

# SERVANT OF MASTER?

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*These are the judgments which you will place before them. If you purchase a Hebrew servant, he will work six years, and in the seventh he will go out for free. (Shemos 21:1-2)*

There are several explanations as to why the not-so-dramatic laws of servants follow on the heels of last week's drama about the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Some of the explanations are basic, some are Kabbalistic.

On a simple level, the Torah is reminding us while the memory is still fresh what it was like to be slaves to others, so that we should never do the same to others. Even if we acquire slaves, for one reason or another, we must act as responsible owners, never abusing those who work for us. This can apply even today in the business world when employers feel a right to make unnecessary demands from those who work for them.

On a more Kabbalistic level, says the Zohar, the whole story about the slave and his wife is really talking about gilgulim (reincarnation) as the Arizal taught:

... There are other reasons as well, such as in order to marry his soul-mate, having not merited to do so the first time. Sometimes he may have already married his soul-mate, but he sinned and must return to rectify it; he will come back alone, as Sabba of Mishpatim has written (Zohar 105b) on the posuk, "If he came by himself . . ." (Shemos 21:3). Sometimes he has merits, and even though she does not need to reincarnate she reincarnates with him b'sod, "and his wife will go out with him" (ibid.). (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 8)

However, another aspect of the answer may lie in a different parshah, and what the Talmud has to say about acquiring a Jewish slave. To begin with, the Talmud is talking about an "Eved Nirtza," a Jewish slave who was acquired originally for only six years, but who subsequently chose to stay on with his master until the Yovel year.

According to the law, if this is the case, his master takes the Jewish slave to the door post of the house, where he bores an awl through his ear, as a sign of his extended servitude. So, the Talmud wants to know:

What is different about the ear from the rest of the limbs of the body? The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "It was the ear that heard My voice at Mt. Sinai, when I said, 'To Me, the Children of Israel are

servants; they are My servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am G-d, your G-d' (Vayikra 25:55). [This means that they should be servants to Me, their G-d,] and not servants to servants (i.e., their fellow Jew), and yet this one goes and acquires a master for himself! Let [that ear] be pierced!" (Kiddushin 22b)

Thus, it is true, as G-d pronounced in last week's parshah: G-d did, indeed, take us out of the house of bondage. But, as the Torah later reminds us, it was to bring us into the service of G-d Himself. Yes, we were freed from being servants to the Egyptians, only to become servants of the Master of the Universe. Thus, as many have asked, "What did we gain by leaving Egypt? What good is being redeemed from bondage if only to enter in another servitude?

The answer has to do with what it means to be a Jewish servant.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*If he says that he does not want to leave you because he loves you and your house, and has prospered with you . . . (Devarim 15:16)*

Says the Talmud:

Prospered with you: with you in food, with you in drink, and therefore it should not be that you eat refined bread, and he eats coarse bread, that you drink old wine and he drinks new wine, that you sleep on cloth and he sleeps on straw. Based upon this, they say: All who acquire a Jewish slave is like one who has acquired a master! (Kiddushin 20a)

Leave it to the Torah to invent such a twist of fate. Normally, the world over, when a person acquired a slave that is exactly what he got: a slave. And, though it is true that a Jewish slave acquired by a Jewish master, nevertheless, is a slave that comes with conditions of servitude that, for all intents and purposes, makes the slave look more like a master than the servant he was hired to be.

Hmm. Would that not mean, that if G-d acquired us as servants as the Torah said, that we would be, and this is VERY awkward to say, a master of His, in some way? I mean, we would still always be every bit His servants, and He would be our only true Master. But shouldn't there be some aspect to the relationship that leaves us looking a little like masters ourselves?

The answer is YES. Is this not what the Talmud has already said elsewhere, when it teaches that a righteous person decrees below, and G-d fulfills above (Ta'anis 23a)? The righteous Jew is just as much the servant of G-d, if not more so, than the unrighteous Jew, and yet it is his will that G-d carries out, as if He, the Master of the Universe, takes instructions from His own creations!

Wait, it gets even better, as the following account proves. It is from a discussion amongst the rabbis regarding a specific law of spiritual impurity:

On that day Rebi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. He told them, "If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it!"

The carob tree was torn a hundred amos out of its place, and some say, four hundred amos.

"No proof can be brought from a carob tree," they responded.

So, he said to them, "If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" after which the stream of water flowed backwards.

"No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they told him.

But, he insisted, "If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the Bais Medrash prove it!" and, the walls began to fall inward.

However, Rebi Yehioshua rebuked them (the walls), saying, "When chachamim are engaged in a halachic dispute, what right do you have to interfere?"

Thus, they did not fall in, in honor of Rebi Yehioshua, nor did they return upright, in honor of Rebi Eliezer; they still stand inclined.

Again, he said to them, "If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" whereupon a Heavenly Voice called out, "Why do you argue with Rebi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him?"

However, Rebi Joshua arose and exclaimed, "It is not in heaven!" (Devarim 30:12).

What did he mean by this? Rebi Yirmiyah said, "That the Torah had already been given at Mt. Sinai, and therefore we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice. You (G-d) have long since written in the Torah at Mt. Sinai, 'After the majority one must decide' (Shemos 23:2)."

