D'var Torah: Parashat Bo

Rabbi Devorah Jacobson
Jan. 23, 2021
Jewish Community of Amherst

Like the cursor on my computer screen, I want to hover for a while on the verses in this week's Torah portion that describe that moment when the Israelites are racing to freedom.

Ex. 12: 33 ff
So the Egyptians urged the (Israelite) people on, impatient to have them leave their country, for they said, "We shall all be dead." So the Israelites took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders… And they did according to the word of Moses; and they asked of the Egyptians items of silver and gold and clothing; and God gave them favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they gave them these things… and thus they despoiled the Egyptians.

I never really gave that moment much thought. Had you?
What I mean to say is, that despite our yearly reading of the story in the Passover *haggadah*, I never really thought about or felt my way into this critical, chaotic moment. I never really appreciated what courage and faith it took, as the Israelite women and men raced around to find their children, some provisions, and fled. It was a moment of desperate hope: that they would somehow survive the elements and the unknowns. It was a moment of sheer terror: knowing that the caste structure that had dehumanized them for generations might quickly devise new ways to terrorize and re-enslave them.

As they leave, we learn that they stop at the homes of the Egyptians to take some of their wealth. And it's quite clear: The Torah does not condemn or criticize the actions of the Israelites. Rather, as we look again at these verses, we see that it is actually God who authorizes this taking.

In fact, as Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein writes, "this appropriation of wealth is such a critical component of Israelite liberation that it is repeated several times in Torah." We don't have time this morning to read all of those passages. But, if we take a look, for example, at the famous passage of Moses at the Burning Bush, in the 3rd chapter of Exodus, we see that when God first promises

liberation to the enslaved Israelites, that promise already includes the taking of Egyptian possessions:

"And I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go…And I will send My hand and smite Egypt with all my wonders and after that he will let you go…. And when you go, you will not go empty… but every woman shall ask of her neighbor, silver and gold and clothing, and you shall put them upon your sons and your daughters, and you shall empty out the Egyptians…(Ex. 3: 21-22)

The Torah never says explicitly that the wealth the Israelites took was reparations for 430 years of slavery. After all there was no formal claims commission back then. And the Egyptians make no efforts to fully acknowledge and meaningfully apologize for the crimes committed. Both are critical pieces we would expect to find in any serious reparations effort.

But I think it is really powerful to see this early idea of reparative justice at the heart of our liberation story, especially as it was read by the post-biblical commentators, like Rashi and Rashbam and others. It is absolutely obvious to them, that these spoils, (however they were recouped) were rightfully deserved restitution for the former slaves, like here in the words of the 13th century French commentator Hizquni: "bis-char sh' avur avodat-fa-rech"
"the spoils they asked of the Egyptians are (to be considered) wages for the enslavement of crushing labor." It's the basic idea underlying the justice of reparations: when you steal something, you must make restitution.

I want to hover next over a second moment of liberation in the Torah, in Deut. 15. It comes about as the laws of *shmittah* are reviewed, the Sabbatical year of release, occurring every 7 years. When indentured Hebrew slaves are freed, after 6 years of servitude, what is to happen? In fact, the Torah teaches,

" they are to be furnished liberally, out of your flock, and sheep, as well as your grain and wine; from that which God has blessed you, give to them… And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt…"

Torah again underscores that the liberation of formerly enslaved people including indentured servants is incomplete, without a portion of their masters' wealth. The Torah teaches us that only with these resources would justice be served and the cycle of poverty and exploitation be broken.

Now, a third moment of liberation comes to my mind, inspired by the *parasha* but occurring thousands of years later. It was a moment in American history that I had not really learned much about.

It was that moment at the end of the Civil War, when the approximately 4 million enslaved Blacks were finally emancipated.
What was that moment like? And what conditions did they face as they began to leave those Southern plantations where they and almost 12 generations before them had known such savage cruelty? Was any debt paid or restitution made by the former slaveholders?

The Black activist and journalist, Ida B. Wells, reflected eloquently on this moment.

" *The Civil War ended slavery, " she wrote. "It left us free, but it also left us homeless, penniless, ignorant, and friendless… Even Russia's liberated serf was given three acres of land and agricultural implements with which to begin his career of liberty and independence. But to us no foot of land nor implement was given. We were turned loose to starvation and death. So desperate was our condition that some of our statesmen declared it useless to try to save us by legislation as we were doomed to extinction."*

Wells describes the absolute destitution faced by millions of newly freed Blacks. No Torah mandate informed that moment, such that White slave-owners provide food, clothing, or shelter. There was no command from God or anyone else that they give over abundant amounts of flock and sheep or any resources in response to the injustices and evils of slavery.

