

The "Borrowing" of Vessels from the Egyptians

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. THREE ACTS OF DECEPTION

The first four parashot of Sefer Shemot include the descriptions of three acts of deception perpetrated by Israel against the Egyptians, all three commanded by God. The first is to be found in Moshe's words to Pharaoh (5:3), "Let us go, then, on a journey of three days in the wilderness and offer sacrifices to the Lord our God" – as he was commanded to do at the burning bush (3:18).

The second deception is the one-time act described in our parasha: the "borrowing of the vessels" from the Egyptians. Prior to the deed itself, we find the command:

(11:1) "And God said to Moshe: 'One more plague shall I bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt, and after that he shall send you out from here; when he sends you he shall banish you altogether from here.

(2) Speak, now, to the people and let each man ask of his neighbor, and each woman of her neighbor, vessels of silver and vessels of gold.'

(3) And God made the nation favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians, and the man Moshe, too, was very great in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the nation."

The fulfillment of this command is recounted later on, in chapter 12, when the Torah describes the actual exodus following the death of the Egyptian first-born:

(12:35) "And the children of Israel did as Moshe had said, and they asked the Egyptians for vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and garments.

(36) And God made the nation favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they lent to them, and they despoiled Egypt."

Thus the command and its fulfillment are both to be found in our parasha, not far apart in the text and in very close chronological proximity – the command was given directly prior to the death of the firstborn, and it was fulfilled immediately thereafter. But advance notice of this deed had been transmitted to Moshe earlier, at the burning bush (chapter 3), when God described the entire process that would lead up to the exodus:

(3:20) "And I shall send forth My hand and smite Egypt ... and thereafter they shall send you out.

(21) And I shall make this nation favorable in the eyes of Egypt, and it shall be that when you go – you shall not go empty-handed.

(22) And the women will ask of their neighbors, and of those with whom they live, vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and garments, and you shall place them upon your sons and your daughters, and you shall despoil Egypt."

There are certain words and expressions that connect these three stages in the story (the original promise to Moshe at the burning bush, the direct command, and its fulfillment):

i. the verb root "sh-a-l" (to ask, borrow);

ii. the subject of the asking: vessels of silver, vessels of gold, garments;

iii. the condition that will facilitate the asking: making the nation favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians;

iv. the description of the act as a "despoiling of Egypt."

The third act of deception is also a one-time incident, but it takes place after the exodus. The command and its fulfillment in this case are described at the beginning of parashat Beshalach:

(14:2) "Speak to the children of Israel; let them return and encamp before Pi Ha-Hirot...

(3) that Pharaoh may say, concerning the children of Israel: "They are lost in the land; the wilderness has closed upon them."

(4) And I shall harden Pharaoh's heart and he shall pursue after them, and I shall be honored through Pharaoh and all of his army..." – and they did so."

I discussed the first and third deceptions in my shiurim on parashot Bo and Beshalach, respectively, in 5761 (see <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/15bo.htm> and <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/16besha.htm>). This shiur therefore will focus on the second deception.

B. THE INTRA-BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Israel's exodus from Egypt "with great wealth" is mentioned twice elsewhere in Tanakh. It appears for the first time in God's words to Avraham in the Berit Bein Ha-betarim, when he is told about the future exile and servitude of his descendants, as well as their eventual departure from that exile (Bereishit 15:13-14):

"And He said to Avraham: Know that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and

oppress them for four hundred years. And I shall judge also the nation that they will serve, AND THEREAFTER THEY WILL GO OUT WITH GREAT WEALTH."

The matter is mentioned again in Tehillim, chapter 105, which looks back at the exodus from the perspective of a considerable period of time:

(36) "And He smote every firstborn in their land, the beginning of all their strength.

(37) AND HE BROUGHT THEM OUT WITH SILVER AND GOLD, and there was none that faltered among His tribes.

(38) Egypt rejoiced at their departure, for their fear had fallen upon them."

