ASTORIA CENTER OF ISRAEL
Judaism With Open Arms

Parashat Bo: Slavery with Interest

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Shemot 11:4-5	
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה כַּחֲצֹת הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרָיִם: וּמֵת כָּל־בְּכוֹר ׀ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכֹר פַּרְעֹה הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־כִּסְאוֹ עַד בְּכוֹר הַשִּׁפְחָה אֲשֶׁר אַחַר הָרֵחָיִם וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה:	Moses said, “Thus says GOD: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians, and every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave woman who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle.

David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 28
[Money has the] capacity to turn morality into a matter of impersonal arithmetic—and by doing so, to justify things that would otherwise seem outrageous or obscene.

1. Lending with Interest

Bavli Bava Metzia 61b	
אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: אֲנִי הוּא שֶׁהִבְחַנְתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם בֵּין טִפָּה שֶׁל בְּכוֹר לְטִפָּה שֶׁאֵינָהּ שֶׁל בְּכוֹר, אֲנִי הוּא שֶׁעָתִיד לִיפָּרַע מִמִּי שֶׁתּוֹלֶה מָעוֹתָיו בְּגוֹי וּמַלְוָה אוֹתָם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִבִּית, וּמִמִּי שֶׁטּוֹמֵן מִשְׁקוֹלוֹתָיו בְּמֶלַח, וּמִמִּי שֶׁתּוֹלֶה קְלָא אִילָן בְּבִגְדוֹ וְאוֹמֵר: ״תְּכֵלֶת הוּא״.	Rava explains: **The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: I am He Who distinguished in Egypt between** the **drop** of seed **that** became **a firstborn and** the **drop** of seed **that** did **not** become **a firstborn,** and I killed only the firstborn. **I am** also **He Who is destined to exact punishment from one who attributes** ownership of **his money to a gentile and** thereby **lends it to a Jew with interest.** Even if he is successful in deceiving the court, God knows the truth. **And** I am also He Who is destined to exact punishment **from one who buries his weights in salt,** as this changes their weight in a manner not visible to the eye. **And** I am also He Who is destined to exact punishment **from one who hangs** ritual fringes dyed with **indigo [*kala ilan*]** dye **on his garment and says it is** dyed with the **sky-blue dye** required in ritual fringes. The allusion to God’s ability to distinguish between two apparently like entities is why the exodus is mentioned in all of these contexts.

Shemot 22:24	
אִם־כֶּסֶף ׀ תַּלְוֶה אֶת־עַמִּי אֶת־הֶעָנִי עִמָּךְ לֹא־תִהְיֶה לוֹ כְנֹשֶׁה לֹא־תְשִׂימוּן עָלָיו נֶשֶׁךְ:	If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them.

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Vayikra 25:35-38	
וְכִי־יָמוּךְ אָחִיךָ וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּךְ וְהֶחֱזַקְתָּ בּוֹ גֵּר וְתוֹשָׁב וָחַי עִמָּךְ: אַל־תִּקַּח מֵאִתּוֹ נֶשֶׁךְ וְתַרְבִּית וְיָרֵאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ וְחַי אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ: אֶת־כַּסְפְּךָ לֹא־תִתֵּן לוֹ בְּנֶשֶׁךְ וּבְמַרְבִּית לֹא־תִתֵּן אָכְלֶךָ: אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לָתֵת לָכֶם אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן לִהְיוֹת לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים	If your kin, being in straits, come under your authority, and are held by you as though resident aliens, let them live by your side: do not exact advance or accrued interest, but fear your God. Let your kin live by your side as such. Do not lend your money at advance interest, nor give your food at accrued interest. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.

Ezekiel 18:13	
בַּנֶּשֶׁךְ נָתָן וְתַרְבִּית לָקָח וָחָי לֹא יִחְיֶה אֵת כָּל־הַתּוֹעֵבֹת הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה מוֹת יוּמָת דָּמָיו בּוֹ יִהְיֶה:	…[He] has lent at advance interest, or exacted accrued interest—shall he live? He shall not live! If he has committed any of these abominations, he shall die; he has forfeited his life.

2. Slavery With Interest

Nehemiah 5:1-7	
תְּהִי צַעֲקַת הָעָם וּנְשֵׁיהֶם גְּדוֹלָה אֶל־אֲחֵיהֶם הַיְהוּדִים…וְיֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר אֹמְרִים שְׂדֹתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ וּבָתֵּינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ עֹרְבִים וְנִקְחָה דָגָן בָּרָעָב: וְיֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר אֹמְרִים לָוִינוּ כֶסֶף לְמִדַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׂדֹתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ: וְעַתָּה כִּבְשַׂר אַחֵינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ כִּבְנֵיהֶם בָּנֵינוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ כֹבְשִׁים אֶת־בָּנֵינוּ וְאֶת־בְּנֹתֵינוּ לַעֲבָדִים וְיֵשׁ מִבְּנֹתֵינוּ נִכְבָּשׁוֹת וְאֵין לְאֵל יָדֵנוּ וּשְׂדֹתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ לַאֲחֵרִים: וַיִּחַר לִי מְאֹד כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־זַעֲקָתָם וְאֵת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה: וַיִּמְלֵךְ לִבִּי עָלַי וָאָרִיבָה אֶת־הַחֹרִים וְאֶת־הַסְּגָנִים וָאֹמְרָה לָהֶם מַשָּׂא אִישׁ־בְּאָחִיו אַתֶּם (נשאים) [נֹשִׁים] וָאֶתֵּן עֲלֵיהֶם קְהִלָּה גְּדוֹלָה:	There was a great outcry by the common folk against their fellow Jews…Others said, “We must pawn our fields, our vineyards, and our homes to get grain to stave off hunger.” Yet others said, “We have borrowed money against our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now we are as good as our kin, and our children as good as theirs; yet here we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery—some of our daughters are already subjected—and we are powerless, while our fields and vineyards belong to others.” It angered me very much to hear their outcry and these complaints. After pondering the matter carefully, I censured the nobles and the prefects, saying, “Are you pressing claims on loans made to your own kin?” Then I raised a large crowd against them

David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 115-116
[When] Nehemiah returned home [from Babylonia], he found himself confronted with a social crisis. All around him, impoverished peasants were unable to pay their taxes; creditors were carrying off the children of the poor. His first response was to issue a classic Babylonian-style “clean slate” edict—having himself been born in Babylon, he was clearly familiar with the general principle. All non-commercial debts were to be forgiven. Maximum interest rates were set. At the same time, though, Nehemiah managed to locate, revise, and reissue much older Jewish laws, now preserved in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus, which in certain ways went even further, by institutionalizing the principle. The most famous of these is the Law of Jubilee: a law that stipulated that all debts would be automatically canceled “in the Sabbath year” (that is, after seven years had passed), and that all who languished in bondage owing to such debts would be released.
In the Bible, as in Mesopotamia, “freedom,” came to refer above all to release from the effects of debt. Over time, the history of the Jewish people itself came to be interpreted in this light: the liberation from bondage in Egypt was God’s first, paradigmatic act of redemption…

Big Question: Why connect the slaying of the firstborn and lending with interest?