

How The Egyptian People provided Reparations to the Jewish People to start a New Life in Freedom!

D'Var Torah - Parashat Bo – David Mayer – January 8, 2022 /Shevat 6, 5762,
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Shabbat Shalom! And, thank you for giving me this honor to drash on Parashat Bo.

Born and raised in San Rafael. I grew-up in the 1960's within a small, strong Jewish community, with a privileged middle-class life. I was imbued with a good public-school education, active participation in religious life, and instilled with proud American values. From an early age, I worked in my family's drugstore, learning the value of hard work. I am genuinely proud of many of my family stories and successes And, for much of my life, I felt my story, and that of my family's, embodied the Horatio Alger myth that anyone, through hard work, intelligence, and a virtuous life can achieve the American Dream.

I moved to Berkeley in 1978 to attend school, and for the past 43 years, with a few brief pauses. I have proudly called Berkeley home for many reasons, but primary was my wish to be part of a diverse community which was neither Marin County where I grew up, nor Palo Alto where my wife Karen was raised. Over time, through community involvement and more recent exposure to Berkeley's past and present history, came more and more questions regarding this "diverse" community we call Berkeley.

Some time ago, I started to diversify, my learning and reading. Including more Black authors, lectures, academics, historians and thought leaders. I worked my way through an amazing podcast series, "Teaching Hard History" and more recently "As Scene on Radio." I started unpacking American History and some of my family's mythology and painfully started deconstructing some of my subconscious beliefs regarding Jewish exceptionalism.

I learned anew lessons about slavery and the economic system it supported, and the afterlife vestiges, of peonage, sharecropping, Jim Crow Laws, redlining, and the systemic and pervasive white affirmative action programs established throughout our country, affecting us to this day.

A personal moment of reckoning came on the night of February 23, 2020, as I was watching the news. There came the image of Ahmad Aubrey. The young black man who, jogging through his mostly white Atlanta suburb, was stalked and murdered vigilante style. A modern-day lynching party. An avid runner for years, I jogged though cities around the world. Downtown financial districts, and city parks; through the poorest of neighborhoods, and exclusive country club enclaves. Never did I consider that I could be gunned down because of my skin color.

Unfortunately, it was not long after that we saw the deaths of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor and so many more. Yet, as the streets started to fill in Berkeley and Oakland and around the world, I did not march... that was not me. I watched the events, I listened to outraged Black Leaders, I listened to our politicians. Maybe like some of you, I turned toward Judaism, our

history, our teaching, our Torah. My feelings of outrage continued as more and more moments of reckoning flashed before us. I continued to read and write, circling issues of tikkun olam, redemption, and renewal. Trying to see a path forward.

However, what really got me to act was my adult daughter. Sitting at our Sunday Supper table, having just been to a demonstration in Oakland. Interested in her and the event, I was asking all kinds of questions, as I often do. But she just looked at me. She didn't say a thing. She didn't need to.... her look communicated everything..." So, Dad, for all your progressive talk, for all the disgruntled upset that you and your friends express ...what the heck are you going to do?" She basically called me out....and rightly so.

If you have kids, you probably know that look, and that feeling. I had fallen from grace.

I went back into our teachings with a new commitment. That is when I relearned today's Parashat Bo. Let me suggest, Parashat Bo is the defining moment in creating our people's identity. I would argue that the partnership of God and Moses, leading to our liberation, our Exodus, the resulting redemption and renewal as a free people is fundamental to who we are as Jewish People today. It is in Parashat Bo that we are commanded to observe Pesach, retelling the story of our bondage, mistreatment, liberation and our rebirth.

However, what brings me here today, at this National moment of racial reckoning was not our story of enslavement and liberation, but 2 lines of text that I had missed which describes what occurs along with our emancipation.

A quick recap:

With the hand of God, Moses goes to Pharaoh, says let my people go. *Dam, Tzfardaya, Kinim, yadda, yadda, yadda.* And before the last plague, we learn of its coming, we are instructed to make provisions, to mark our homes, and Adonai commands, *This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to Adonai throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time to retell this story, what has happened, to all generations.* And then Ha Shem passes the 10th plague Makkat Bechorot. And now we move to the end of Parashat Bo...

verse 32 - and Pharaoh Summons Moses and Aaron..and says Enough already!...Go, pack up your things and get out of here, and by the way, please leave a blessing for me...

verse 33 – The Egyptians, suffering, lamentingly “We are all dead” so they eagerly help us pack up our things so they can leave –

verse 34 – We pack up our things, our cattle, our kneading bowls and our bread that has not leavened, and we are now ready to go.....

So what happens next? I thought I knew...

