

In the 1960s, the United States National Zoo in Washington D.C. was home to a big beautiful white tiger named Mohini. The Zoo started a major project to build a large enclosure for Mohini, their star attraction. The large enclosure would simulate Mohini's natural jungle habitat as closely as possible. It would have many acres of lush forest with rolling hills and a large pond. It would give Mohini plenty of room for her to stretch and express her natural self.

Meanwhile, while the large enclosure was being built, Mohini was kept in a small 12 x 12 foot cage with iron bars and a cemented floor. For days, Mohini would pace around ceaselessly in this cage while her eventual home was being built.

Finally, after a few months Mohini's new living space was completed. The Zoo made Mohini's moving day into a big event and news outlets throughout the country came to cover the event. A large excited crowd had gathered to witness it. Let's return to this story in just a minute.

In this week's parsha we read about the final plagues that Hashem afflicts the Egyptians with. It seems that the Pharaoh and the Egyptians reach a breaking point. After suffering Barad, Arbeh, Choshech and Makos Bechoros the Egyptian Morale fell to its lowest point. It seemed the Jewish people were ready to be free. Nothing else was needed; Egypt had been punished and Hashem's power over creation was now apparent. What else was needed before freedom?

However, before Bnei Yisrael go free we encounter a very interesting event. During Makkos Choshech the Bnei Yisrael are told to take the gold and silver from the Egyptians.¹ וַיִּשְׁאַלּוּ אִישׁ מֵאִשׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ הוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ כְּלֵי-כֶסֶף וְכְלֵי זָהָב: *Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold.*” If we think about it, a number of difficulties emerge from this episode.

One, why was it so integral for the Jews to take jewelry before they were free? Chazal even recount that the Jews did not want to partake in the Egyptian spoils. All they wanted was to go free! Imagine you are a slave and are told you are going to go free. You are physically and mentally exhausted- the last thing on your mind is trying to make some extra money! Furthermore, imagine the fear that Bnei Yisrael must of had! They were told to enter the Egyptians’ home, the homes of the very people who despise and tortured them, just for some gold and silver?

Another difficulty is that this request actually had negative consequences later on in our history. The Gemara in Sanhedrin tells us a story about how hundreds of years after the Exodus, Egyptians brought a lawsuit against the Jews before Alexander of Macedonia. They demanded that the Jews return the gold and silver that they unrightfully took during the Exodus! Not only did the Egyptians use this against the Jews, but for all generations it served as anti-semitic ammunition that the Jews are obsessed with money and, even in their lowest moments, are trying to make an extra buck.

¹ Shemos 11:2

Finally, this event does not seem to be a minor detail of the story. In fact, in Hashem's very first conversation with Moshe Rabeinu he promised that Bnei Yisrael will leave "b'rechush gadol," with a lot of wealth. Actually, if we think about it, this promise can already be found all the way back to the bris bein habesarim when Hashem promises Avraham that his children will be enslaved in a foreign land- but "Don't worry!" says Hashem- "וְאַחֲרָיו יֵצְאוּ בְרֵכְשׁ גָּדוֹל"-they will eventually leave b'rechush gadol! What was so important about leaving "b'rechush gadol" that it was promised from the onset of our people? Did this really comfort Avraham from the news that his descendants would have to suffer for hundreds of years?

The mefarshim struggle to figure out the purpose of Bnei Yisrael taking the gold and silver from the Egyptians. R. S"R Hirsch proposes that Bnei Yisrael didn't take the gold and silver against the will of the Egyptians. Rather, in the aftermath of the plague of darkness, during which the Children of Israel proved their morality and honesty by not taking advantage of the Egyptians, the latter's feelings changed and they gave happily and out of respect.

R' Bachye maintains that the gold and silver was actually reparations for centuries of unpaid wages.²

² R. Zalman Sorotzkin in Oznayim LaTorah Shemot 11:2 brings this quandary to life by drawing a contemporary parallel to the debates which raged in Israel in the early 1950s over the propriety of requesting and accepting West German reparations. He suggests that there was a similar situation in Egypt, where many bereaved Israelite parents were opposed to negotiating a settlement and accepting "blood money" from the Egyptians,³⁰ and thus Hashem had to make a special request for them to do so. Thank you to alhatorah.org for this source.

