nature of humans will never be changed by God in a miraculous way... and we do not say so because we are of the opinion that changing the nature of a human being is too difficult for the Exalted One; rather, it is possible and it is... within His ability, but He did not and will never wish to do so, according to the lawful foundations of the Torah. And should he have wished to change the nature of a human being into what the Exalted One wishes for that person, then the message of the prophets and the entire command would be nullified. (*Guide for the Perplexed* [Rav Kapach ed.] 3:42)

Maimonides bases his statement on two arguments: **A.** God miraculously changing man's nature would damage the "lawful foundations of the Torah" – the foundations of religion such as free will, divine justice, reward and punishment, etc., **B.** Change of this kind would render the prophets' message of repentance irrelevant, which would support those who seek to challenge the eternal significance of the Torah. One might conclude from Maimonides that God avoids affecting the situation "on the ground" by miraculous means; He prefers that humans choose to do so out of their own free will, and not due to Divine force.

³⁶ The need for Pharaoh's agreement will be further discussed in next week's lesson on *Parashat Beshalach*.

only asks him to let the nation go for three days.

**Borrowing
the Vessels –
Part of
the "Three
Days" Ruse**

Why do the Israelites need to deceive the Egyptians with regard to their property as well?

While enslaved, the nation of Israel³⁷ cannot worship God properly as they have no property with which to do so. Therefore, their request to borrow gold and silver vessels to worship in a more adequate fashion does not strike the Egyptians as unusual or deceitful. Borrowing the vessels was meant to strengthen the illusion that the nation was only leaving for a limited time and would return the vessels upon their return.

**The Dual
Purpose
of the
Deception**

In fact, this deception actually had two purposes:

- A. To persuade Pharaoh to agree more easily to allow the nation to leave Egypt.
- B. To encourage the Egyptians to pursue the Israelites when they discover the deception, thus allowing God to complete His vengeance against the Egyptians at the Red Sea.³⁸

³⁷ See Rabbi Elchanan Samet, "*She'ilat HaKelim*," *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua*, second series, *Parashat Bo*.

³⁸ See *Derashot HaRan*, *Derush 11*, and *Hizkuni*:

"וישאלו איש" – מה שקיים הקב"ה ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול בענין שאלה ולא בענין מתנה כדי שיהיו מצריים להושים לרדוף אחריהם.

"And each man shall request" – God fulfilled [the promise that] "Afterward they shall leave with great wealth" through borrowed [property] and not through gifts so that the Egyptians would be roused to chase after them. (*Hizkuni* on Ex. 11:2; see also Seforno ad loc.)

Or *HaChaim* writes:

3. BORROWING THE VESSELS AND LATER ACQUIRING THEM AS SPOILS OF WAR

Seforno comments further on Ex. 3:22:

“And you shall take advantage of Egypt” – although you will be given everything as a loan, and you will be obligated to return it, you will possess everything legally when they chase after you to make war against you and take spoils from you... for the spoils of the pursuer belong to the pursued, so it is in all wars. (Seforno on Ex. 3:22)

“ונצלתם את מצרים” – אף על פי שתקבלו הכל מהם דרך השאלה, ותהיו חייבים להחזיר, הנה תקנו אחר כך הכל בדין, ברדפם אחריכם להלחם בכם ולשלול את שללכם... כי שלל הרודפים לנרדפים, כמנהג בכל מלחמה.

The Israelites did indeed ask for the Egyptians’ property with the understanding that they would return it. However, since the Egyptians chased after them and attacked them and the Israelites triumphed (with God’s help), they were awarded the Egyptians’ property as spoils of war.

4. SUMMARY OF THE ETHICAL ISSUE

We have raised three possible explanations for the apparent ethical difficulty of “borrowing” the

כי באמצעות ב' המצאות, שידברו ללכת דרך שלשת ימים, גם כשישאלו מהם כליהם, זה יסובב אותם לרדוף אחריהם וירדו במצולות.

For by means of two fictions – that they spoke of leaving for three days, and that they borrowed [the Egyptians’] vessels – this caused [the Egyptians] to chase after them and they were drowned in the depths. (Or HaChaim on Ex. 3:22)

Egyptians’ property:³⁹

First – it was not borrowing but requesting a **gift** from the Egyptians, which the Israelites deserved as **payment** for their years of slavery. In the aftermath of the plagues, even the Egyptians understood that they had treated the Israelites unjustly and they sought to atone for it.

