

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Bo
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bo – Why did Hashem say ‘please’?

In this week’s Parasha of Bo, we read about the final three plagues and the release of Bnei Yisrael from the slavery of Mitzrayim.

Before the final plague, Hashem makes a surprising request of Moshe:

“Please, speak into the ears of the people, and let them borrow, each man from his fellow and each woman from her fellow, silver vessels and golden vessels.”

Hashem normally issues *commands*; He doesn’t need to *ask*. Why did Hashem request, using the word ‘please’, that Bnei Yisrael take treasures from their Egyptian neighbours? Rashi quotes the explanation from the Gemara¹, which teaches us that Hashem wanted to pre-empt a possible complaint by Avraham Avinu. At the ‘Brit ben Hab’tarim’,² Hashem told Avraham that his children would be enslaved in a strange land, but they would leave with great possessions.³ The first part of the prophecy had already been fulfilled – the Egyptians took care of that. But if Bnei Yisrael didn’t take treasures with them when they left, then Avraham could complain that the second part of the prophecy had not been fulfilled. Thus, Hashem beseeched Bnei Yisrael to take the treasures.

But why did Hashem have to beseech? Who wouldn’t want to take the treasures?! This is a difficult question.⁴ Here is one answer that I heard, which can be explained with an analogy:

A man was in prison for many years. The conditions were intolerable. He was finally given the chance to go free and he was overjoyed. He was then given an option to say in prison a bit longer in return for receiving a large sum of money. But he was so desperate to leave that he said, “You can keep your treasure, I just want to leave right now!”

Similarly, Bnei Yisrael might have been ready to forgo the treasure in return for leaving Mitzrayim as soon as possible. Though this explanation does provide an answer, it is not entirely satisfactory. The oppressive slavery had already all but ceased due to the plagues, and Bnei Yisrael would not be leaving Mitzrayim until Hashem said it was time to leave. It doesn’t seem that Bnei Yisrael were in such a pressurised position that it would be so hard to borrow treasure from their Egyptian neighbours.

The Oznayim LaTorah is a commentary on the Chumash written by Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, a major Torah leader of pre-war Poland and post-war Israel. The Oznayim LaTorah provides a brilliant answer to our question that beautifully explains why Hashem had to use the word ‘please’. We see that only now, post-World War II, can we truly appreciate the Rashi noted above.

In the early years of the state of Israel, there was a very fierce public debate over whether Israel should accept reparations from Germany for the horrors of the Holocaust. Israel was split into two camps, but not along the usual right/left or religious/secular divide. Rather, this was a deeply personal and emotional debate. Those who were against accepting reparations, argued that accepting them was somewhat equivalent to forgiving the Nazis. It would serve to whitewash to an extent their horrific crimes. Under no circumstances, they argued, should we give the Germans any measure of “kapara” (atonement). However, on the other side of the debate, people argued that we may as well accept some payment if it was being offered, and it would assist the new country to

¹ Brachot Daf 9a.

² The ‘Covenant Between the Parts’, see Chapter 15 in sefer Breishit, Parashat Lech Lecha.

³ Breishit 15:13-14.

⁴ There is another question. Why did Hashem use the word ‘borrow’ if there was no intention that the items would be returned? A number of answers are given. According to one suggestion, Bnei Yisrael would return the treasures when (and if) they returned to Mitzrayim. And if they didn’t return, the Egyptians would take all of the Jewish property that was left behind. The treasures that were borrowed would become the payment for that property. That sounds quite fair to me!

See also Darchai Noam Vayetze 5776 for another approach to this question:

<https://darchai-noam.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Darchai-Noam-Vayetze-5776.pdf>

grow. Though we could never forgive the Nazis for their crimes, they should at least pay for the forced labour and the property that was stolen from the Jews.

