

# Geared To Go: She'eilat Keilim

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Nehama Leibowitz,<sup>8</sup> always sensitive to the nuance of the text, brings to life a discussion between the commentators regarding the following verses.

*And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses; and they asked of the Egyptians jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment. And God gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And they despoiled the Egyptians.*

**Shemot 12:35-36**

לה ובני ישראל עשו, כדבר משה ;  
וישאלו, ממצרים, כלי-כסף וכלי זהב,  
ושמלת. לו וה' נתן את-חן העם, בעיני  
מצרים--וישאלום; וינצלו, את-מצרים  
שמות יב:לה-לו

The extensive dialogue that spans the pages of the Talmud and biblical commentators mirrors our own moral and didactic intuitions. We feel uneasy with the act of the people of Israel, at the moment of freedom, acting as pillagers of war, seemingly lacking moral integrity. Moreover, God even preordains the *she'eila* (borrowing) and *nitzul* (despoiling) in his conversation with Moshe at the burning bush:

*But every woman shall ask of her neighbor, and of her that sojourneth in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment; and you shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and you shall spoil the Egyptians.*

**Shemot 3:22**

ושאלה אשה משכנתה ומגרת ביתה,  
כלי-כסף וכלי זהב ושמלת; ושמתם,  
על-בניכם ועל-בנותיכם, ונצלתם,  
את-מצרים.  
שמות ג:כב

In *Parshat Bo*, this incident is described as a Divine command:

*Speak now 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.' And God gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.*

**Shemot 11:2**

דבר-נא, באזני העם; וישאלו איש מאת רעהו,  
ואשה מאת רעותה, כלי-כסף, וכלי זהב ויתן  
ה' את-חן העם, בעיני מצרים;  
שמות יא:ב

The biblical and academic research on these verses center around three main questions which will be discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot*, "The Valuables the Israelites Took", Jerusalem, 1996, pp.183-192.

## How can Bnei Yisrael “borrow” valuables that they have no intention of returning?

The first commentator to contemplate the Hebrew root *sha'al* to explain this difficulty was Sa'adya Gaon (892-942), insisting that it referred to asking for an outright gift rather than borrowing. He based his explanation on the usage in 1Shmuel 1:28.

*Therefore I also have lent him to God; as long as he liveth he is lent to God*

וְגַם אֲנֹכִי, הִשְׁאֵלְתִּהוּ לַיהוָה, כְּלִי-הַיְמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה, הוּא נְשִׂאוֹל לַיהוָה

From this perspective, Chana gave Shmuel as a gift to God, since He had never asked for this. Chana understands that her son truly belongs to God and that he was given to her as a gift for a certain amount of time. On the other hand Shmuel is really hers on the most humanistic level: he is physically part of her. Even giving him to serve God all his life does not take away from her essence of being a mother. And so, Chana does not relinquish her motherhood, nor does she separate herself from her son. She takes care of him year in and year out until she must take him to Shilo. From this perspective Chana is *mash'ila* Shmuel to God for a specified period of time, but Shmuel remains her son.

Rashbam (1083-1174) makes a methodical study of the uses of the verb *sha'al*.

*“Every woman shall ask” – as an irrevocable and outright gift, cf.: Psalm 2: “Ask of me (she'al mimeni), and I will give the nations for thine inheritance”. This is the plain sense and a refutation of the heretics.*

**Commentary on Shemot 3:22**

ושאלה אשה משכנתה-במתנה גמורה וחלוטה, שהרי [כתוב] ונתתי את חן העם. כמו שאל ממני ואתנה גוים נחלתך. זהו עיקר פשוטו ותשובה למינים.  
**פירוש לשמות ג:כב**

Chizkuni (13th century) adds another dimension to this debate and explains that the Egyptians bestowed a gratuity of silver, gold and clothing as a farewell gift from the masters to their freed servants.