Second – the nation did indeed **borrow** the vessels, which the Egyptians thought they intended to return. This was meant to strengthen the impression that they were leaving for only three days to worship God. Deceptive tactics are permissible in times of war; this particular ruse also encouraged the Egyptians to pursue the Israelites and ultimately drown in the Red Sea, thus receiving the punishment they deserved.

Third – the nation did **borrow** the Egyptians’ possessions and were obligated to return them, but following the Egyptians’ death at the Red Sea the Israelites were awarded the property as **spoils of war**.

³⁹ However, there are other possible interpretations which were not discussed here. *Toledot Yitzhak* writes:

“ושאלה אשה משכנתה” – יש מקשים אבותינו גנבים, ואינו כן כי היא מצוה והשם נותן עושר למי שירצה ויקחנו מידו ויתננו לאחר.

“And each woman shall request from her neighbor” – some object that our forefathers were thieves, but it is not so, for it is a *mitzva*, and God gives wealth to whomever He wishes, and takes it from him and gives it to another.

Toledot Yitzhak is the commentary of Rabbi Yitzhak the son of Rabbi Joseph Caro, uncle of Rabbi Joseph Caro who wrote the *Shulchan Aruch*. His commentary presents the simple understanding of the text, homiletic interpretations, *kabbala* and philosophy.

THE PROPHECY OF SLAVERY AND REDEMPTION – DIVINE JUSTICE

After examining the implementation of the request for the vessels, let us return to the source of this idea – God’s promise to Abram at the Covenant between the Parts: “And afterward they shall leave with great wealth.”

The prophecy of the nation’s enslavement and subsequent liberation first appears at the Covenant between the Parts. The main element of this covenant seems to be the promise to inherit the Land of Israel.⁴⁰

40 The promise for descendants and the prophecy regarding their enslavement seem to be God’s response to Abram’s interruption of His speech. The chapter begins: “Do not fear, Abram; I am your shield, your reward is great.” What is his reward? At this point we are not told, nor does Abram ask – he merely states that without children, any reward would be worthless (Gen. 15:2-3). Following this, God promises Abram descendants (v. 4-5) and picks up His speech to Abram from where it left off: “And He said to him, ‘I am God who took you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land to inherit it.’” Once again, Abram interrupts and asks: “How will I know that I am to inherit it?” God responds by making the covenant with Abram (manifest through Abram’s passing a torch between halves of slaughtered calves, etc). The covenant deals exclusively with inheriting the land: “On that day God made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To you descendants I will give this land...’” (v. 18-21).

This entire episode (passing the torch between the animal halves, making the covenant) occurs in a prophetic dream of Abram’s. In the first stage of this dream, before the covenant is made, Abram receives the prophecy of the nation’s future enslavement: “And a slumber fell upon Abram, and behold, a terror, a great darkness fell upon him. And He said to Abram, ‘Know surely that your descendants will be strangers...and

When Abram asks God, “How will I know that I am to inherit it,”⁴¹ God describes the future of his descendants:

“...Know surely that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will be enslaved and tortured, for four hundred years. And the nation under whom they labor I shall judge as well, and afterward they shall leave with great wealth. And you shall come to your forefathers safely; you shall be buried in good old age. And the fourth generation shall return here, for the sins of the Amorites have not yet been completed.” (Gen. 15:13-16)

...יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעִבְדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה: וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרַי כֹּן יֵצְאוּ בְרִכָּשׁ גָּדוֹל: וְאַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶל אֲבוֹתֶיךָ בְּשָׁלוֹם תִּקְבְּרָה בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה: וְדוֹר רְבִיעִי יָשׁוּבוּ הֵנָּה כִּי לֹא שָׁלֵם עוֹן הָאֱמֹרִי עַד הֵנָּה. (בראשית ט"ו, יג-טז)

they shall be enslaved and tortured...” Some commentators (see the Sages’ statements in *Nedarim* 32a and Rashi’s comments) understand this prophecy as God’s response to Abram’s question: “How will I know that I am to inherit it?” In any case, the prophecy of enslavement is an introduction to the main element of the prophecy – the promise to inherit the land.

