

SHABBOS AS LIBERATOR

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Shabbos As Liberator¹

The symbolism seems fitting, but the timing is all wrong. The Jewish servant who declines the offer of freedom after six years of service must submit to an unusual practice. He is made to stand against a doorpost, and his earlobe is bored through with an awl. The statement we make is a striking denunciation of his moral obtuseness. His ear heard clearly the words thundered at Sinai, "Do not steal," but paid them no heed. He stole nonetheless, and was subsequently sold into servitude. That unhearing ear is punished through the pain and mark of shame of this ceremony.

So taught R. Yochanan ben Zakai. But if this were correct, why wait six years? The errant ear should be punished for its failure at the beginning of his term of service, just after his commission of the crime - not at the end!

Our *parshah*, like so many other *parshios*, can be examined on different planes, one of them being instruction in our personal *avodah*. Taken this way, the *eved ivri* is a symbol of the Jew who has fallen from his previous, loftier spiritual level. (Note that he is called *eved ivri*, not *eved yehudi* or *eved yisrael*. Prior to the exodus, the Jews were often called *ivri'im*²; they earned the other, more exalted designations only upon their liberation. We refer to our *eved* here as *ivri* as a throwback to the earlier period of spiritual ignominy. Having stooped to the level of thief, he does not deserve the title of *yehudi hashalem*, the complete Jew.)

This is the reason why he - in contradistinction to other Jews - is permitted to consort with a non-Jewish slave woman. Plainly put, he has squandered some of the *kedushah* that others have, and can therefore be in a relationship that is less than holy, unbefitting the expected station of a Jewish citizen.

HKBH wishes that no soul ever be left behind. What, then, is the *tikun* for this fallen individual?

"Six years he shall toil; in the seventh, he goes out free." Within the precious "seventh," even this seemingly lost soul can regain his former spiritual brilliance and luster.³ The light of Shabbos penetrates even to the darkest cellars of spiritual mediocrity. It can raise up a Jew from the lowliest of conditions. "The earth shall observe a Shabbos for Hashem."⁴ Even the person who has lost himself in complete earthliness can still sense the *kedushah* of Shabbos.

Shabbos comes in several varieties, arranged hierarchically. For some, Shabbos comes once a week. On the other hand, the genuine *talmid chacham* turns his entire week into a kind of Shabbos. The fallen *eved* of our *parshah* feels Shabbos only after seven long years. Some people can go year after year, cycle after cycle, and still feel nothing of Shabbos' *kedushah*. After most of their allotted years have past without ever having felt the magic touch of Shabbos, there is still ample opportunity. *Yovel*, which comes only once every fifty years, holds out the promise that even a person who has not utilized Shabbos for so many decades can still find in it a remedy to his spiritual malaise.

For every mitzvah, every aspect of *kedushah*, there is some special device that facilitates achieving it in its fullness. For Shabbos, that device is *ahavah*. We serve Hashem on Shabbos with the *midah* of *ahavas Hashem*; *ahavah* is the very essence of the day. To feel the *kedushah* of Shabbos properly, a Jew must assign all of his *ahavah* to Hashem. So long as his *ahavah* remains invested in the base desires of the material world, he cannot properly receive the *ohr* of Shabbos.

This, then, is why we do not bore the ear of the *eved* at the beginning of his term, rather than when he spurns the opportunity to savor his freedom. "When you acquire a Jewish *eved*, he will toil for six years, and go out free in the seventh." Through the effect of the seventh, through the redemptive power of Shabbos, the *eved* can escape his limitations. (The verse stresses that he goes out "free," which alludes to *isra'usa d'le'eyla*, to an arousal and inspiration initiated Above, coming as it were in the form of a free gift.) If, however, he is unaffected by that element of seven, if he fails to feel the *kedushah* of even the Shabbos that comes after six years, then we take greater note of his original failure. We bore through the ear that ignored the prohibition of theft it heard at Sinai, and that ignored every opportunity to remedy the damage.

The *pasuk* continues with the reason for his moral blindness. "If the *eved* will say, ??I love my master, my wife, my children..." In other words, if the *eved* will proclaim, "I love the Master of the Universe, but I love my wife and children." Essentially, he has ample room in his heart to serve two masters, to even place them on a common plane: *yotzro v'yitzro*, his Creator on the one hand, but his evil inclination on the other. "I will not go out free!" he tells us. He is not ready to divest himself of his longings and desires. Having refused the cure of Shabbos that is made available to him, he deserves to be shamed.

We hold out hope, though, even for him. "He shall serve him forever," says the Torah, but Chazal take forever as a figure of speech, rather than in its conventional sense. Even such an *eved* gains his freedom after the seeming eternity of an entire *yovel* period. As the *Bais Avraham* taught, even within the evil person there is a bit of him that is not evil. There is always the possibility of redemption. If this is true of the evil person, it is certainly true of the fence-sitter, the not-so-evil person who nonetheless serves two masters. He can still repair his damaged self through the mega-Shabbos of *yovel*, the sensitivity to *kedushah* that some people must wait decades to experience.

HKBH created all things so that they would never be completely lost. Every creature has its *tikun* in

the end. The ultimate *tikun* of Creation as a whole comes in the days of Moshiach. The robust belief in the final, complete redemption is central enough to our belief to rank as one of the fundamentals of faith. One who rejects it is a heretic. We must realize, however, that the coming of Moshiach is simply the universal idea of *tikun* applied to all of existence. This idea of *tikun* applies to every individual as well. A Jew must have utter confidence in his own *tikun*, which is helped along by Shabbos. Each Shabbos has the power to liberate a Jew from all the factors that hold him back from basking in the light of Hashem.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 174-175

² See, e.g. Shemos 1:15, 2:6, 3:18

³ See the commentary of R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch for a remarkably similar approach

⁴ Vayikra 25:2