

Bo: Me'es and Me'im Egypt's Gifts

- Nisson Shulman, based on an idea heard from The Rav.

Nations accuse us of looting what does not belong to us, while compacently ignoring the pillaging by others. Historically, taking gold and silver from Egypt is a frequent example. The defense. The real answer, as given by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, zt"l.

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(based on a thought I once heard from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik)

In our Sidra we find God pleading with the people to take gold and silver from the Egyptians and not to leave empty handed.

Since when does anyone have to be coaxed to acquire wealth? But this was different, say our Rabbis, because the Jews rejected this command saying, "It is enough that we escape with our skins!" In fact, it was the only time Hashem required Moshe to plead with the people, *Daber na beznei haam* (Shemot 11:2).

That is a good answer. Today, 3600 years later, we wonder at the demand. Why did God want us to take from the Egyptians? In fact we have suffered from it ever since. No nation has been criticized for acquiring spoils of war. Alsace Lorraine changed hands many times. Every conquering nation acquires spoils and booty. We hardly hear criticism, perhaps muted veiled disapproval. The Vatican has never been criticised for stealing treasures of Judaism and filling the Vatican library with them, and in fact the Vatican palace. There was a discussion with the Russian government about books that the early Rebbi of Lubavitch possessed and which were looted from him and at the time when people heard about it they raised their eyebrows, saying that there are more important things in the world.

Only the Jews are criticized. We were criticized from the very beginning. Later in Alexandria, descendants of the Egyptians sued our sages before Alexander the Great, saying they are entitled to all the gold and silver we "looted" from their ancestors in Egypt, by borrowing these objects and never returning them or their value". Geviha ben Pesisa asked the sages permission to represent them, saying – If I win all is well. If I lose, you can always claim a layman responded, give us, the sages, a chance to respond. They agreed. He appeared before Alexander, and interrogated the men of Alexandria as follows: "On what do you base your claim?" They answered, "On your Torah". He responded, "Then I shall bring evidence from the Torah which testifies that we dwelt in Egypt 430 years (Shemot 12:40), give them the hire of 600,000 enslaved people that your ancestors withheld from them for all the work they were forced to do for nothing". Alexander the Great demanded that they answer. They asked for three days' time, and when they could not find an answer they left their fields and possessions behind and fled. (Sanhedrin 91b). Whenever the Jew acquired something even though by right, people were always there to take it away from him. And the world accuses us for settling on land acquired in a war of self-defence in Israel, in Judea and Samaria.

But if we examine the story in the Torah, we suddenly see that in Egypt, at least, it was not that

way at all. Geviha ben Pesisa might have had an even better answer. For there is a difference in nuance, in the Hebrew language, if you say lishol me'im and if you say lishol me'et. Lishol me'im means to borrow, since im means together with, and the borrower takes the object together with the owner. There is a partnership. His part is to be able to use it; the lender's part is ownership. He is im, "with" the lender.

Lishol me'et literally means "to ask away from". It means to ask for a gift. And in Egypt that is the expression used. We were asked to tell the Egyptians we wanted them to give us all that wealth as outright gifts, so that ownership transfers from them to us. And they did so. They gave us whatever we asked for, as outright gifts.

Why were we so honoured? Because of the Makat Bechorot. It was a period of three days' time, when in the palpable darkness the Egyptians were paralysed. The Torah tells us they could not even move, velo kamu ish mitachtav (Shemot 10:23). He did they survive? The Torah tells us that for Jews there was light wherever we went. We roamed freely in all the houses and palaces of the Egyptians. There could have been a bloodbath that night, for as Mishlei testifies (30:21-22), a slave who gains power is ruthless. That did not happen. On the contrary, our sages teach that we performed acts of hesed even to our past slavedrivers, feeding them, repaying "good for evil". On that night we reached a height of morality and hesed which was unknown to our oppressors and would have been impossible for any, even the most civilized person, to match.

The Egyptians realized this. They know we could have killed them and did not do so. We could identify the very Egyptians who tortured us and who threw our children into the Nile, and it could have been a series of three days and nights of bloody revenge. It did not happen so. We could have looted everything, and yet we actually took nothing from them. So when we approached them to give us precious things as we parted, they gladly gave us whatever we asked for, marvelling at this slave nation that reached a height of morality which was beyond their own imagination. That is the meaning of the pasuk, Vayiten Hashem et chen haan beeynei Mitzrayim, gam haish moshe gadol meod beeretz Mitzrayim beeynei avdei Pharaoh ubeeynei haam (Shemot 11:3).

Till this day the world doesn't recognize this. So we are still criticized with much the same accusations which Alexandrian citizens expressed before Alexander the Great.

When Oslo was new, the catchword was "land for peace". It has been proven to be a dishonest phrase. To the Arab it means "land now, more land later". We had at first been criticized, and then when 9/11 took place, there were some who even blamed us for a time. In Europe today, that blame persists, and in reaching a crescendo of statements and acts of anti-Semitism. All this, even when Israel has always accepted the downtrodden of our people, even some of the downtrodden of other nations. And now we know that French Aliyah is growing much greater, not because of attraction to our Promised Land, not because of Zionist feelings, but because of the rise of Anti-Semitism in their own land and the fear of the erstwhile fellow citizens amongst whom they had been living.

We know what morality really is. We will ultimately show the world. Sof hakavod lavo. In the meantime, we shall do our utmost to combat these expressions of anti-Semitism, this injustice

and these alilot dam spread by our implacable enemies, some of who now have become enemies of the entire free world.