41 The commentators disagree over how to interpret Abram’s question. Some view it as Abram requesting a proof or guarantee that God’s promise will be upheld (*Nedarim* 32a); our lesson relies upon this interpretation. However, others understand that Abram did believe that God would fulfill His promise, and was asking what right he had to inherit the land (Rabbenu Bahya).

Similarly, other commentators explain that Abram believed that he would inherit the land and was merely asking for

God's
Providence
Throughout
History

God's answer to Abram does not include any specific miraculous signs. It merely presents the manifestation of Divine Providence throughout history: God steers history in the way He sees fit. There is indeed a Judge and justice is served; God examines human behavior and guides the events of history toward justice, even if we are not always able to understand how. This Divine guidance will ensure that Abram's descendants inherit the land.⁴²

Let us examine the verses in reverse:

Timing of the
Inheritance

A. **Verse 16** states: "**For the sins of the Amorites have not yet been completed**" – the nation's time has not yet come to inherit the land, since its current inhabitants, the Amorites, have not yet committed their share of sins and do not yet deserve to be driven out of the land. While the inheritance of the land has been promised to the nation of Israel, this will be executed fairly, when the time is right and the current inhabitants are deserving of expulsion.⁴³

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details regarding the timing (Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor). Still others state that even though Abram did fully trust God's promise, he sought to ensure that it would be upheld even when his descendants were unworthy of it (Nahmanides, Seforno, Malbim).

42 The Covenant between the Parts warrants an extensive, in-depth discussion, which is beyond the scope of this lesson.

43 Rashi explains this verse as follows: "For God does not demand payment from a nation until it has completed its share [of sins]." See also Radak's comments ad loc.

Rashbam comments that "the fourth generation" does not refer to the generations of the nation of Israel (according to

Rewarding  
Individuals

B. **Verse 15**: "**And you shall come to your forefathers safely**" – Abram is deserving of reward for his faithful service to God; therefore, he will not personally experience exile or slavery.<sup>44</sup> This demonstrates that God does not only affect people's lives through broad historic processes; rather, He also rewards individuals for their actions.

Punishing  
the  
Oppressors

C. **Verse 14**: "**And the nation under whom they labor I shall judge**" – a nation that enslaves another nation will ultimately be held accountable.<sup>45</sup> The verse continues: "And afterward they shall leave with great wealth." Part of the execution of justice for both sides is the fact that the Israelites leave with

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this calculation the fourth generation did not merit to return to the land of Israel). Rather, after the Amorites complete their share of sins, the Israelites will be required to wait four generations until they are allowed to enter the land, since God always waits for four generations to see whether they repent or continue to sin: "I visit the sins of the fathers upon their children, and upon the third and fourth generations of those who despise Me."

44 This verse may serve as a proof against the interpretation that God decreed that the nation would be exiled as a punishment for Abram's question, "How will I know that I am to inherit it." The Torah emphasizes that Abram is righteous and deserving of reward. God promises Abram that the exile will not begin during his lifetime; he will merit long life and live out his days in peace and respect.

45 The commentators ask a question regarding free will: if God wanted the nation of Israel to be enslaved, why does He later punish those who enslaved them? The obvious answer is that the oppressors did not act out of any desire to fulfill a Divine mission. They acted out of malevolence, of their own free will, and they are therefore deserving of punishment (see the commentary of Nahmanides and Radak; see also Maimonides' *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuva* 6:3).

great wealth – the Egyptians must be punished for their actions and the Israelites receive payment for their years of slavery.⁴⁶ Thus, it is essential to leave with property as it demonstrates that the hand of God guides the course of history and that He ultimately dispenses justice.

Strangers in
a Land that is
Not Theirs

D. The first stage of this process is exile: **“Know surely that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs”** – in light of the above, this is easily understood: as long as “the sins of the Amorites have not yet been completed,” as stated in verse 16, the nation of Israel cannot inherit their land, and they will remain strangers in another land.