## What can justify the removal of gold, silver and clothes from their Egyptian task masters?

There are a variety of answers to the second question of the people of Israel's audacity of taking from those who had dominated them for so long. The Gemara provides an ironic approach:

*Once again the Egyptians came to present their case against Israel to Alexander the Great. They said to him: Behold their Scripture states: “And the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so they lent them” Return us the silver and gold that you took from us. Said Gaviha ben Pasisa to the Sages. Permit me to go and argue with them in front of Alexander. If they vanquish me, say; You but vanquished our most ignorant one. And if I vanquish them,*

שוב פעם אחת באו בני מצרים לדון עם ישראל לפני אלכסנדרוס מוקדון, אמרו לו הרי הוא אומר וה' נתן את חן העם בעיני מצרים וישאלום תנו לנו כסף וזהב שנטלתם ממנו אמר גביהא בן פסיסא לחכמים תנו לי רשות ואלך ואדון עמהן לפני אלכסנדרוס אם ינצחוני אמרו להם הדיוט שבנו נצחתם ואם אני אנצח אותם אמרו להם תורת משה רבינו נצחתכם נתנו

tell them, The Torah of Moses our teacher vanquished you. They gave him permission and he went to argue the case with them. He said to them, Whence do you bring a proof? They answered him: From the Pentateuch, as it is stated: "Now the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years" (Ex. 12:40). Return me the wages of the six hundred thousand you enslaved in Egypt... " Whereupon Alexander the Great said to them: Answer him. They replied: Give us three days respite. He gave the time; they searched but could find no answer.

### Sanhedrin 91a

לו רשות והלך ודן עמהן אמר להן מהיכן אתם מביאין ראייה אמרו לו מן התורה אמר להן אף אני לא אביא לכם ראייה אלא מן התורה שנאמר ומושב בני ישראל אשר ישבו במצרים שלשים שנה וארבע מאות שנה תנו לנו שכר עבודה של ששים ריבוא, ששיעבדתם במצרים ... אמר להן אלכסנדרוס מוקדון החזירו לו תשובה אמרו לו: תנו לנו זמן שלשה ימים. נתן להם זמן בדקו ולא מצאו תשובה.  
סנהדרין צא.

Nehama Leibowitz expands upon this Gemara. The Egyptians who came to charge the Jews in front of Alexander the Great were the same people whose writings are littered with anti-Semitic sentiments. Our reply is clear, though its legal and moral standing is debatable. The Egyptians owed the people of Israel for hundreds of years of servitude and need no apology for what they took.

In the last generation of the Second Temple and immediately thereafter, two scribes devoted their life to defending the Jewish people against their enemies, Philo (20 BCE- 50 CE) and Josephus (Joseph ben Matityahu, 37- 100 CE).<sup>9</sup> Philo in his work *Life of Moses*, shares the viewpoint of the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*. The people of Israel were not seeking to amass wealth, but rather to regain some of the wages owed to them for their slave labor and to obtain some compensation (albeit not sufficient) for the bondage they endured. Josephus did not share the approach of the Talmudic sages who argued that the people of Israel had a right to claim wages back. He adopts the view that a gift was involved. In his historiographic work *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus writes that the Egyptians honored the people of Israel with gifts and gave them over willingly in order that they would leave quickly. When the people of Israel left, they wept and regretted their ill-treatment of them.

Some of the Midrashim on this story do not see the *biza* so favorably. In *Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael* (on 13:19), we are taught that at the time the people of Israel were parting in the spoils of war, Moshe was busy with the mitzvah of preparing the bones of Yosef. The tone of other Midrashim are not so disapproving, and are more aligned to the opinions which justify remuneration owed to the people of Israel for their work.

## Why does the Torah repeatedly emphasize this as a Divine command to Bnei Yisrael?

This brings us to the third question and perhaps most difficult problem of why the Torah emphasizes that God commanded this of the people of Israel? Shadal (1800-1865) explains that

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Elchanan Samet, *She'ilat ha'kelim b'rei ha'parshanut ha'apologetit u'vre'i ha'parshanut ha'acheret*, Shemot 12, [www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/samet2/7-2](http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/samet2/7-2). Quotes from Philo and Josephus taken directly from this article.

God despises immorality and wants to ensure that justice is meted out for His people who were enslaved for many generations. It is also an educational opportunity for us to learn how one should treat slaves. The *Or Hachaim* (1696-1743) sees the Divine command as an initiation for the nation's need to obey Moshe. Moving forward, Moshe would be giving them more challenging and seemingly illogical commandments. However, God needed to ensure that they would obey His appointed leader. In the grand scheme of things, the Netziv (1816-1893) explains, the action had to be one of borrowing and not taking. God's master plan was for the Egyptians to regret parting with their valuables, thus chasing after the people of Israel and drowning at *Yam Suf*. It was only then that the people of Israel could celebrate their full redemption.