Neither of these sources makes any mention of the source of the great wealth – the silver and gold with which Israel departed from Egypt (although we may assume that it had belonged to the Egyptians) - nor do they mention how this great wealth was acquired (by asking or borrowing). Thus these two sources lack the key words and expressions that characterized the relevant verses in Sefer Shemot. What, then, may we learn from these two sources?

Firstly, we may learn that the departure with great wealth is not an insignificant detail of the great event of the exodus. The fact that it appears in the brief notice transmitted to Avraham hundreds of years before the event, and its inclusion in the description of the psalmist hundreds of years thereafter, indicates its importance.

Secondly, it would appear that in both places this detail merges into the general trend of the description of the exodus. We have the impression not of a frenzied flight of slaves escaping from their masters, but rather a respectable and just exodus of a nation that is lawfully leaving its slavery behind, while punishment is meted out to the slave-masters. The exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt necessitated great wealth, for if one leaves naked and penniless then his freedom is not complete.

It appears, therefore, that departure with silver and gold was a crucial element in the circumstances of the exodus, as described succinctly by the Torah in parashat Beshalach:

(14:8) "And the children of Israel went out with a high hand."

C. THE ATTITUDE OF RABBINIC SOURCES

In his article, "The Despoiling of Egypt in Rabbinic Sources" (Sinai, vol. 67, Av-Elul 5730), Prof. Yaakov (Gerald) Blidstein of Ben-Gurion University summarizes the approach of Chazal as expressed in midrashim dealing directly with the events of Sefer Shemot. He also reviews the Hellenistic Jewish exegesis that preceded the works of Chazal, as well as the medieval commentaries that came after them. I shall quote some of his sources and conclusions.

The Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el (on verse 12:36) presents four opinions:

"And God made the nation favorable... and they lent to them' – this is meant literally. An Israelite did not even finish asking, 'Lend me,' and the Egyptian would already take it out and give it to him – this is the opinion of RABBI YISHMAEL.

RABBI YOSHI HA-GELILI said: The Egyptians trusted the Israelites on the basis of their experience during the three days of darkness. For they said, 'If they were not suspected of stealing while we were in darkness and they had light, then why should we suspect them now?'

RABBI ELIEZER BEN YAAKOV said: The Divine Spirit rested upon the Israelites, and an Israelite would say to the Egyptian: 'Lend me your vessel that is lying in such-and-such a place,' and the latter would take it out and give it to him, for the term 'favor' only refers to the Divine Spirit...

RABBI NATAN said: It appears superfluous to say, 'And they lent to them;' therefore we learn from this that even vessels that the Israelites did not ask for, they were nevertheless given. An Israelite would say: 'Give mesuch-and-such object,' and the Egyptian would say, 'Take it – and this other one like it.'"

Concerning this discussion among the four Tannaim, Blidstein writes:

"What are the textual problems that concern these Sages? They are particularly interested in the question of why and how the Egyptians lent their possessions or, in an exegetical sense, they seek to explain the meaning of, 'And God made the nation favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians.' We witness here no desire (or need) to question the event as a whole, or to discuss its moral significance. The main point is to demonstrate the miraculous nature of the event – the wondrous good will of the Egyptians, the miraculous knowledge of the Israelites. Perhaps we may perceive a slight difference in opinion between those who emphasize the good will of the Egyptians, and those who emphasize the activation of the Divine Spirit amongst Israel."

Were all the Sages at ease with the issue of the "borrowing of the vessels?" Not necessarily. We read in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (on verse 13:19):

"And Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him' – this shows Moshe's wisdom and piety, for all of Israel were busy with the spoils, while Moshe busied himself with the mitzva of bringing Yosef's bones. Concerning him it is written (Mishlei 10:8), 'The wise of heart will accept mitzvot, but one with a foolish mouth will be punished.'"

