

Softening of the Heart
Parashat Bo
January 20, 2024
Rabbi Leslie Gordon
Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA

Today we read the last of the signs and wonders, in Torah they're also called chastisements, but we often refer to them as the ten plagues that G. unleashes on Egypt. The plagues have evolved from the first to the last, as has the response, particularly the response of the Egyptians. {Focus on this today.} Recall that when

Aaron turned the waters of Egypt to blood, Pharaoh and his magicians were singularly unimpressed: “[Aaron] lifted his rod and struck the water ...and all the water in Nile was turned into blood and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt.” Might have appeared as little more than a party trick, as we read, “But when the magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh’s heart stiffened...Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this.”

And so it was with the next wonder: Aaron held out his arm with the rod over the rivers, canals and ponds, and frogs covered the land of Egypt. In our day we sing cutesy songs about the silly frogs, but they overran the Egyptian homes, the kitchens and bedchambers, and the frogs covered the people themselves.



Here too, the magicians kept pace, producing even more frogs throughout the land. And this is exactly the problem: no one stopped to consider whether Egypt needed more frogs. In fact, the magicians failed thoroughly, responding to the crisis in the worst possible way –Just because they **could** make more frogs does not mean they **should have**. Turns out no one in Egypt needed more frogs.

Now let's consider the Egyptian response to the final plague, the death of the firstborn Egyptian, “from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first born of the captive who was in the dungeon.” This changes everything. As foretold, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron to surrender unconditionally. And for the first time we see the response of the people, the everyday Egyptians, who urge the Israelites on, impatient for them to leave the country.

And -- also as foretold-- the Israelites borrowed from their Egyptian neighbors klei cheshev u'chlei zahav, objects of silver and gold. These objects the Egyptians handed over willingly, “הֵאֱמַן אֶת־הַזָּהָב וְאֶת־הַכֶּסֶף לְעִבְרֵי מִצְרַיִם” – G. had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people and they let them have their request.”

Well this is awkward, what kind of **borrowing** is this – does anyone believe that we are taking on loan gold and silver on our way out of Egypt and to a new life? When exactly will these borrowed items be returned? No, the Torah is most explicit as to the nature of this borrowing, “Thus they stripped (or plundered) the Egyptians.”

If it helps, “borrow” is not the only meaning of sha-al. It can mean to ask, even to ask for a gift. But however we understand sha-al, we are left with this taking of wealth from the Egyptians, which they feel compelled to facilitate.

Knowing that this “borrowing” was commanded by G. only muddies the waters. {Nechama Liebowitz notes that this action might be understandable if the enslaved Israelites had conceived it themselves. It is in keeping with what we might expect of a nation long oppressed and exploited. “The Torah”, she writes, “describes the generation of the wilderness without any idealization, with all its slave mentality, ingratitude, lack of faith, longing for the fleshpots. In this too they would have run true to form.”}

But in fact, G. had commanded this borrowing. It was part of the plan from its inception. Speaking to Moshe at the burning bush, G. had said, “I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed.”

Rabbi Shai Held “Why would G. mandate that the Israelites despoil the Egyptians on their way out; why this seeming combination of theft and deception?”

Some understand this plundering as backpay for 400 years of unpaid labor. Others speculate that the supplying of outgoing slaves prepares us for how to set free our own indentured servants someday: “in the seventh year you shall set free

your indentured servant. When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed; Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor and vat, with which the L. your G. has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the L. your G. redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.”

{Part of humbling of Pharaoh, which must be total. -the Exodus narrative is not just the liberation story of an enslaved people – surely the Kadosh Baruch Hu could have found a faster, more efficient way to do that. No, the protracted, agonizing sequence of plagues was for another, maybe larger purpose: to showcase G.’s inimitable power to the Israelites, so they might believe with an unshakable faith. To Pharaoh, who fancied himself a god, locked in battle with a peer. And to the Egyptians, the inner circle and the everyday people, witness to this battle of the gods.}

Most intriguingly, Rabbi Shai Held suggests that this giving of gifts, even if compelled, could mean as a softening of the hearts of the Egyptians. This strikes me as not at all outlandish. Most hearts would soften upon realizing the fullness of the Israelites’ suffering and the Egyptians’ role in that suffering. We have evidence of this softening, even during the worst of the state-sponsored oppression.

Shifra and Puah, Egyptian midwives resort to subterfuge to subvert Pharaoh’s edict to murder Hebrew baby boys. His own daughter flouts his decree by knowingly rescuing a Hebrew boy and raising him – in Pharaoh’s own home.

And we will read in coming weeks of the asafsuf, the mixed multitude—the non-Hebrews who left Egypt of their own will and joined their destiny to that of the Israelites.

Benno Jacob sees in this otherwise embarrassing detail, what might appear to be plundering, the seeds of reconciliation. Rabbi Jacob writes, “the gold and silver were farewell gifts, a clear public protest against the policies of the royal tyrant. They demonstrate a renewal of public conscience.” The asking for and granting of the objects of value turns the trajectory of our story. According to Jacobs, “this giving of gifts was of major importance to the Torah in our drama of liberation, as it showed a moral change; the receptive heart of the Egyptian people was now contrasted to the hard heart of Pharaoh.”

Because, incredible as it may have struck an ancient Egyptian or Israelite, the drama of our liberation holds the possibility of full reconciliation between the two nations. The Egyptians are compelled to soften their hearts, open their hands, and provide for their former slaves generously. We Israelites are similarly commanded to soften our heart toward our former oppressors: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian”. In later generations Israel will establish diplomatic relationships with their former oppressors, and Egyptians will even be permitted to marry into the Israelite nation. That outcome was not a given without the formidable effort to overcome bitterness, to soften the heart and find reconciliation.

We, too, might learn a softening of our own hearts. What would that look like? When we are angry or hurt, when we feel betrayed or disrespected, our answer is often in kind. It is easy, almost automatic to answer anger with anger, hurt with hurt. In other words, it is easy to respond to frogs by making more frogs, although that is almost never what we need. When we are plagued with contention, the path to liberation requires we soften our stance. It takes a softness of heart—often at tremendous effort – to recognize the humanity of our opponent and to remember we are on the same journey to redemption.

<https://images.shulcloud.com/13691/uploads/Softeningoftheheart-Bo-RG.pdf>