Both sides had compelling arguments and we can certainly appreciate what a dilemma this must have been.⁵

Rav Sorotzkin explains that Bnei Yisrael had the same dilemma in Mitzrayim. While undoubtedly many were ready to accept the treasure as compensation for their back-breaking labour, there were many who had seen the horrific oppression and the murder of their relatives and would not be willing to accept 'blood money'. No doubt others were quite happy to be compensated for the back-breaking labour that they performed for the Egyptians. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to leave Mitzrayim with wealth, but He understood how difficult it was for some of them to take this money, so He did not force them to do so. Rather, He only requested that they please ask for the money from the Egyptians.

This incident shows us how important it is to fulfil our word and our promises. Hashem had promised Avraham that his descendants would leave with riches, so it was crucial for Him that they requested the treasures. By using the word "please", Hashem is teaching us how important it is to fulfil our promises.

We also learn that money cannot buy teshuva. We see that our sins cannot be whitewashed by simply paying money. There are many stories of people who have ill-gotten gains and make a large donation to charity in order to feel better about themselves. Halachically, accepting such donations can in some cases be prohibited.⁶ The following story is told in the name of Rav Chaim Kanievsky:⁷

Rav Chaim once said: "Anyone who acquires something that is not rightfully his does not get what he wants, and what he already has is taken... when one earns a living in an improper way, he loses twice." He added: "My father [the Steipler Gaon] was about to publish one of his sefarim but was short 7,000 lirot. A man came to me and asked me to give my father the entire sum anonymously. When I brought him the money, my father said that he could not accept an 'anonymous' donation. I had just left the room when another man came in, holding 7,000 lirot in his hand. He gave the money to my father to publish his sefarim. My father told me "You see, if Heaven had decreed that the money will come – it will come!"

If we have sinned and/or obtained money in the wrong way, we must do proper teshuva for our sins and pay back any ill-gotten gains. If one cannot ascertain who to repay, he is advised to donate the money anonymously to a community need that would benefit his victims and he should pray that his victims benefit from the money.⁸

I heard the following story which took place in Northern Israel:⁹

Reuven was driving on a busy highway somewhere in the north of Israel when all of a sudden he had car trouble. He was forced to pull over to the side of the highway, very far from the nearest town. He didn't have roadside assistance coverage and he had no idea what to do. All of a sudden, a van pulled over and a man jumped out and offered to help. He popped open the car bonnet,¹⁰ and quickly identified the problem. He had the necessary tools and the spare parts in his van, and he fixed the problem quickly. When he refused to accept any payment, the gob-smacked Reuven asked him for an explanation. The man explained that he used to be a dishonest car mechanic who would frequently steal from his unsuspecting customers by charging too much and not doing work that he claimed to have done. He then became a ba'al teshuva and felt guilty for his crimes. But there was no way that he could identify the hundreds of customers that he had cheated over the years. His Rabbi had advised him that this was the best way to do teshuva!

Let's try something this week:

1. Before committing an act that might harm someone else, stop and reflect on how difficult it will be to repair the damage caused.
2. Before making a promise or assurance, remember how important it is to keep our word.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Historical note: an agreement was reached between West Germany and Israel on 10 September 1952. Under the agreement, West Germany paid huge sums of money over many years to compensate for the stolen property and the years of slave labour.

⁶ If one knows that money is stolen it is forbidden to benefit from it (Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 369:4). Accepting money may also imply that you condone the illegal behaviour, which could be a problem of chanifah (flattery). This is a very complicated issue, and each case needs to be decided on its merits by a competent Rabbi.

⁷ Orchos Yosher, Artscoll 2018, p321.

⁸ Based on Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 366:2 and other sources. For more details see "Does not know who to repay": https://halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Being_Careful_With_Other_People%27s_Money#:~:text=Someone%20who%20is%20a%20victim,to%20repay%20the%20small%20debt.

⁹ I understand that this is a true story. It is one of those stories that could only take place in Israel!

¹⁰ The 'hood' for Americans.