

Reparations



Exodus and Reparations

As the battle between God and Pharaoh comes to a close, there is an exchange of treasure between the *Mitzrayim-ites* and the *Yisrael-ites*:

The Israelites had done Moses' bidding and asked from the *Mitzrayim-ites* objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And YHVH had disposed the *Mitzrayim-ites* favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they *va-y'natzlu* the Egyptians.

-- Exodus 12:35-36

The verb used for this exchange, *va-y'natzlu*, is variously translated as "strip away, plunder" or "rescue, deliver," and there are many ways of explaining what happened and why. This text is sometimes used to support the concept of Reparations.

Another discussion of Exodus 12:35-36 argues that the *Yisrael-ites* were owed money from *Mitzrayim-ites* for past labor.

Centuries of treasure-related commentary also link Joseph's actions at the close of Genesis with enslavement in Exodus, raising some questions worth considering in the context of coalition and redemption:

- Joseph helped pharaoh take advantage of famine conditions, amassing wealth from around the world and even taking land and means of livelihood from the people in exchange for food. Whose, in that light, is that treasure?
- What lessons might be drawn for the need for Reparations for people descended from enslaved populations in the United States?

Talmud and Reparations

One year, in a Svava class led by Laynie Solomon, we looked at "the stolen beam" discussion in Babylonian Talmud Gitten 55a. The text speaks about what measures should be taken to compensate the owner, if the stolen beam has been already built into a large structure.

It seemed pretty clear, from the earliest classes, that the rabbis of the Talmud assume the beam had a legitimate owner and was taken, illegitimately. But I was completely stymied by the idea, proposed by Beit Shammai,

of returning the beam to its “*baalan*” — which seems to mean, on the face of it, the beam’s “(true) owners.” In Modern Hebrew, “*baal habayit* [master of the house]” is a landlord, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that some shady landlord was somehow benefiting from a loophole in the law...as too many of our big ones here in DC are wont to do...and had, by vague analogy, no right to that beam in the first place.

Just prior to these studies, I had interviewed advocates for the “Vacant to Virus Reduction” (V2VR) campaign discussed above. One of the arguments of this campaign is that WE, District taxpayers in this use of “we,” have already paid dearly for luxury housing — through tax incentives and other perfectly legal means — and so should be able to claim some of that benefit now, in this crisis involving health and housing.

Here in DC, we have thousands of housing insecure people. The DC government regularly removes and destroys the belongings and shelters of neighbors in the encampments, insisting that they have no right to live where they do. The argument for this “cleaning” (a terrifying word) is sometimes that the sidewalks must be unblocked; the same sidewalks will soon be blocked by cafe tables -- or, in a sadder irony: tents! -- to support restaurants. The same DC government regularly supports the building of luxury dwellings with all kinds of incentives which come from taxpayers’ pockets.

Gittin 55a: That Stolen Beam

Here is a translation of the relevant verses in Gittin 55a based loosely on what’s at Sefaria and our Svava class:

And about a stolen beam that was built into a large [maybe multi-residential] building [*biru*], remove the value, due to an ordinance instituted for the penitent...Beit Shammai say: He must destroy the entire building and return the beam to its owners [*baalan*]...

The Root of the Trouble

Svava method in Talmud study emphasizes looking up each word encountered, even if the study partners think they already know it. We learned that the Hebrew word “*baal*,” which is usually translated as “owner” or “master,” is based on a two-letter root, *bet-ayin*. And that root can mean to search out, lay bare, or ransack.

And, while I confess to some bias here before I opened the dictionary, finding this root really spoke to one of the many issues bothering me about the idea of returning the beam to its *baalan*. I cannot honestly argue that either

Beit Shammai or Beit Hillel thought property ownership was a form of ransacking. But I will argue that people in DC, and probably in many other locales, need to be thinking

- about how many of our beams were obtained,
- what it would mean to extract them or their value, and
- whether someone who took a beam — or chose to shelter under one that does not technically belong to them — is really the culprit.

None of this even begins to consider the issue of reparations for the Atlantic Slave Trade, for this country's genocide and massive theft from indigenous people, or for the more recent, ongoing displacement of Black people in DC and elsewhere. But it has caused me to ponder some aspects of the work ahead...

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