Slavery for
Reasons
Unknown

E. **“And they shall be enslaved and tortured”⁴⁷** – this is the most difficult phase of the process to understand. The verse does not explain why the nation must be enslaved. The commentators suggest a number of explanations, which we will list briefly: some search for a sin that the slavery atones for (Abraham’s sin,⁴⁸ or the sin of selling

⁴⁶ This is the interpretation offered by *Hizkuni* and *Radak*

⁴⁷ It is important to note that in the traditional division of the verse (according to its *te’amim* [cantillation]), the phrase “four hundred years” does not describe only the period of slavery and suffering; rather, it also includes the period of being strangers in a strange land. The length of the period of slavery is not defined and can only be calculated after the fact. According to *Rashi*’s calculation, the period of being strangers began at *Isaac*’s birth and the period of enslavement in *Egypt* lasted 210 years (see *Rashi* on *Gen. 15:13*).

⁴⁸ The *Talmud* in tractate *Nedarim* states:

*Joseph*⁴⁹). On the other hand, some explain that the enslavement is not a punishment, but part of the preparation for becoming the chosen people,⁵⁰

אמר רבי אבהו אמר רבי אלעזר: מפני מה נענש אברהם אבינו ונשתעבדו בניו למצרים מאתיים ועשר שנים? מפני שעשה אנגרייא בתלמידי חכמים, שנאמר: "וירק את חניכיו ילידי ביתו". ושמואל אמר: מפני שהפריז על מדותיו של הקב"ה, שנאמר: "במה אדע כי אירשנה". ורבי יוחנן אמר: שהפריש בני אדם מלהכנס תחת כנפי השכינה, שנאמר: "תן לי הנפש והרכוש קח לך".

Rabbi Abbahu said that Rabbi Elazar said: Why was our forefather Abraham punished and his children enslaved in Egypt for two hundred and ten years? Because he forced wise and learned men to perform labor, as it says: “He armed his trained servants, born in his house. And Shmuel said: Because he questioned God’s judgment, as it says: “How will I know that I am to inherit it.” And Rabbi Yohanan said: Because he excluded them from coming under the wings of the Divine Presence, as it says: “Give me the people, and take the property for yourself.” (*Nedarim* 32a)

Similarly, *Nahmanides* links the Israelites’ enslavement to Abraham’s descent to *Egypt*

ודע, כי אברהם אבינו חטא גדול בשגגה שהביא אשתו הצדקת במכשול עון מפני פחדו פן יהרגוהו, והיה לו לבטוח בשם שיציל אותו ואת אשתו ואת כל אשר לו, כי יש בא־להים כח לעזור ולהציל. גם יציאתו מן הארץ, שנצטווה עליה בתחילה, מפני הרעב, עון אשר חטא, כי הא־להים ברעב יפדנו ממות. ועל המעשה הזה נגזר על זרעו הגלות בארץ מצרים ביד פרעה במקום המשפט שמה הרשע והחטא.

And know that our forefather Abraham unintentionally sinned greatly by putting his righteous wife in danger of sin out of fear that he would be killed; and he should have trusted in God to save him and his wife and all that they had, for God has the power to help and save us. So too when, due to famine, he left the land regarding which he was commanded at the beginning. [This too was] a sin that he sinned, for God, through famine, [sought to] redeem him from death. And for this deed, exile under Pharaoh was decreed for his descendants; justice is served where there is evil, and where [Abraham] sinned [i.e., Egypt]. (*Nahmanides* on *Gen. 12:10*)

See note 44 for an objection to this interpretation.

⁴⁹ See *Abarbanel*’s commentary.

⁵⁰ *Abarbanel* suggests this explanation as well, as does *Rabbi*

Moshe Alsheich:

וטעם שאשעבדם הלא הוא כי הנה ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול וריוח גדול, שהוא סילוק וזהמת הנחש על ידי השעבוד, שיוכנו בו לקבל תורה...

And the reason for enslaving them is so that they will leave afterward with great wealth and profit, which is that the impurity of the snake was cast off of them, **so that they would be prepared to receive the Torah...**

According to Rabbi Alsheich, the “great wealth” does not refer to material possessions; rather, the nation profited spiritually from their period of enslavement. Furthermore, in Deuteronomy, the Torah itself compares the slavery in Egypt to an iron furnace:

וְאַתֶּם לָקַח ה' וַיֹּצֵא אֶתְכֶם מִכּוּר הַבְּרֹזֶל מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם נַחֲלָה בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.
And God took you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a nation of inheritance until this day. (Deut. 4:20)