Let us return to Blidstein's comments on this midrash:

"The wise and pious Moshe was engaged in the mitzva of taking up Yosef's bones, while the nation – neither wise nor pious, but rather foolish (as the quote from Mishlei would suggest) - was engaged in despoiling Egypt... The nature of this midrashic attack and its center of weight are fairly clear: there is no suspicion here that the Israelites misled the Egyptians or stole their money. The criticism is leveled, rather, from an ascetic, moral angle: while the pious Moshe was engaged in the mitzva of burying the dead, you were engaged with your materialistic desires...."

But even the criticism itself is far from universal. In the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai we find a sort of reaction to the teaching of the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael:

"Was there perhaps one person among them who did not take? The proof that there was not is the verse (Tehillim 105:37), 'And He brought them out with silver and gold....' Did Moshe and Aharon – who were engaged in the mitzva – perhaps not take of the Egyptian spoils? The proof against this is the verse (3:21), 'And it shall be, when you come out, that you will not go empty-handed.' Is it possible that Moshe and Aharon transgressed both positive commandments and negative commandments? Proof against this is the verse (11:3), 'Also the man Moshe [was very great in the land of Egypt].'"

Blidstein summarizes the sources he cites from Chazal (only some of which we have quoted above) as follows:

"We see that Chazal present several approaches with regard to the despoiling of Egypt. There are some who interpret the act in a positive light, while others relate to it in a negative fashion, but we find no evidence of any great need to prove Israel's right to the possessions of their oppressors. The crux of the argument concerns the moral and spiritual significance of engaging in material pursuits at all during the time of the exodus from Egypt."

We shall conclude our review of Blidstein's article by quoting from his introduction:

"'Had He killed their firstborn but not given us their money – it would have sufficed. Had He given us their money but not split the sea for us – it would have sufficed.' We detect here, in the ancient litany of the Haggada, an echo of that declaration of thanksgiving in Tehillim (105:36-37), 'And He smote every firstborn in their land, the beginning of all their strength. And He brought them out with silver and gold, and there was none among His tribes who faltered.' Apologetics and reservations are foreign to this way of thinking. God gave strength to His nation, and an Israelite can only be proud of his victory and give thanks to God. It is perhaps based on this perspective that the expression prevalent in rabbinic literature, 'the despoiling of Egypt,' was born. 'Spoils' refers only to the possessions of the enemy, and a nation that has fought for its

freedom has no reason to apologize for its victory. But the expression 'the despoiling of Egypt' also anchors the rights of the Israelites to the money: the money was simply the spoils justly appropriated during wartime, and the Jewish-Egyptian relationship should not be described other than as enemies."

This study of Chazal's attitude toward the story of the "borrowing of the vessels" teaches us something about their attitude in general towards the Torah – an attitude devoid of apologetics.

D. APOLOGETIC EXEGESIS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Medieval exegesis on the borrowing of the vessels adopts a stridently apologetic approach, denying the very deception inherent in the act and thereby avoiding the need to justify it either morally or legally. The beginning of this approach may be traced to Babylon during the period of the Geonim – in the commentary of Rav Sa'adia Gaon. It was maintained in Spain and North Africa at the end of the same period – in the commentaries of R. Yona ibn Janach and Rabbeinu Chananel. There is also evidence of it in the literal commentaries of northern France – in the commentary of Rashbam and his disciples. In all of these commentaries, we hear that claim that there was never any issue of borrowing with the intention that the vessels would be returned, but rather a complete gift that the Egyptians gave to the Israelites who requested it from them. In this sense, this approach unknowingly accords with the view of Josephus in his Jewish Antiquities, but these commentaries – unlike Josephus – take the trouble to show how their approach fits in with the language of the text.

Let us examine, for example, the commentary of the grammarian Rabbi Yona ibn Janach (Spain, 11th century). In his "Sefer Ha-shorashim" (Book of Verb Roots), he explains the root "sh-a-l," which usually means "to ask and borrow," as also having the meaning of "to give (a gift)."