Nehama Leibowitz quotes<sup>10</sup> Benno Jacob (1862-1945) as saying :

*For an Israelite, the word Egyptian had bittersweet associations. It would not have been remarkable had the Jew hated the Egyptian as the enslaver of his ancestors and would have reserved the right not to accord him the generous treatment enjoined by the Torah with regard to the stranger... But the Torah records that the Egyptians and Jews parted friends, the former, liberally furnishing them with gifts as the latter themselves had bidden, in the case of sending away their own Hebrew servants... Consequently "thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, for thou were a stranger in his land." But since the Egyptian could not be expected to offer gifts, Israel was bidden to spur them to do and say to them: Let us part friends and we'll take with us a parting gift.*

In a similar vein, she quotes MD Cassuto (1883–1951) as saying:

*The Hebrew slaves had worked for their masters for the number of years preordained by Providence. They were entitled to their freedom and, therefore, at the same time to statutory farewell gratuity. The law or rather absolute justice demanded it. Though the latter does not exist in the world, the court on high sees to its implementation, directing the course of events accordingly.*

While Cassuto's answer to the question of Divine imperative focuses on God's concern for justice, Benno Jacob uses the story as an educational tool to moderate the feelings of revenge and also allows us to fulfill the commandment of "thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, for thou were a stranger in his land" (Devarim 23:8).

Perhaps Rashi's answer also is under the realm of a higher Divine plan.

*Na in this context is an expression of request - please keep on reminding them, so that the righteous man, Avraham should not say "and they shall serve them and they shall afflict them" (Bereshit 15:3) He did fulfill, but "after wards they will come out with great substance" (Bereshit 15:14) He did not fulfill.*

### **Commentary on Shemot 11:2**

אין נא אלא לשון בקשה,  
בבקשה ממך הזהירם על כך  
שלא יאמר אותו צדיק  
אברהם ועבדום וענו אותם  
קיים בהם ואחרי כן יצאו  
ברכוש גדול לא קיים בהם.  
פירוש עה"ת שמות יא:ב

<sup>10</sup> See Nehama Leibowitz, "Accept the Truth from Wherever it Comes," *Milin Havivin*, Vol. 1, pp. 108-110, [www.yctorah.org/component/option,com\\_docman/task,doc\\_download/gid,121/](http://www.yctorah.org/component/option,com_docman/task,doc_download/gid,121/), where she explains why she quotes ideas from Benno and Cassuto even though their commentaries contain other comments that are objectionable.

Rav Avraham I. Kook (1865-1935), *Ein Ayah, Berachot*, ch. 1, 114-115, explains this tension in relation to the two-fold Divine promise to Avraham. The people of Israel would suffer *v'avadum v'inu otam* (and they will be enslaved and tortured) but at the end of this process they would emerge *b'rechush gadol* (with great wealth). Rav Kook elaborates that in order to fulfill this Divine promise to Avraham, the people of Israel were required to leave Egypt in such a fashion. They needed to purge themselves of the slave mentality, to become more familiar with a more lofty level of existence, individually, nationally and globally. They needed to master the art of expanding their physical expectations and successes, so that the same could be achieved on a spiritual level as well.

Finally, Rashi's comment on the original verses quoted.

*And garments: These were even more valued by them than the silver and gold. The later a thing is mentioned in the verse the more valued it is.*

**Commentary on Shemot 12:35**

ושמלות אף הן היו חשובות להם מן הכסף ומן הזהב  
 והמאוחר בפסוק חשוב.  
 פירוש לשמות יב:לה

I would like to relate a small vignette which I heard. In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, many Jews were allowed into Sweden. They were held in quarantine due to fear of epidemics and diseases, yet they were treated reasonably. There was a committee of rabbis, including Rav Wolbe, Rav Pinchas, and Rav Yisrael Hazdan. On one occasion, members of the Red Cross accompanying a new group of women into the camp asked Rav Hazdan what was imperative for the women to receive. Rav Hazdan replied that make-up was most urgent. I believe that this story and Rashi's sensitivity to the *peshat* derive from the same place. Both are concerned with the dignity of man (or woman). While we may feel a level of discomfort with the image of the people of Israel borrowing or taking valuables from the Egyptians, we must surely identify with the most basic human need for self-respect. The people of Israel's Exodus from Egypt had to be endowed with material stature as the prequel to the most momentous of circumstances - receiving the Torah at Har Sinai.