This metaphor is repeated in I Kings, where Solomon says:

כִּי עָמַד וְנַחֲלָתְךָ הֵם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם מִתּוֹךְ כּוּר הַבְּרֹזֶל.
“For they are Your nation and inheritance, whom You took out of Egypt from the iron furnace.” (I Kings 8:51)

An iron furnace refines gold and extracts its impurities (see Rashi ad loc.). Why did the nation require purification in Egypt? *HaKtav VeHaKabbala* explains:

“מכור הברזל” – כי זה היה התכלית האמתית המכוון ממנו ית' לשעבדם במצרים, לצרפם כזהב בכור שיתפרדו הסיגים וישאר זהב טהור לבד, חלאת הפושעים מתו בימי החשך, ורק הנשארים נבחרו לקבלת התורה, כי אלו הרבה את ישראל והשפיע להם טובות גדולות בלתי שיעבוד, לא היו מתרצים לקבל עליהם התורה הזאת האוסרת עליהם כל ענינים שהיו רגילים בהם, לכן היתה מעצת ה' לשעבדם תחת עול מלכות קשה ולסבה זו נטהרו ונודקו עד שהיו ראויים לקבל התורה מרצון נפשם.
“From the iron furnace” – for this was the true purpose that God intended when He enslaved them in Egypt – to purify them like gold in the furnace, where the impurities are extracted and only pure gold is left. The worst of the sinners died during the plague of darkness, and only those who remained were chosen to receive the Torah. For had He multiplied the Israelites and bestowed goodness upon them without first enslaving them, they would not have agreed to accept this Torah, which prohibits all of the practices to which they were accustomed. Therefore, God decided to enslave them under a terrible empire, and for this reason they were purified and cleansed until they were worthy of receiving the Torah willingly.

worthy of receiving the Torah and settling the Land of Israel. God’s answer to Abram is thus better understood: Abram asks God, “How will I know that I am to inherit it,” and God answers him that the exile and enslavement are preparation for inheriting the land.⁵¹

**The Promise
of Wealth –
Divine
Justice**

Abram does not need a promise for wealth, and even the Israelites may not be interested in it.⁵² But Divine justice must be served. **The Israelites leaving Egypt with great wealth is part of God’s governing the world with justice.**

In *Parashat Bo*, at the peak of the intense conflict between Pharaoh and Moses, the Torah mentions the command to request the Egyptians’ property;

In the midst of the hasty exodus from Egypt, the Torah mentions that the Israelites requested property from the Egyptians.

Requesting the Egyptians’ property is not a minor detail within the story of the exodus; it is fundamental – and for this reason it is mentioned at every crucial juncture of the story.

God’s justice will be done; God will judge the

According to this interpretation, the enslavement in Egypt was a crucial stage in becoming a nation worthy of serving God.

51 This issue deserves a more detailed discussion, but it is beyond the scope of the present lesson.

52 As noted above, wealth cannot compensate for years of terrible slavery, and perhaps the Israelites are preoccupied with their imminent freedom and not even interested in it.

Egyptians for their oppression of the nation. The Israelites left with great wealth, as they deserved in return for their years of slavery – not because they need the property, but because God needs justice to be served. This idea is expressed in the following *midrash*:

“Please speak” – Please is only used for requests; God said to Moses: Please, I ask of you, go and tell the nation of Israel, and let each man request from his fellow man...⁵³ To fulfill what was said “And afterward they shall leave with great wealth” (Gen. 15:14). God said that just as “Your descendants will be strangers” was fulfilled, so too “And afterward they shall leave with great wealth” will be fulfilled.⁵⁴ (*Pesikta Zutreta [Lekach Tov]* on Ex. ch. 11, *siman 2*)

“דבר נא” – אין נא אלא לשון בקשה, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה בבקשה ממך לך אמור להם לישראל, וישאלו איש מאת רעהו... לקיים מה שנאמר: “ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול” (בראשית ט”ו, יד), אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא כשם שנתקיים עליהם “כי גר יהיה זרעך”, כך יתקיים עליהם “ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול”. (פסיקתא זוטריתא (לקח טוב) שמות י”א, סימן ב)

A Grant for Freed Slaves

Hizkuni highlights a parallel between the biblical laws of freeing a slave and the Israelites’ liberation