"We are reminded further of the verse (I Shemuel 2:20), '...in place of the loan (she'ela) which He had given her,' meaning: 'in place of the gift that He had given her'; also (ibid., 1:28), 'he is lent (sha'ul) to God' – i.e., given over to Him; and the causative state (ibid.), 'I have lent him to God' – I have given him to Him; also (Shemot 12:36) 'And they lent to them, and they despoiled Egypt' – i.e., they gave to them. And we note further (ibid. 3:22), 'And each woman shall ask of her neighbor' – she will ask for this gift, and likewise (ibid. 11:2), 'Let each man ask of his neighbor, and each woman of her neighbor.'

If someone were to raise the objection that this term refers generally not to a gift but rather to a loan, we might answer that when Channa declares, 'I have given him (hish'iltihu) to God,' she cannot have meant this in the sense of a loan, but rather she meant it as a gift, for the Creator never asked for [a loan], and a loan does not involve an obligation of giving anything in return [i.e., someone who lends something to someone else does not do so in return for money, while here Eli declares, 'May God give you seed from this woman IN PLACE of the gift that he has given to God']; hence this [i.e., God granting seed] is in return for the

gift [that Shemuel is dedicated permanently to God's service].

Another meaning is (Shemot 22:13), 'If a man borrows from his neighbor' – this refers to an object that is borrowed, and the term appears often in this context in the Mishna."

E. WERE THE VESSELS HANDED OVER AS A GIFT?

The innovation of the above commentary, and others like it, is that the root "sh-a-l," which appears in conjunction with the vessels of the Egyptians in Sefer Shemot, MAY also be interpreted in the sense of receiving a gift, and further on we shall address this innovative idea. Nechama Leibowitz, z"l, who adopts this approach (bringing support also from Benno Jacob), justifiably feels that the POSSIBl of such an interpretation is not sufficient; it must be proved to be the linguistically NECESSARY interpretation.

Let us return, therefore, to the words of Rabbi Yona, quoted in the previous section, from which it would appear that there is room to question his interpretation, and that he himself is aware of this:

"And if someone were to raise the objection that this term refers generally not to a gift but rather to a loan, we might answer..."

Why would someone raise this objection, when these commentators cite a string of verses to prove that the root in question may also relate to a gift?

The root "sh-a-l," which is the subject of our discussion, means "asking" for something from someone else. Hence, wherever this root appears with this meaning, the verse or the context should direct us to the essence of the request. When the incident involves a request for an object from someone else – as in our case – the question arises whether the request is to receive the object as a gift, or whether it is simply to borrow.

Rabbeinu Chananel and Rashbam maintain that we may complete the phrase, "And each woman shall ask of her neighbor," with the words, "that she give her as a gift." They bring as proof several verses in which the intention of the request is indeed that its object be given as a gift: "ASK of Me and I SHALL GIVE nations as your inheritance" (Tehillim 2:8); "I SHALL ASK OF YOU a request; YOU SHALL GIVE me" (Shoftim 8:24). But it is important to note that while in the verses quoted it is explicit that the request is for a gift, the case is less clear in Sefer Shemot. It seems forced to say that in each of the three instances in Sefer Shemot we need to add words to the sentence, making the borrowing of the silver and gold vessels into the acceptance of a gift.

This difficulty does not arise if we interpret the verse according to the accepted understanding of the word – the giving of an object for use until it is returned. Let us look at a verse that unquestionably deals with lending:

(Shemot 22:13) "And if a person should borrow (yish'al) from his neighbor, and it breaks or is mislaid..."

