

Why the Haste and Why the Riches?

Introduction

In the Book of Genesis, God makes a strange prediction to Abraham:
Know for certain that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs,
and shall be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years. But I will execute
judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free
with great wealth. [Genesis 15:13-14]

This is not punishment for anything. As we discussed elsewhere,
God decided that slavery for the Israelites was necessary for His plan.
Let us focus today on the Israelites getting freed “with great wealth”.

After the Israelites are enslaved, God speaks to Moses for the first
time at the burning bush and repeats the prediction:

When you go [out of Egypt], you shall not go empty-handed, but every
woman shall ask of her neighbor, and of the women who live in her house,
jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and garments. And you shall put them
on your sons, and on your daughters; and you shall despoil Egypt. [Ex.
3:21-22]

In this week’s Torah portion, *Bo*, the last of the ten plagues is about
to be unleashed on Egypt and God tells Moses it’s time to collect:

And the Lord said to Moses: I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh
and upon Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here. When he lets you
go, he will surely throw you out of here altogether. Speak, please, [דַּבֵּר-נָא]
in the ears of the people, and let them ask, every man of his neighbor and
every woman of her neighbor, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold. [Ex. 11:1-
2]

Sure enough, that is what the Israelites do:

-The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the
country, for they said, “[Otherwise] we are all going to die.” So the people
took their dough before it was leavened and their kneading bowls wrapped
in their cloaks upon their shoulders. And the children of Israel did
according to the word of Moses: They asked of the Egyptians jewels of
silver, and jewels of gold, and garments. And the Lord gave the people

favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And [the Israelites] emptied out Egypt. [Ex. 12:33-36]
-And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. [Ex. 12:39]
-For seven days you should eat matzot... because you left Egypt in haste. [Deut. 16:3]

Questions

Why the haste? Why the riches? What use did they have for riches when facing the desert? Why was God so insistent on that? All they needed was God's guidance and provision for their material needs. And we know what they ended up doing with this gold: Build an idol: the Golden Calf. Moses even castigates God for that in the Talmud: Master of the Universe, the gold and the silver that you lavished upon Israel ... is what caused Israel to make the Golden Calf. [Berakhot 32a]

Also, if they were in such a hurry that they didn't have time for the dough to rise, how come they had enough time to ask for silver, gold and jewels from the Egyptians?

Why the haste?

-Rashi: Because the Egyptians would not allow them to stay long enough for the dough to become leavened. Be gone, Jews! (But they didn't have to comply.)

-When I finally got my exit visa from Egypt in late 1967, I was given two weeks to leave!

-To get out before Pharaoh changes his mind. (He did and pursued them!)

-Because God makes things happen fast. The Maharal, from 16th-century Prague, wrote a great deal about this verse. In his view, the lesson of the haste is that God Himself took us out of Egypt (and not human or natural forces). God makes things happen very fast. We emphasize this in the Haggadah, in which God is quoted as saying:

I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night – I, and not an angel.
And I will slay all the firstborn in the land of Egypt – I and not a seraph.

And I will execute judgment upon all the gods of Egypt– I and not a messenger.

I, God; it is I and no other. [Pessah Haggadah]

By remembering the *swiftness* of the exodus, we remember that *God* made it happen, and that's why the matzah is central. The other symbols are not as important. Indeed, eating matzah is one of only two positive commandments regarding Pessah (the other is telling the story).

-Jewish concept of זריזות *zrizut*: Alacrity, speed in performing mitzvot. Another verse in our portion:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַמַּצּוֹת

And you shall watch over the matzot. [Ex. 12:17]

The Midrash tells us what it means:

Rabbi Yoshiah says: Do not read אֶת-הַמַּצּוֹת, [watch over] the matzot, but אֶת-הַמִּצְוֹת, [watch over] the commandments. [The letters are the same, but the vowels are different.] Just as we may not allow the matzot to become leavened, so we may not allow the commandments to become leavened [by waiting too long to perform them]. If [a commandment] comes your way, perform it immediately. [Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael]

Thus, the deeper lesson is that we must be prompt in performing *all* commandments. The Maharal notes that if the Torah only wanted to talk about matzah, it would have stated “Watch for chametz”, that is, make sure the matzah is not contaminated. Since the Torah said “Watch over the matzot”, there must be a deeper meaning. So a teaching is needed: Mitzvot must be performed with alacrity, promptly and with cheerful readiness. (Dispute: If waiting reduces the chance of failure, how long are you allowed to wait? Example: Vaccine development – how much testing before making it available?)

As the Mishna says:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְפָטֵל מִמֶּנָּה

It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. [Pirkei Avot 2:15-16]

Why the riches?

-To compensate them for slavery. The Torah says later this must be done for all freed slaves:

If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free. 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 Lord your God has blessed you.
[Deut. 15:12-14]

-For religious use. Chizkuni (13th-century France) says that the Israelites told the Egyptians they needed these riches to celebrate their religious holiday in style.

-To make the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, in the desert. Torah:

Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts. You shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him: ... gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. [Exodus 25:2-8]

Why did God want this elaborate Tabernacle in the desert?

-Possibly to keep the people busy in their long trek.

-But the Jerusalem Talmud [Shekalim Y 1:5]: The Tabernacle was to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. If so, it could not have been the direct reason for the Israelites taking the riches.

-Talmud: The people were not inclined to ask for these riches and needed to be encouraged to do it. Indeed, God tells Moses *Dabber na* – Speak, *please*, in the ears of the people and tell them to take the riches. It's an entreaty!

"Please" is nothing more than an expression of supplication. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: "I beseech you, go and tell Israel: 'I beseech you: Ask for vessels of silver and vessels of gold from the Egyptians'" ... Israel said to Moses: If only we could get *ourselves* out, [that would be enough]! This can be compared to one who was jailed, and people would say to him: "We promise to release you tomorrow and give you much money. He says to them: I beseech you, release me today and I ask for nothing." [Berakhot 9a-b]

Sforno (16th-century Italy): The reason for their reluctance was worry worried that the Egyptians would pursue them to retrieve their riches. The fact that the Egyptians did indeed do so was why God came to the Israelites' assistance and drowned the pursuing Egyptians.

-Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: God wanted the Israelites to be compensated to reduce their feelings of hatred against the Egyptians:

A people driven by hate are not – cannot be – free. Had the people carried with them a burden of hatred and a desire for revenge, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would not taken Egypt out of the Israelites. They would still be there, bound by chains of anger as

restricting as any metal. To be free you have to let go of hate.
[<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5769-bo-letting-go/>]

This point is clearly stated later:

לֹא־תִשָּׂא פָנֶיךָ עַל־מִצְרַיִם כִּי־גֵר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ־צוֹן

You shall not hate an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land. [Deut. 23:8]

Note: It says “Do not hate”. It does not say “Forgive”, or “Forget”, or “Love”, or “Help”. Just move on!

As the rabbi said in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, when asked if there was a proper blessing for the Czar: “Yes, there is: May God bless and keep the Czar... far away from us!”

Shabbat shalom.