

- Just over a week ago, I was at Yad VaShem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, with a group of college students on Birthright. I have been there many times, and each time, something different grabs me. But one part always brings on very strong feelings - the pile of shoes that were confiscated from the Jews at the concentration camps, as well as the other items, very basic – combs, books, suitcases, clothing, and so forth. These possessions are so normal, and it reminds us of the humanity of these victims who are so much like us.
- In our Torah portion this week, we also have a mass movement of Jews; however, the circumstances are reversed. Instead of going from freedom to captivity, like the victims of the Holocaust, they go from captivity to freedom. God brings on the final three plagues, and Pharaoh releases the Israelites to leave. It is notable to see in this case, going from captivity to freedom, what the Bible tells us that the Israelites took with them. We don't hear about normal items, like books or combs, and it's likely that as slaves, the Israelites didn't have much of their own to bring with them. What we are told is that they leave with riches, which they take from the Egyptians. In Chapter 11:2 we read God commanding Moses: "Speak now in the ears of the people, and let every man ask of his neighbor, and every woman of her neighbor, jewels of silver and jewels of gold." And we read later that the people complied. In Chapter 12:35-36 it says, "Meanwhile, the children of Israel had done Moses' bidding, asking the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and clothing. As the Eternal had made the Egyptians favorably disposed towards the people they let them have what they asked for. Thus they despoiled the Egyptians."
- This reaction to their new freedom is not so difficult to imagine – they had been deprived for so long, and since they were clearly in a position of new power, they could take the things that they want.
- There's another layer, however, that we have to think about, which Biblical scholar Nechama Leibowitz points out, and that is that it isn't the base instincts of the Israelites, seeking retribution, who plunder the Egyptians. They are doing so under the command of God. And not only that, but this part of the story is part of a larger, pre-determined plan that dates back over 400 years to the time of Abraham.
- As you might recall, God speaks to Abraham, at the Covenant of the Pieces, before Isaac is even born, and Abraham is still Avram at this point. He says that he will make his descendants great, but also says that his descendants will be strangers in another land, will be enslaved there for 400 years, and then God will liberate them, and they will leave with great possessions.
- And then again, at the burning bush where God first summons Moses to the task of leading the people out, God says that he will take the people out, and that the Israelites will not leave empty handed, but rather should take the gold, silver and clothing of the Egyptians and wear them out to freedom.
- Today, I have a hard time imagining going to the home where the first born has died, and taking their jewelry. That feels awful. And that God is the initiator of this plan doesn't sit right either.

**We are not the first to bristle at this, both because it feels uncomfortable, and because we aren't the only people reading this text. It makes the Israelites look like thieves. Over the course of the last 2000 years, our scholars have grappled with this question.**

-Debate is recorded in the Talmud where the Egyptians present their case to Alexander the Great, where the Egyptians ask for their silver and gold back. Rabbi Gavicha ben Pasisa brings up that the Israelites,

600,000 of them, were enslaved for 430 years, and demands those wages back. The Egyptians have no response, and the issue is settled.

The rabbis come up with a reasonable defense, but it is certainly a defense.

-Other ways to work this out: Josephus, ancient Historian and commentator, wrote that the Egyptians gave them these departure gifts out of love and friendship, and because they felt bad.

-Ibn Yanach - Translating the word “borrow” as a request for a gift. The example cited is Hannah, who consecrates her first son Samuel to work with Eli the priest in the Temple. She writes “I have lent him to the Eternal.” But God never asked to borrow him; therefore the word can mean a gift.

-Midrash Hemdat Hayamim – bribed to save their first born, asking for these back

### **Two modern commentators, for why God does this**

-Benno Jacob: don’t want the Israelites to leave angry; commandment in Deut. not to abhor an Egyptian, and the Israelites otherwise would have.

-Cassuto: God wills it to ensure justice, because the Egyptians were not going to do it

**Whether you find any of these explanations satisfying or not, what’s important to remember is that challenging the text is not an affront to the text; it is engagement with the text. People far more pious than you or I, and far more knowledgeable, have been disturbed, and have raised big questions.**

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg helps frame this process. She writes in her commentary on the book of Exodus, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, that the liberation of the Israelites is the master narrative. The point of the story of the Exodus is that an all-powerful God defeated the mortal Pharaoh to fulfill the promised God made with our ancestors, to free us from slavery and bring us into service of God. That is the master narrative. However, Zornberg writes, this master narrative naturally gives rise to a counter-narrative, which throws the justification of God’s actions into question. We read this story and hear both narratives, and there is dissonance between them.

