

Mount Sinai and a pyramid mirror each other, two halves of a whole. The pyramid is upside down, demonstrating that slavery is unnatural. Servitude distorts reality and ambition. This distortion comes not only from slavery to a human master, but also from when we become enslaved to our own drives—lacking the ability to envision an alternative or to hold fast to hope.

The midrash about Joseph and his brothers above is inscribed in the background set against the pyramid. The pyramid is draped with Joseph's striped coat; the colors carry over into the border, a mosaic of multicolored glass, reflecting the shattered love of his family—torn apart by favoritism and hatred.

Mount Sinai is upright, indicating that learning Torah is a natural state, the very purpose for which we were created. Calligraphed in the sky, one sees Leviticus 25:55, "For it is to Me (God) that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt." Thus, freedom manifests itself in becoming a servant of God rather than a servant to Pharaoh.

True liberation comes from the observance of Torah, which "inverts the pyramid of Egypt."

See the image in color and high-definition at
www.jtsa.edu/we-were-slaves-to-pharaoh-in-egypt

Bo 5781

בא תשפ"א



Sworn to Sacred Service

**Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of
The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division
of Religious Leadership, JTS**

The most powerful ritual in American life is the oath of office administered to our President. The text is prescribed by the Constitution, but its choreography is a matter of convention. Most Presidents have placed their left hand on a Bible as they raise their right and swear to execute their office faithfully, to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." This ritual signals solemnity and anticipation for the work awaiting our new leader.

The weaker arm (left, for most of us) is strengthened by contact with Scripture, as if to say that true strength comes not from muscles but from virtue. This gesture recalls Deuteronomy 17:18-19 where the new king is commanded to write a copy of the Torah, to read it and keep it close by so that they will learn to revere God and guard the divine precepts. This pose also reminds me of wearing tefillin, with the left hand linked to the divine word, and the right ready for resolute and righteous action.

Those who take an oath—whether of testimony, of office, or of military commission—raise their right hand, alluding perhaps to Isaiah 62:8, "the Lord has sworn by His right hand, by His mighty arm" (NJPS translation). In the civic oath ritual, the President commits to guard our American covenant with faithfulness, to draw strength from the people, and to hold nothing higher than their constitutional duties.

The raised right hand is open and empty, which to me implies transparency and readiness for action. One cannot commit fully to a new task while clinging still to an old one. This point is made in our Torah portion, just before the people of Israel commences its duties in worshipping God. Chapter 12 of Exodus contains instructions for the sacrifice of the paschal lamb, beginning with the designation

of the animal. Moses calls the elders of Israel and says to them, “Draw out and take yourselves sheep according to your clans and slaughter the Passover offering” (Exod. 12:21, trans. Robert Alter).

The phrase opens with two imperative verbs: *mishkhu*, “draw out,” (your hands) *u-kekhu*, “and take” (the offering). This strange doubling has yielded numerous interpretations. Robert Alter suggests that the two verbs may indicate haste, but Rashi cites *Midrash Lekah Tov* to assign distinct meaning for each one. If you already own sheep, then “draw out” one from the flock. If not, then go “take” or purchase one from the market. Rashi’s interpretation works as *peshat*, or the contextual reading, but for nearly two millennia our sages have squeezed more interpretive *derash* from the verbs.

The first imperative, *mishkhu*, can mean “withdraw,” indicating that something must be released before the new thing can be grasped. What must the Israelite release before offering the paschal lamb? Two answers are offered, one related to idolatry, and the other to theft. According to *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* (Bo 16:2), followed by Ramban and others, this verse means that before the people of Israel can commence their worship of Adonai, they must relinquish the grip of idolatry. By sacrificing a sheep, an animal venerated by the ancient Egyptians, the Israelites make a dramatic shift to their new faith.

Alternatively, the Israelites must remove stolen objects from their hands and purchase the sacrificial lamb with their own property. This reading, based on the rabbinic claim that “the righteous keep far from theft,” is applied to our verse by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Baal Haturim): *First purify yourselves of dishonesty and theft, and then commit to worshipping the Lord*. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz says that preventing theft is the foundation of faith, and therefore it must precede even the first command given to Israel in Egypt, the paschal sacrifice (*Keli Yakar* to Gen. 1:1).

Americans should demand integrity from our elected officials, and especially from the President. They must divest themselves of conflicts of interest and of any compromising commitments so that they can devote themselves fully to the Republic. Conflicts of interest are a perennial challenge for public officials, as exemplified dramatically in recent years. The Torah portion instructs officials, *mishkhu u-kehu*, *withdraw your hands from selfish and unworthy causes, and then stretch your hands forward in dedication to your country and its highest principles*.

As President Biden and Vice President Harris raise their hands and swear to protect our nation, how can we help them fulfill their duties? Only with collective effort can we construct a wise, strong, just, and righteous government. The undemocratic force of chaos and violence that recently defiled our Capitol demonstrates the danger of neglecting these duties. As Parashat Bo depicts a transition from plagues toward freedom, so may America and the world escape the grip of injustice and build more equitable and compassionate societies. This is the blessing that we seek, and this is the cause to which we should all lend a resolute right hand.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



“We Were Slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt”
Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs,
The Rabbinical School, JTS

Rav Hanina explained, “God said to the tribes, ‘You have sold Joseph into slavery. By your lives, every year you will declare, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh,’ and thereby atone for the sin of selling Joseph. And just as Joseph went forth from imprisonment to royalty, so we too have gone forth from slavery to freedom” —*Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor X*



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