Here there is no possibility of explaining the meaning of the verse as "If a person should ask of his neighbor," for the continuation of the verse says nothing about the actual asking of

the request. Clearly, then, the meaning is, "If a person should RECEIVE something, with a view to returning it." Similarly, when one of the "children of the prophets" shouts in alarm at Elisha, when his axe falls into the water (Melakhim II 6:5), "Alas, my master, for IT WAS BORROWED (sha'ul)," the intention is not "I asked for it (as a gift)," but rather "IT WAS LOANED to me." We learn, therefore, that the verb "sh-a-l" itself has a certain meaning of RECEIVING something for use, with a view to returning it.

If this is indeed the meaning of the verb in our case, then there is no problem with the fact that it is not stated explicitly that the giving was done with a view to having the object returned. But if the meaning in our case is "to request" (i.e., as a gift), then we face a difficulty in that the essence of the request (that the object be given as a gift) is not mentioned anywhere in any of these verses. This is especially problematic in Shemot 12:36, where the root appears in the causative case: "And they lent to them" (va-yash'ilum).

Rav Sa'adia Ga'on and R. Yona ibn Janach were well aware of this difficulty. Therefore they do not suggest that "each woman shall receive..." means "each woman shall ask," and likewise they do not quote verses of the variety quoted by Rabbeinu Chananel and Rashbam. Their claim is that just as the verb "sh-a-l" itself has a certain meaning of "RECEIVING something with a view to returning it" (as in the laws of a borrower, in parashat Mishpatim), so it also has an additional meaning of "RECEIVING something as a gift." The only sources upon which they could base this claim are the verses in Sefer Shemuel, which speak of Shemuel being "given as a gift" to God.

But it seems that even in the story of Shemuel's birth, we may interpret the verb as giving not in the form of a complete gift, and without complete relinquishing of ownership. The root "sh-a-l" serves as a leading word in that story, and works in two directions: Shemuel is the "request (ha-she'ela) that I requested (sha'alti) of Him" – i.e., of God, and therefore "ALSO I have given him (hish'iltihu) to God" (Shemuel I 1:27-28). Channa's meaning is that she recognizes that this son belongs, in his essence, to God, and He has given the child to her as a loan – a deposit, for a limited time – until the time will come for the loan to be returned (after he is weaned). On the other hand, the son – once given to his mother – is hers in the human sense: he is part of her, and the fact that he is given to God's service for his whole life in no way detracts from her status of motherhood. Indeed, Channa does not relinquish her mothering role and does not sever contact with her young son; on the contrary, she makes him a coat every year and brings it to him at the time of the pilgrimage to Shilo. From this human perspective, Channa is "lending" her son to God for an unlimited time, but the child remains her maternal "property." Thus Shemuel is simultaneously both "lent by God" (such that he is deposited temporarily with his mother) and is also her son, part of her, whom she "lends" to God as an unlimited deposit.

If we interpret the root "sh-a-l" in this way in the context of the story of Shemuel, the central pillar upon which Rav Sa'adia Gaon and R. Yona ibn Janach built their explanation is undermined, and we must return to the perception of Chazal and the majority of the commentators, according to whom the vessels of Egypt were given as a deposit, a loan meant to be returned.

This interpretation is necessary not only because of the linguistic aspect discussed thus far, but also because of the context. In all three sources it is emphasized that the objects received from the Egyptians were "vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and garments." Why are specifically these objects given?

"Vessels of silver" and "vessels of gold" are understood as referring to jewelry, and "garments" means garments of finery. The need for all of these is explained by Rashbam (3:22):

"'Vessels of silver and vessels of gold' – jewelry in honor of the festival that they will celebrate in the desert."

This explanation is eminently plausible: it connects the giving of the objects to the fulfillment of the demand that is the subject of all the negotiations between Moshe and Pharaoh, from Moshe's first appearance before the king until after the slaying of the firstborn: (3:18) "Let us go, now, a journey of three days in the wilderness, that we may offer sacrifices to the Lord our God;" (10:9) "For it is a festival of God for us." The members of this oppressed nation in Egypt are poor; they lack the means to hold a celebration for God in the appropriate style, and so they ask their Egyptian neighbors for jewelry and fine garments for the purposes of their festival in the wilderness.

