

Parsha Ponders

Shemos | January 12, 2023 | 20 Teves 5783

Sagely exegesis, suffering, and salty meat¹

ויעבדו מצרים את-בני ישראל בפרך: וימררו את-חיייהם בעבדה קשה בחמר ובלבנים ובכל-עבדה בשדה וגו'

The Egyptians worked the Jewish people with backbreaking labor. They embittered their lives with difficult labor, with bricks and mortar, and all the work of the field...²

Our Sages have a disagreement³ about the significance of the Torah's usage of the word בפרך, usually translated as backbreaking labor. One opinion says it's a contraction of two words: רך בפה, a soft voice. Meaning, initially the Egyptians were very gentle in their subjugation of the Jews. They spoke softly with them, and even offered to pay them for their services. Once the Jews got used to manual labor, the Egyptians enslaved them. The other opinion reads the word literally, that they enslaved the Jews brutally and destroyed their bodies with backbreaking labor.

However, there's an obscure *Midrash*⁴ which takes this verse and spins it in a whole different direction. When the Torah says that the Egyptians worked the Jews בפרך, one opinion says this refers to an *a fortiori* argument (קל וחומר), a Talmudic logical deduction from a stronger case to a weaker case.

Another opinion says this refers to a גזירה שוה, a Talmudic exegesis which learns a law from one context to another based on a shared word between them. As well, the Zohar HaKadosh⁵ takes the next verse and says that when the Torah says that the Egyptians worked them with חומר, mortar, this again refers to a קול וחומר. What are we to make of this? How can this in any way be reconciled with the simple reading of the verses?

Our Sages tell us⁶ that suffering, may we never experience it, can atone for a person's sins. How do we know? One opinion learns it from a קל וחומר. The law is that if someone owns a slave and cruelly knocks out their eye or tooth, the slave goes free⁷. Suffering, which can affect the entire body, all the more so should make a person free from punishment for their sins. Another opinion learns it from a גזירה שוה. It says the word ברית, covenant, with regards to salt⁸, and it says the word ברית with regards to suffering⁹. Just like salt sweetens the meat, bringing out its inherent flavor, so too suffering can remove the sins of a person. We can say in fact that the two opinions don't disagree; they're just giving different sources for the same concept, and really we need both sources¹⁰.

¹ Based on Likkutei Orah Pesach Chiddushim Shibud Mitzrayim § 14 by the Satmar Rav

² Exodus 1:13,14

³ Sotah 11b

⁴ Midrash Pliah, brought by Torah Sheleimah *ad. loc.* § 154

⁵ Zohar I parshas Bereishis p. 27a, brought by Sifsei Kohen *ad. loc.* The Zohar analyzes the entire verse and explains when the Torah says that the Egyptians persecuted the Jews with עבודה קשה, difficult labor, this refers to difficult questions (קושיא). When the Torah says they worked them with לבנים, bricks, this refers to הילכתא, precision and clarification of the law. The Satmar Rav doesn't attempt to explain these other two innovations of the Zohar

⁶ Berachos 5a

⁷ Exodus 21:26

⁸ Leviticus 2:13

⁹ Deuteronomy 28:69

¹⁰ Iyun Yaakov *ad. loc.* See there

If we learned this concept solely from a קל וחומר, we would have a problem. It would imply that the more suffering, the better. If freedom is given to pain inflicted on just one limb, and all the more so if the entire body is suffering, then that would mean that all the more so if the suffering is unbearable. It's totally undesirable to say that the Jews need terrible suffering to atone for their sins. Therefore, we also learn this concept from salt sweetening the meat. Everyone knows that the right amount of salt is perfect for meat, but overdoing it will ruin it. The more is not the merrier. So too, overdoing the suffering doesn't help. It doesn't accomplish anything and Hashem wouldn't do it. A little bit is enough to atone for the sins. However, we still need to learn from the קל וחומר of the freedom of a slave, to teach us that Hashem will free us from our suffering in exile.

Hashem told Moshe that He heard the cries of the Jewish people, that the Egyptians were abusing them with labor, and that He remembered His ברית, His covenant¹¹. According to the above, we can explain this verse as follows¹². Hashem heard that the Egyptians were overdoing it, making the Jews suffer more than the necessary amount to atone for their sins. As such, Hashem remembered His "covenant", i.e. the concept of the covenant of salt where we learn that only a small amount of suffering is necessary. This was the impetus to start the process of redemption and their freedom from slavery in Egypt.

This can explain the obscure *Midrash* and Zohar HaKadosh. Another *Midrash* teaches¹³ us that after the splitting of the Reed Sea, Hashem was going to drown the Egyptians. The Angel in charge of the Egyptians complained: "Just because they enslaved the Jews, You want to drown them?" Just then, the Angel Gavriel came and presented a brick and said: "Master of the Universe! The Egyptians worked Your children excruciatingly hard; please have mercy on them". Hashem immediately acted with strict justice and drowned the Egyptians. With the above, we can understand the intent of this *Midrash*. The Angel's claim was of course the Egyptians were very forceful with their enslavement, as they were simply following the קל וחומר that the more suffering, the more atonement for the Jews. However, Hashem recalled the covenant of the salt and knew that only a small amount of suffering was enough. Any more than that deserved its own punishment, and the Egyptians were drowned as a result.

The simple disagreement about the word בפרך can in fact fit with the more unusual one. The opinion who understands בפרך as referring to back crushing labor also understood the verse to be referring to a קל וחומר. Meaning, they learned the concept of suffering from a קל וחומר. Thus, the Egyptians went overboard in their enslavement of the Jews. The other opinion, who said בפרך referred to the soft start of the enslavement, also learned the word to be referring to a גזירה שוה. Meaning, they learned the concept of suffering from the covenant of salt. Therefore, it only makes sense for the enslavement to start off slow and gentle, like a little bit of salt on meat. However, everyone agrees the Egyptians eventually took it too far, and were thus worthy of punishment.

Good Shabbos

¹¹ Exodus 6:5

¹² Cf. Rashi ad. loc., and Mizrachi and Gur Aryeh ad. loc.

¹³ Yalkut Shimonj Beshalach § 241