The newly emancipated would walk away with nothing except maybe a mule, if they were lucky, and the promise of 40 acres, as contained in General William Sherman's Special Field Order #15. It was seen as an important step toward restitution and economic self-sufficiency. But President Andrew Johnson, as some of you may know, quickly annulled that order after Lincoln's assassination and those 400,000 acres, along the coast of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, were returned to the former Confederate slaveholders.
And the Freedmen's Bureau, created by Congress to help emancipated Blacks with all kinds of practical aid, including housing, employment, hospitals, schools, as well as locating separated family members, was shut down by Congress just 7 years after its creation. Fierce opposition from the Southern states and violence caused by the newly formed KKK and similar terrorist organizations, were the primary causes.

Clearly, the call of freedom and the promises of Reconstruction were no match for the White Backlash from the South and beyond. And the century from 1865 – 1965 often dubbed the Jim Crow era became, more accurately, in Bryan Stevenson's words, "the age of racial terror."

It was a relentless campaign including so many things I knew very little about: Sharecropping and Convict leasing; the Black codes that controlled every movement of black peoples lives; and the state-sponsored race massacres that destroyed entire Black communities that had begun to achieve some measure of economic success, in places like Tulsa OK and Wilmington NC.

This system of racial apartheid was not just a Southern phenomenon. It thrived in the North including here in New England, as well as in the Midwest and the West.
It included systemic inequity in housing, using tactics like redlining and exclusive racial covenants, which as you may know, were also used for many decades against Jews. Just recently, we have learned from our Amherst Reparations Committee about a home on Blue Hills road whose 1950s deed prohibited the sale "to any person or persons of color." If you own an old home in the area, go back and check your deed. You may be surprised to find a restrictive covenant that can't easily be deleted.

The tentacles of this systemic racism extended in every direction. Banks, universities and insurance companies aggressively perpetuated it. It created vast inequities, in healthcare and medical treatments, and grossly inferior school systems. It involved the criminal justice system, as the constant surveillance of and the rush to incarcerate Black and Brown people continues with a vengeance such that we Americans now find ourselves in charge of the largest prison population in the world. Perhaps you were aware, as I was not, of the exclusion of the majority of blacks from FDR's Social Security Program, along with the exclusion of Black GIs, returning form the War effort, from receiving any benefits of the GI Bill. That's the way in which many of our parents were able to purchase their first homes and get their first mortgages. That's how they were able to begin building assets, and creating a safety net for their families. It's no wonder then that the typical Black family in this country has 1/10 of the wealth of a typical White family. It's not a surprise that the major goal of some reparations proposals is the elimination of this vast Black-White wealth inequality.

Although we didn't know it at the time, when we undertook the study of Reparations, we took on the project of re-learning American history. The constant refrain of our committee members has been "Why at my age am I first hearing about this? Why was this missing from our textbooks, our class lectures, and the curriculum? Our study together has helped us see things

from another, often overlooked perspective by White people, one that asks: What have Black Americans experienced and endured in this country?

Our participation on the Reparations sub –committee has been quite the journey. Some of us have felt ashamed of our ignorance. Many of us have opened ourselves more honestly to the truth of our White privilege –- a status conferred from birth, that has thoroughly shaped each one of us. Now we are asking ourselves, how do we go forward and what choices will we make? We have understood more than before, that we Whites, in the words of Rabbi Sharon Brous, "are all beneficiaries of a national economy that was built on a foundation of stolen land and stolen labor. " Many of us, like many of you, have begun to recognize the terrible contradiction at the heart of the American story, that this country was founded on certain ideals that it violated right from the beginning. And that if we are to heal and achieve true equality, we must heed the words of Torah, proclaiming, *tzedek tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice shall you pursue.

Ta Nahisi Coates issued a powerful call for reparations in his groundbreaking essay in 2014. In it, he defined reparations this way : "Reparations, by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences, is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as – if not more than – the specific answers that might be produced. To know the past and its lessons is essential if we are to have a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal."

A national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.
That sounds very Jewish to me, maybe that's why it resonates so strongly with many of us on this committee. It sounds like the real meaning of *teshuvah* and how we Jews, with the wisdom of our ancient tradition, attempt to reckon with our own past, with the things that keep us from making real change in our lives and achieving a sense of moral and spiritual renewal.

Soon after the murder of George Floyd last May, I joined in on a Zoom call with the Pioneer Valley Project in Springfield. Community leader

and activist, Bishop Talbertt Swan, was introduced. With over 250 people on the call, mostly White, he welcomed us and said, "We're glad you are here tonight. But to you my White friends, I have to ask very honestly: "**What took you so long?"**

It's moments like that one that continue to unsettle me, and urge me on to further racial justice work, here at the JCA and elsewhere. This month and next, our committee is sponsoring a variety of programs and opportunities to learn and talk in depth about the topic of Reparations. Please join us. Because as I have come to believe, more passionately than ever, our collective liberation from what we Jews call *Mitzrayim* –the deeply narrow and confining places - depends on it!

Shabbat Shalom!

* With thanks to Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein for his helpful article, "The Torah Case for Reparations"

T