If this is the purpose of their asking for the "vessels of silver and vessels of gold and garments," then there is no reason that they need be requested as gifts. After all, the negotiations concern a "journey of three days in the wilderness," and it seems obvious that upon their return Bnei Yisrael will be able to return these objects, since they will have no further use for them. The whole situation teaches us, therefore, that the asking was only for the purpose of temporary use, until they would be returned.

In truth, this interpretation of the Rashbam contradicts what he himself writes just before these words, that "each woman shall ask of her neighbor" means "as a complete gift." The latter may indeed have been meant to serve as "an answer to the heretics," as he writes there, but it is difficult to say that this is "the main, literal meaning of the text."

F. NON-APOLOGETIC EXEGESIS: CONTINUING THE TRADITION OF CHAZAL

The discussion that we have presented thus far on the apologetic interpretations the "borrowing of the vessels" may create the impression that all the commentaries followed this line. This impression is quite untrue. Let us conclude with two commentators who, although quite familiar with the tradition of apologetic exegesis that preceded them, refused to go along with it.

The first is Ibn Ezra (Long Commentary, 3:22):

"There are some who decry and say that our forefathers were thieves. But they do not see that it was in fulfillment of a Divine command. There is no point in asking why, for God creates everything, and He gives riches to whomever He chooses and may take from one and give to another. There is nothing bad about this, for everything belongs to Him."

The Ibn Ezra also addresses this issue elsewhere (Short Commentary, 11:4):

"When Israel were close to coming out of Egypt, 'each woman asked of her neighbor...' (3:22). Had God not made the nation favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians, they would not have given them anything. KNOW THAT IT WAS A GREAT THING, and the Israelites were completely righteous in not revealing the

secret [that they would not be returning to Egypt]. For Pharaoh believed what Moshe had told him, that they would undertake 'a journey of three days' and then return to Egypt...

It appears to me that it happened thus [i.e., the deception concerning their return after three days] for two reasons: firstly, so that the Egyptians would give them vessels of silver and gold, for had they known that the Israelites would not return, they would not have given; and secondly, in order that Pharaoh and his armies would eventually drown, for had the Israelites left with his permission, with no thought in his heart that they would return, then he would not have pursued them."

Ibn Ezra therefore regards the exodus of Israel with silver and gold as such an important goal that the ongoing deception of Pharaoh concerning the three-day journey to the wilderness was meant, *inter alia*, for this purpose.

We shall conclude with the impassioned words of the nineteenth-century commentator Shemuel David Luzzatto (Shemot 33:22):

"'And each woman shall ask...' – There is no doubt that this was an act of deception, for they did not tell them that they would not return, but rather that they would undertake a journey of three days and then come back. The term 'borrowing' is also known as a term referring to [a situation of] intending to return... and the truth is that this was a Divine deception... God desired judgment and justice, that Israel would not come out of Egypt empty-handed, and therefore He commanded that they deal in a deceptive way with the one who himself was crooked..."

There are those who claim: it is true that Israel justly took what their Egyptian enslavers lent to them, when they abandoned their property and their lands in their hands when they left; but how could God command an act of deception? Would this command not leave a harsh and evil impression in the hearts of the Israelites, from which they may learn deceptive language and to perform deceitful acts? ... I say that the Israelites, who suffered what they suffered at the hand of the Egyptians and recognized their evil deeds – when they were commanded concerning this act, and when they fulfilled it... no impression of license for deception was left in their hearts. On the contrary, it was impressed upon them that God recompenses each person as he deserves; He punishes the wicked and the cruel for their evil deeds. For the Israelites did not perform this on their own initiative... but rather did it because they were so commanded by their leader, who spoke to them in the name of God. Thus, what was impressed upon their hearts was that God detests unjust people, and that He saves those of oppressed spirit and performs good for them..."

Visit our website: <http://vbm-torah.org>