Verse 35:

וּבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָשׂוּ כְדִבְרֵי מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁאַלּוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם כָּל־כֶּסֶף וְכָל־זָהָב וְשָׂמֶלֶת:

And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses; and they asked of the Egyptians for silver, and jewels of gold, and elegant garments.

Verse 36:

וַיְהִי־נָתַן אֶת־תְּנוּ הָעַם בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁאַלּוּם וַיִּנְצְלוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם:

Then Adonai gave the people of Israel favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they took all that was given to them from Egypt.

In *Rashi*, it is suggested that Verse 36 is more like “AND THEY (the Egyptians) HANDED THEM OVER” — Even what they did not ask of them did they give to them: “You say “one” — no, take “two”, only go!” Mekhilta d’ Rabbi Yihmael,

And then, and only then do we leave Egypt....

These two verses blew my mind ! “I had no idea? I had never heard about this? “

So, before we leave Egypt, Moses says, “Go to the Egyptians, and ask them for reparations.” And the Egyptian people gave the People of Israel reparations. The Egyptians gave it freely. They were not ordered to do this. They gave significantly, reparations of silver, gold, and even more valuable their special garments.

OK, so for me this explains a few things: like “where did the gold come from to make the golden calf?” ...Reparations

Or ,“where did the jewels and the fine linens come from to make the Mishkan?” ...Reparations

And, perhaps most importantly, our “survival” of 40 years in desert was not made possible purely because of magical manna, but most probably our survival was tied up with ...Reparations ...the Silver and Gold that allowed us to buy and trade with other peoples and tribes.

The Egyptian people, who for 100’s of years benefited from that system of slavery, in reconciliation paid reparations that helped us make a new life of freedom.

However, what my discovery does not explain is how in my 60+years, had I never heard this critical part of the story. In my many, many seders why was this never mentioned. In the many Haggadot that I have read, this never shows up? And frankly why, if we are commanded to “Retell the story for all times” and if the Torah does not waste any words, Why have I not heard any of my Rabbis, including my beloved Grandfather, discuss the reparations we received as we were emancipated from Mitzrayim?

This Torah portion, along with other Torah meld with reading and listening to other Jewish thinkers, Black Writers, as I begin a period of teshuva. Wes Moore of the Robin Hood Project in New York, said, ***The thing we should be aiming for is a new normal that's founded in justice – not just criminal justice, but economic justice.*** Somewhere in my reading I came across a March 2019 New York Times Opinion piece by David Brooks, “The Case for Reparations...a Slow Convert to the Cause.” As David Brooks his recounted his path, he articulated my arc, providing me an articulated perspective and a place to find solid footing on what might be done. - On what must be done!

Amos Wilson, a theoretical psychologist and Pan African thinker stated the following:

Justice requires not only the ceasing and desisting of injustice but also requires either punishment or reparation for injuries and damages inflicted for prior wrongdoing...If restitution is not made and reparations not instituted to compensate for prior injustices, those injustices are in effect rewarded. And the benefits of such rewards will continue to "draw interest," to be reinvested, and to be passed on to their children. Consequently, injustice and inequality will be maintained across the generations as will their deleterious social, economic, and political outcomes.

I continued to think about my children, and future generations, and the legacy we were leaving as it related to this issue of the vestiges of slavery and our historical, systemic racism that persists.

I shared some of my writing with a black colleague. Through tears, she said two things that have changed the course of my life: 1) She said, we Black People been talking about what you are talking about for years. I have been teaching this stuff to Children....But, I have never read a White Man own his “Expletive!!”. And #2) You have to do something!

And this is where I would find my Northstar. I along with 11 Black Americans and 6 White Americans joined together. We proudly support the many other voices demanding reconciliation. Together, we became Reparation Generation putting our words into action for truth and justice.

Reparation Generation’s overarching mission is to support the enactment of a Federal Reparations Program to help the Nation we love live up to its promise. But if we simply wait for the process to unfold, it could take decades if not generations. Yet, just as the individual Egyptians did for us, we too must do for Black Americans who have descended from slavery. We must take personal and moral responsibility. We can reconcile and make restitution. Today’s racial reckoning requires no less of our Nation, our Berkeley, and ourselves

So, as I conclude, I leave you with 3 actionable considerations,

- 1) This Pesach, I ask that you consider adding to your seder plate objects of gold or silver, and when telling the story of Passover, tell how we were given reparations by the Egyptian People
- 2) If you are a White Jew, I ask you to look at the privilege you and your family have enjoyed as a result of passing as white in this country, and I ask that you share your truths openly with your family and friends as part of a personal teshuvah and reconciliation.
- 3) I ask you to consider making a reparative wealth transfer. Not as charity, philanthropy, donation or a gift, but as Tzedakah as Justice, Your moral payment for the reconciliation of a past. And as important, as part of your legacy for the America you wish to leave to your children and future generations.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom