

Dvar Torah for Parshat Mishpatim

Based on *The Exchanged Children*

Slavery is a very sensitive subject. Some don't like being reminded that their ancestors were slaves. Some don't like being told they ought to be enslaved. Some don't like the concept of slavery at all. No one should be ever be forced to do anything they don't want to do!

Yet, slavery is right there in the Good Book. "If you buy a Hebrew slave..." (*Exodus* 21:2). There are a lot of laws concerning a Hebrew slave. If you were to buy one (which you can't do nowadays - not *halakhically* and not legally), you would have to feed him the same quality of food that you eat. You would have to feed not only him, but his wife and children as well, even though they wouldn't do any work for you.

You would have to provide him with clothing and lodging. If you have a down pillow, he would get one too. If you have only one pillow, you would have to give it your Hebrew slave. You would have to find something else. 'Tis not for nought that our Sages say, "Anyone who buys himself a Hebrew slave is buying himself a master" (*Kiddushin* 20a)!

Even though this Hebrew is your slave, you may not order him to do any demeaning labor. Nor may you occupy his time with mere busywork. You have to treat him as a beloved brother. If certain conditions are met, you can have him work at nights with your maidservants. Any ensuing offspring are yours.

All this said, one might think that being a Hebrew slave is not so bad. It seems so, until one considers *why* the Torah is so insistent that the slave be treated so well. Being a slave is so demeaning it can break a person's spirit. The Torah doesn't want that. One broken Jew is one too many.

There are two ways one can become a Hebrew slave. One may sell himself, if he has incurred debts he cannot pay; or he may be sold by *beit din* (a Jewish court), if he has committed a theft and cannot make restitution.

How many "debts" do we have? In *Likutey Moharan* I, Lesson #23, Rebbe Nachman writes that many people live their life as if they were debtors. We feel as if we must purchase and expand our business or lifestyles. We "owe" it to ourselves to possess this thing or that, so we borrow and work to pay back the banks and credit card companies. We sell ourselves into slavery.

How much have we stolen, literally and figuratively? Do we work honestly? Do we pad expense accounts? Where is the time we have stolen from Hashem (God); Torah we could have studied, mitzvot we could have done, *tefilot* (prayers) we could have said. If we eat without saying the proper *berakhah* (blessing) beforehand, we steal not only from Hashem, but from our fellow Jews as well (*Berakhot* 35b). Is any of us capable of making restitution for such thievery? Is it any wonder that the "Great *Beit Din* in the Sky" might sell us?

We have been sold, exiled. We don't recognize our true home or our true selves. Though we are materially prosperous, these are only creature comforts, meant to ease our spirit so that we do not break. Yet, so often we *are* broken that we use these gifts for the same purpose the true prince initially took to drink and whoring - to silence the pain and humiliation of a topsy-turvy life.

However, as anyone enslaved to an addiction knows, one cannot be freed from pain and humiliation this way. The first step out of slavery is to recognize that Hashem has put you into it. As the true prince says, "If God can do such a thing, to exchange a king's son and all this should happen to him, is it right what I have done? Was it proper for me to act as I did?" Even if freedom isn't immediate, eventually one's regret will help him to eliminate his "debt" and discontinue his "stealing."

agutn Shabbos!
Shabbat Shalom!

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