The Rashbam says that Bnei Yisrael actually did not intend to keep the jewelry. Rather, they were loaned to the Jews to use in their worship of Hashem. The Egyptians gave it willingly so that they would find favor in the Jews eyes and not be affected by any more plagues.

I would like to suggest a different answer because all the previous answers don't really explain why this was such a fundamental aspect of yetzias mitzrayim to the point that it was already promised to Avraham Avinu at the bris bein habesarim.

In order to understand this answer I will share the ending of the Mohini the white tiger story.

With hundreds of onlookers waiting to see take a picture and witness Mohini frolic in joy in her new sprawling enclosure, Mohini headed straight for a perimeter wall at the enclosure's edge. At the wall, Mohini started to pace around in a 12x12 foot radius as if she was still enclosed in her cage. Mohini stayed in this tiny corner at the wall for the remainder of her life, oblivious to the freedom and choices she had.

Many people feel sad for Mohini when they hear this story. They think it's a shame that animals are not smart enough to realize when their situations change for the better. However, the same learned helplessness that characterized Mohini, characterized Bnei Yisrael in Egypt as well. Bnei Yisrael were not just physically enslaved to Pharoah and Egypt, they also possessed the slave mentality as well. After 210 years of bonage, Bnei Yisrael did not even know what freedom looked or felt like. All they knew was

servitude. Even if Egypt had by this point eased their grip on Bnei Yisrael, Bnei Yisrael was still a long way from feeling truly free.

[Similar events have taken place in the United States in which there have been many instances in which there have been people kidnap children and actually let them roam free throughout the day because the kids will actually just come back home because they begin to identify with their captor. This phenomenon, called the Stockholm Syndrome, is the ultimate form of slavery. Not only are the captives physically enslaved, but their minds forget what freedom even looks like].

The same is true for each and everyone one of us. We all suffer from Stockholm Syndrome to some degree or another. We may not be physically enslaved to anyone, but each and every one of us has the areas of our lives in which we are mentally and spiritually enslaved to an external source. For some of us it might be an addiction in which, no matter how many times they try to quit, the addiction seems to never leave them. They begin to lose hope that they can ever become free from it.

For some of us it may be relationship struggles. Many people suffer from broken relationships: whether it be husband and wife, parent and child, or friend and friend- sometimes it seems that there are barriers that are holding us back from forgiving or showing our love to the people who need it most in our lives. Months, years, and even decades go by without healing these deep wounds. For a lot of people, they forget what healthy relationships look like.

So how do we free ourselves from our own mental slavery? How are we to look at our own proverbial Pharaohs in the eye and finally let ourselves free?

The answer to this is in the taking of the jewelry. Bnei Yisrael were commanded to take the Egyptian jewelry. This was not a quick way to earn some money or reparative measures as some mefarshim explain. Rather, I think the message is that in order to be free one must be able to envision themselves as free. The great psychologist, Viktor Frankl, said that what allowed him to survive the Holocaust was that he envisioned himself being liberated. He needed to picture himself as someone other than a slave in order to have the courage to survive. When Hashem promised Avraham to free his children from slavery, Avraham was scared: "True, they might be physically free," he said. "But how will they ever be able to get past the trauma and live like free people?" When Bnei Yisrael took gold and silver from the Egyptians, they were finally able to see themselves as rich and powerful people. They needed this change in perspective to get rid of their slave mentality.

The same is true with our own personal mitzrayims. The word *mitzrayim* come from the word *meitzarim*, boundaries. When one is in mitzrayim, whether physically or emotionally, they feel like they are stuck in narrow boundaries. The way to leave our own Egypt is to begin to see ourselves as failures. Stop thinking what was in the past, must continue to be. Envision a brighter future and don't let our demons continue to have control over us.

If we are able to change our perspective of who we are and who we will be, we will be able to accomplish great things. We will finally be able to feel free, and we will emerge with a *rechus gadol*.