53 See note 8 for the continuation of this *midrash*.
54 The *midrash* quoted earlier (*Brachot* 9) explains this somewhat differently, as God’s commitment to Abram in the wake of His promise. This *midrash* relates to the promise not only as God’s oath to Abram, but as a fundamental commitment which must be honored.

from Egypt:⁵⁵

“You shall not leave empty-handed – for they will give you from three kinds... similar to the slave’s grant. (*Hizkuni* on Ex. 3:22)

“לא תלכו ריקם” – כי הם יעניקו לכם משלושה מינים... דוגמת הענקת עבד. (חזקוני, שמות ג', כב)

The Torah writes regarding the slave: “And when you release him... you shall not release him empty-handed” (Deut. 15:13).

Regarding the Israelites, it states: “And it will be that when you leave you shall not leave empty-handed” (Ex. 3:21).

Divine justice requires a freed slave to receive a gift for his years of labor. The Israelites receiving the Egyptians’ property is part of the manifestation of Divine justice. When the Egyptians are unwilling to give the Israelites their property honorably, out of their own free will, God commands the Israelites to take what they deserve in a less than honest way to ensure that justice is served.⁵⁶

55 *Or HaChaim* suggests a similar interpretation to Ex. 3:21: לא תלכו ריקם כאן רמו ה' משפט עבד עברי דכתיב בו (דברים ט"ו, יג-יד) לא תשלחנו ריקם, הענק תעניק לו: “You shall not leave empty-handed” – here God alludes to the law regarding a Hebrew slave, as it is written regarding this: “You shall not release him empty handed; give him generously” (Deut. 15:13-14). (*Or HaChaim* on Ex. 3:21)
56 See M.D. Kasuto’s commentary on Exodus, p. 27, and Nechama Leibowitz, *Iyyunim BeSefer Shemot, Parashat Va’era – She’ilat HaKelim*.

REQUESTING THE VESSELS – SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

In summary, we will explain why the Israelites had to actively take the Egyptians' property by directly requesting it from them.

The nation of Israel, after suffering hundreds of years of slavery under Pharaoh, is suddenly liberated. How can this liberation be expressed? How will they truly feel that they are free? Will liberation from physical labor be enough to turn them into a truly spiritually free people?

Taking the Egyptians' property is part of this process:⁵⁷ although the Israelites left Egypt in a hurry, they did not leave as slaves rushing to escape their masters, heedless of their property. They left calmly, with time to take something for themselves along the way. They did not leave with nothing – they will no longer be deprived lowly slaves but free people with the means to build a new, decent life.

Most importantly, the Israelites were able to demand property from the Egyptians. A slave would never dare to ask his master for anything; the Israelites' asking the Egyptians for their property is a psychological turning point. The relationship between the Israelites and the Egyptians has utterly changed:


⁵⁷ Fleeing Egypt as slaves would be a residual sign of slavery. Therefore, God redeems them from Egypt in broad daylight with an outstretched hand, and not in the middle of the night (when the Egyptians drove them out). For discussion of other stages of the process of leaving Egypt, see next week's lesson on *Parashat Beshalach*.

the Egyptians are now willing to accommodate the Israelites' requests, and more importantly the Israelites are willing to ask and take as "each man from his fellow man and each woman from her fellow woman,"⁵⁸ and perhaps they even feel that it is their right to do so.

Now the Israelites are truly no longer the Egyptians' slaves but their equals – the first step toward genuine spiritual freedom.

AFTERWORD

Requesting the Egyptians' property is mentioned at every crucial stage of the exodus: the Covenant between the Parts, the encounter at the burning bush, the prophecy regarding the Plague of the Firstborn, and the moments of the exodus itself.

This emphasizes the significance of this subject.

Requesting the Egyptians' property was not a means to becoming wealthy. Rather, it fulfills a crucial role in the process of redemption in two ways:

1. Bringing Divine justice to the course of history.
2. Liberating the nation spiritually by requiring them to demand property of their former Egyptian masters and leave as truly free people.


⁵⁸ Ex. 11:2. The *midrash* asks: are the Egyptians considered the Israelites' "fellow men"? It answers that the relationship between the Israelites and the Egyptians has indeed changed significantly. This change is the most significant step in the process of the Israelites' liberation.