



Torah Table Talk

Did the Israelites Plunder Egypt?

Parshat Bo, Exodus Chapters 10:1 –
13:16



The devastation in Egypt was complete. Nothing like it had ever been seen before nor would the people of Egypt witness such suffering again. With each plague the Egyptians became convinced that the God of Israel was far more powerful than their gods. The courtiers of Egypt told Pharaoh, “How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go and worship the Lord their God! Are you not aware that Egypt is lost?” Pharaoh’s irrational obstinacy, however, has become absolute. It was as if God himself refused to let Pharaoh change his mind. As Parshat Bo opens we read about the final plagues: locust, darkness, and finally the death of the first born of Egypt. There was not a home in Egypt that was not devastated by the loss of a loved one.

Before the final plague, the Israelites are commanded to publicly prepare for their redemption. Parshat Bo contains the essentials of the first Passover. God commands the people to set aside a lamb and to prepare a special meal by roasting it and placing its blood on the door post of their homes. The lamb is to be eaten along with Matzah and bitter herbs. Moses tells the people “This day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord throughout the ages...”

Exodus 11:2-3 and 12:35-36

Please (Na) tell each person to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers objects of silver and gold. The Lord disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people.... The Israelites had done Moses bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold and clothing. And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people and they let them have their requested; thus they stripped the Egyptians.”

(The sages were deeply troubled by the idea that the Israelites either plundered or borrowed the valuables of the Egyptians under false pretenses and never intended to return them.)

1. **Rashi:** The word “Na” can only mean here “Please.” “I beseech you Moses, please instruct them about this (i.e. that the Israelites should take silver and gold vessels of the Egyptians), so that the righteous one, Abraham should not say, God fulfilled the promise, ‘and they will enslave and inflict them,’ but the promise, ‘and afterwards they will go free with great wealth’ God did not fulfill.”
2. **Genesis 15:13 -14** Rashi’s comment is based on a promise that God made to Abraham. “And God said to Abram: Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.”
3. **Benno Jacob** – For the Israelite, the word Egyptian had the bitterest associations. It would not have been remarkable had the Jew hated the Egyptian as the enslaver of his

ancestors and would have reserved the right not to accord him the generous treatment enjoined by the Torah with regard to the stranger... But the Torah records that the Egyptians and Jews parted friends, the former liberally furnishing them with gifts as the latter themselves had been bidden in the case of sending away their own Hebrew servants...Consequently, "You shall not hate the Egyptian for you were a stranger in his land." Since the Egyptians could not be expected to offer the gifts freely, Israel was bidden to spur them to do it. (taken from *Studies in Bereshit* by Nehama Leibowitz)

4. **Mechilta12:36** - The Lord gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and they let them have what they asked for - literally so. Before they could make their request the offer was forthcoming.

Questions for Discussion:

1. According to Rashi, how does the word "Na," "Please," change the connotation of Israel's plundering of Egypt? Why is it important to draw a connection between this incident and the promise which God had made to Abraham many generations before? In "borrowing" from the Egyptians, were the Israelites acting out of their own volition or fulfilling a divine commandment?
2. Why did God consider it so important for the Israelites to leave Egypt "with great wealth?" According to Benno Jacob, what purpose did Israel accepting wealth from the Egyptians serve? How did this act allow the Israelites to live up to the commandment not to hate the Egyptians? Was the silver and gold which the Israelites took from the Egyptians a form of reparations? Under what circumstances should one group of people give reparations to another?
3. Recently an Egyptian attorney threatened to bring a class action suit against the Jewish people for plundering Egypt thousands of years ago when they left Egypt. Setting aside the absurdity of this claim, how does the Torah respond to this claim? Did the Israelites really plunder Egypt? What claims might the Israelites have against the Egyptians?

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***