

LIVE AND LEARN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Mishpatim begins with the laws dealing with the treatment of a Jewish slave. Although halachically one may own a Jewish slave, there are many laws and guidelines which limit the extent to which one may treat him as a slave. The slave must receive the same meals as his master; for instance, if the master chooses to eat marinated sirloin steak with artichoke hearts and champagne, he can't give his slave hamburgers with french fries and soda. If the master sleeps on feather quilts and silk cushions, then his slave must receive the like. (And if the master only has one steak and one set of linens - the slave gets them! I guess it'll hamburgers for supper tonight...) At the end of the day, the Gemara remarks, "one who purchases a Jewish slave is purchasing a master for himself!!" [Kiddushin 20a]

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin zt"l asks: Why now, so soon after leaving Mitzrayim (Egypt), was it necessary to make a point of teaching these laws? Had the Jews not just left the "House of Slavery?" Was the taste of oppression not still fresh on their tongues; the lashes of harsh dictatorship still freshly upon their backs? His answer gives us a shocking insight into human nature (and perhaps chinuch as well!):

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) writes (Mishlei 30:21): Because of three [things] the earth does tremble: Because of a slave who ascends to the throne... What is so terrible about a slave ascending to power, that it causes the very earth to tremble? Will not his years of slavery and bondage give him a sensitivity for the needs of the commoner? Who better than a slave can identify and sympathize with the issues of the proletariat - the blue-collar working class? One would think a slave's ascension would be cause for celebration!

Sadly, writes R' Sorotzkin, the annals of history bear chilling witness to the fallacy of this notion. How swiftly one's standpoint changes. On the rare occasions that the working class, who had once complained so bitterly about the incongruous wealth of the few, actually succeeded in ascending to power, how quickly did they forget the masses and the life they left behind! Today's slave, who waxes poetic about life as a free man - about equality and fairness and equal rights for all men - suddenly succumbs to the trappings of power and wealth, having been given a mere taste of their intoxicating nectar. Not only does he not become the magnanimous and compassionate leader he once envisioned; often he succeeds in becoming even more vindictive and brutal than those he overthrew. (Can you spell S-t-a-l-i-n?)

There is no more appropriate nor more critical time than immediately following the Exodus from Egypt to warn the Jews about the treatment of a slave. While they may now think that they could never maltreat another the way they were abused, the Torah knows otherwise, and cautions them to always remember the taste of slavery.

What indeed is the cause of this Savage-Slave-Syndrome, which at first glance so defies logic and reason? I am reminded of a poem, entitled "A Child Learns What He Lives," which goes something like this:

If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.

If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.

If a child lives with fear, he learns to be afraid.

If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.

If a child lives with impatience, he learns to be hysterical.

If a child lives with anger, he learns to resent.

If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.

If a child lives with reassurance, he learns to be confident.

If a child lives with love, he learns to find love in others.

If a child lives with calmness, he learns to be at peace.

We are, as they say, a product of our environments. While I don't profess to be erudite in psychiatrics, it's a safe bet to say that most abusive, critical, and difficult individuals, came from abusive and overly-critical upbringings. When they were young, they swore they would never abuse others the way their parents abused them. Yet (and, of course, this is not inevitable) as they grow older, to their own astonishment and chagrin, they find themselves a carbon copy of their forebears.

It's really not so surprising. Unfortunately, they had very poor behavioral models. Although they know well how much they detest this type of abusiveness, they've never been taught any other way. So when the stress level rises, they find themselves reverting to the familiar patterns of behaviour they so intimately know.

When a slave ascends to power, the very earth shudders. A slave has been raised and bred with the slave-mentality: Life is a hierarchy; you're either on one end of the rod, or the other. Though his mind may be full of flowery ideals of equality and fairness, the likelihood is he will soon revert to the oppressive ways he has learned and internalized in his years as a slave.

Have you ever overheard your kids "playing house," and naively mimicking the way you lecture/criticize/scold them? Don't you too feel the very earth shudder beneath your feet? - Is that how I sound - ? A child, as the title of the poem goes, learns what he lives. It's our task to provide them with a life worth learning from.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored by Mr. Zalmen Deutsch, in memory of his father, R' Yaakov Tzvi ben Mordechai Yehuda, and in memory of the holy rebbe, author of Kedushas Yom Tov.

And by R' Yitzchak Goldstein, in praise and appreciation of his Refuah Sheleima 17 years ago.

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