Zornberg argues that we do not need to dissolve the dissonance. We can just keep asking questions. How can we find the balance between justice – making up for the losses experienced by the Israelites – with compassion – wanting to behave better than our oppressors. To what extent do possessions, like gold and silver, give us a sense of worth, and to what extent should we reject the material for the spiritual? How do we honor the humanness – the animal extinct that we were created with – while still pursuing a higher level of morality?

It is in these questions that we grow and learn.

**This year has been a year of re-examining our stories, and coming up with new questions.**

We learned this year that a number of people whom we trusted have been serial abusers of both male and female subordinates. I know for me, I stopped watching the news in December for fear of hearing accusations from another person that I trusted or admired. The master narrative had been, for a long time,

that we don't question publicly what happens behind closed doors, and that if we don't know what's going on, or if it isn't happening to us or someone we know directly, then it isn't our place to say.

But a few counter-narratives have since emerged:

- The private can become public – it no longer can be assumed that abuse will remain a secret
- Abuse isn't something that happens to strangers; we are surrounded by victims and survivors, and we saw that with #me too.
- There can be consequences for these actions; it can be safe to come forward.

When presented with these counter-narratives, we then come up with new questions:

- What does justice look like, for the victims, and for the accused?
- When is it appropriate to contract with someone to remain silent, considering that it can put other people in harm's way?
- What do we do with the gold and silver, as it were – the cultural contributions of celebrities who have been found to be perpetrators of abuse?

**This process is overwhelming, and sensitive, and can be contentious. And, at the same time, questioning our story is a very Jewish thing to do. It is an authentic Jewish act. As Jews, we are experts at looking at our stories from many directions, and not settling for what it meant at one time as the final say.**

**Not only is questioning an authentic act, but we have tools to do it.**

It is an authentic exercise for us, and one that we can embrace using the tools of Judaism

One tool is looking at language very closely. Think of the example of trying to figure out if the word meant to borrow or to ask for to keep. We found a whole world of thought in the possible interpretation of one word. Although debates over language can be frustrating in an age of social media, where hastily written messages can certainly not be compared to the craft of the biblical text, we still maintain that language is how we communicate, and that speech and the written word have the potential to heal and create peace, as well as to hurt and destroy.

Another tool we have is judging with favor. Our Sages teach in the Mishnah, in Pirkei Avot, from Yehoshua ben Perachia, that we just judge each person favorably – *dan et kol ha'adam l'chafzchut*. This means that our starting point for each person is one of favor, until evidence shows otherwise. This does not mean we are naïve, or give someone endless chances, or a pass altogether. This means that in raising questions between our master narrative, and our counter-narratives, we make ourselves open to the truth, and give questions fair consideration.

A third tool we have are our values, which are based in the Torah itself. Why do we struggle with the possibility that God told the Israelites to deceive their neighbors into lending them silver and gold when they aren't planning to return them? Because our Torah says elsewhere, thou shalt not steal. We weren't raised to be thieves. That isn't a modern sensibility, that is our heritage. Why is it difficult to read about

the slaying of the first born? Because we were taught in our Torah, Love your neighbor as yourself, We are all created in God's image. Be fruitful and multiply. These are our values speaking, and we learned them in the Torah, and we should be unapologetic in raising these questions today. The same goes for our society. We have been taught to not oppress another, because we were slaves in Egypt. We have been taught Thou shalt not bear false witness. Our Torah teaches that abuse is wrong, that bribes are wrong, that power can be dangerous, and that we are responsible for pursuing justice.

These are not new thoughts; these are rooted in our most sacred text, and they stay with us, whispering new questions into our ears.

While the society around us struggles to make sense of new narratives, we can stand proudly and sturdily in these debates, because the debates themselves are core to who we are as Jewish men and women.

I pray that on this Shabbat of raising up women's voices and contributions in our community, that we can all commit to supporting the voices that are still subdued, in places where there is not yet freedom or safety to challenge authority. May we be open to one another's stories. May we be deliberate with our language and hold others to the same standards. May we be brave with our questions, and even more brave to listen to the answers.