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CONTINUITY

Bo: Cathartic Clothing

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It was so close; freedom was in the air. After 210 years of slavery and servitude, the Jewish people stood on the threshold of emancipation, ready to embrace their national destiny. God reminded Moshe of the promise made to Avraham during the *Bris Beyn Ha'Bisarim (the Covenant of the Pieces)* that the nation would emerge from Egypt with great wealth. God instructed Moshe: *"Please, speak into the ears of the people, and let them request, each man from his friend and each woman from her friend, silver vessels and golden vessels (Shemos 11:2)."* Moshe complied, and the Torah tells us, *"And the children of Israel did according to Moses' order, and they borrowed/requested (va'yishalu) from the Egyptians silver objects, golden objects, and garments. The Lord gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they gave them, and they emptied out Egypt (Exodus 12:35-36)."*

Why does the Torah use the word *"va'yishalu, request"*? Why didn't the Jews demand the gold and silver which they were owed as back-pay for 210 years of servitude?

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Moshe commanded them regarding silver and gold, and yet when they approached the Egyptians, the people asked for clothing (*smalot*) as well. Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, Spanish Rabbi 1255-1340) makes a fascinating statement: *These (articles of clothing) meant more to them than the silver and the gold, and [thus] whatever is mentioned later in the verse is more esteemed - gold is more important than silver, and clothing is more important than gold.* What is the significance of this clothing? Why would it be more valuable than silver and gold?

The Chizkuni (Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach, a 13th century French rabbi) links the *"gifts"* received by Jewish slaves (from their Egyptian master) to the gifts that a Jewish master must give his servant upon emancipation.

"They (the Jewish people) will not go out empty-handed, because they (the Egyptians) will provide them with 3 types (of gifts); gold, silver and clothing - in order to fulfill (the promise that God made to Avraham) "and afterwards they will leave with vast possessions." This is comparable to the provisions that one must give his servants (from sheep, granary and wine-press)."

In reference to the obligation of *ha'anaka* (providing for one's servant upon emancipation), the Torah states:

If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you for six years, and in the seventh year you shall send him forth free from you. And when you send him forth free from you, you shall not send him forth empty-handed. You shall surely provide him from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your vat, you shall give him from what the Lord, your God, has blessed you (Devorim 15:12-14)."

If we examine the word *ha'anaka*, we find that it shares a root with two other words: *anak* (giant) and *yanak* (to nurse). Perhaps, the Torah is trying to convey to us an important sensitivity toward the emancipated slave. When a person is an *eved* (servant/slave), it is easy to lose his or her sense of humanity and begin to feel like an object. Part of the emancipation process is to *"re-humanize"* the servant, to make him feel normal once again. *Ha'aneik taanik lo*, you must mother him, nurture him, nurse him back to emotional health, help restore his *"person-hood"*, make him feel *anak* (giant, like he is something special). We begin this process on a most basic level by giving him possessions. By allowing him to own goods, we endow the former servant with a sense of humanity and autonomy in this new chapter of his life.

Perhaps, with this understanding, we can appreciate all that is occurring during these last few hours in Egypt. As the Jewish people are preparing to leave the land of their oppression, there is one thing they still need from their former masters - a recognition and validation of their humanity. The Jewish slave



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looked at his Egyptian master and said, *“For the last 210 years you treated me like chattel - you broke my body with unending labor, you murdered my children, and you crushed my spirit. Now I am free, but there is something I need from you. Show me that you understand that I am a fellow human-being. Express to me your recognition that I am a person just like you. Acknowledge and validate my humanity.”*

Va'yishalu, they asked for the silver and gold; the Jews did not demand the Egyptians turn over these possessions. The Jew said, *“I will ask nicely, I will request, no demands - I am respecting you as a human being, and I want to see if that feeling is reciprocal.”* Herein lies the test; how will the Egyptian respond to his former servant? Will he throw the gold and silver at the Jew and slam the door, or will there be some element of humane reciprocity? Will the Egyptians recognize and validate the humanity of their former slaves? The Torah states: *“The Lord gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they gave them, and they emptied out Egypt (Exodus 12:37).”*

The Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, Lenczyk, Poland 1540- 1619) comments: *And that which it says, “And they gave them” - this means that the Egyptians requested that they (the Jewish people) accept more and more gifts - to such a degree did the Jews find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians.”*

The Jewish people *“asked”*, and the Egyptians responded, *“please take.”* The Egyptians responded to them as *“people”*. Their humanity that had been ignored for 210 years was finally recognized and validated.

Building on this idea, we can now appreciate the meaning of the request for clothing. Clothing serves a dual role. Clothing endows the wearer with a positive self-image. Clothing can help me feel good about myself. Clothing also allows others to form an initial positive impression about me.

It was for these two reasons that the clothing played a pivotal role. It was this clothing that allowed the people to begin to think differently about themselves. Although they were objectively free, they still had to *“feel free.”* By donning the clothing of *“free-men”*, they were able to experience freedom even before actually leaving Egypt. Furthermore, by wearing the clothing of freedom, they were able to project this emancipatory image to their fellow Jews, former masters, and all humanity.

The accumulation of wealth upon leaving Egypt was more than just the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. It was a necessary step in the emotional healing and re-humanization of a people. After over two centuries of persecution and pain, God allowed us to re-acquire our identity as human beings, don the physical and emotional clothing of freedom, and begin the journey toward our destiny. But this message is not only historically important, it has tremendous contemporary relevance as well. Our ancestors needed validation of their humanity from their former oppressors. God understood that this would help catapult the creation of a national identity. As important as validation from others may be, we cannot hinge our happiness and self-worth on how others view us. We must learn to feel free, even if others do not share the same opinion. We must learn to see the good within ourselves, even if others cannot. Sometimes, even those closest to us cannot always see the beauty we possess. We must find the strength to wear the clothing of self-confidence and walk toward our personal promised land.