Rebi Nasan [later] met Eliyahu and asked him, "What did The Holy One, Blessed is He, do at that time?"

"He laughed [with joy]," he answered him, "saying, 'My sons have defeated Me! My sons have defeated Me!'" (Bava Metzia 59b)

Again, leave it to the Talmud to portray such an unlikely scene, and reveal the level of sophistication of the relationship between G-d and His people. And, this is what the Torah is telling us: Yes, you are to be My servants. But here's the twist: "If you truly become My servants," says G- d, "I will treat you like masters! You will serve Me, but it will be like serving yourselves."

And thus, we have an alternative explanation for why this week's parshah is about Jewish servants that follows last week's parshah of giving the Torah.

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*"I will send hornets ahead of you, which will drive out the Chivites, the Canaanites, and the Hitites, from before you. I will not drive them out before you in one year, which would make the land desolate, and cause the animals of the field to multiply against you." (Shemos 23:28-29)*

Imagine being taken out to dinner to an expensive restaurant and after a great meal, not having to pay for anything. Imagine going to a book store next, and the same friend buying you an expensive set of books, at no cost to you. Next, imagine that your friend has taken you to an expensive clothing store in order to buy you a new suit, as a gift. Now, imagine, after being overwhelmed by all the unexpected generosity, being asked by the same friend if you wouldn't mind sharing the cost of the gas!

"Huh?"

It would probably throw you for a loop, wouldn't it? I mean, after spending hundreds of dollars on you, you probably wouldn't mind chipping in your share of the transportation costs. But, why? It can't be because your friend can't afford to shoulder the burden of the traveling expenses, because he just spent hundreds of dollars on you without batting an eye. Obviously \$15.00 for gas is no sweat off his nose.

"Ah . . . sure . . ." you say, confused, and not wanting to sound ungrateful.

Well, that was kind of what it was like for the Jewish people in this week's parshah. Egypt had been destroyed by ten plagues that did not physically involve a single Jew to make them happen. The sea was split for them, clearing a path to freedom where, under normal circumstances, they should have drowned. Hunger was solved with bread from Heaven, and clothing did not wear away.

Now, close to the border of Eretz Canaan, G-d has informed the newly freed Jewish nation of the upcoming miracle and military victory against nations far more powerful than they were. G-d Himself will wage the war, and drive out the corrupt Canaanite nations in a completely miraculous fashion.

"However," G-d says, "we're not going to do this too fast. You see," He continues, "if we do this too fast, then we'll have a technical problem. With all the people gone, wild animals will move into the cities, and you'll have to deal with them."

"Ah, right," we wonder to ourselves. "Ah, G-d, why don't you just tell the animals not to come? Or, just make them go away, You know, poof! . . . Kind of like the way you made the Egyptians go away . . . You're G-d! Can't You make the world do whatever you want it to?"

Of course He can. That's never the issue. The issue is, do we deserve such perfect miracles? Leave Egypt? We had to; G-d had promised Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov that we would. Get to Canaan? That too was part of the deal made with our Forefathers. However, how we got there and what we would have to contribute to take the land depended upon the people at the time. "I don't care how you get my son back here," the father tells his son's redeemer, "just as long as you get him back here in one piece, and alive."

Likewise, get to the Final Redemption? We must. But just how many technical details we will have to overcome along the way will depend upon the merit of the Jewish people at the moment of truth. Thus, even though THE moment of truth may not be far away, and great miracles may be occurring

for us, still, we may have to deal with some "wild elements" along the way while taking the land, once and for all.

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*Everyone counted must give a half-shekel, according to the standard of the sanctuary, where a shekel equals twenty gerahs. Such a half-shekel is to be given as an offering to G-d. (Shemos 30:13)*

This Shabbos begins the first of the four parshios before and after Purim. The first is Parashas Shekalim, in honor of the half-shekel piece that Jews contributed at this time of year. The money was collected and deposited into a chest in the Temple, and was used to pay for the public sacrifices throughout the upcoming year.

Why a chetzi-shekel and not a full one, regardless of one's financial position? Because, we are being taught how to look at ourselves as pieces of the national puzzle, and not puzzles unto ourselves. We are only "half" of the story, and our fellow Jews are the other "half."

Kabbalistically, shekel implies something more than money. The word "mishkal" means scale, and represents the idea of balance. More specifically, it represents the idea of the "Middle Line," the balance between the Right Side of Chesed, and the Left Side of Din (Judgment). Traditionally, it represents the idea of Rachamim (Mercy).

According to the Vilna Gaon, this idea has added significance in advance of Moshiach. According to the talmidei HaGR"A, one of the seven traits of the period just in advance of Moshiach, which helps create the proper spiritual atmosphere for Moshiach's rule:

Each person must equate himself to the other in his community. He must not regard himself as superior or greater than others, neither materially nor spiritually. This is the intention of the Talmud when it says, "Moshiach ben David will not come until all measurements are equal" (Sanhedrin 98a), "until all the prices are equal." (Kol HaTor, Ch. 7)

It is talking about the physical market place, but it refers also to the spiritual market place. This is definitely much easier said than done, this idea of treating all Jews equal. There will always be differences on levels of souls, because that is how Creation has been wired. But, how one views oneself because of His Divine gifts is the avodah of the individual.

One of the most powerful aspects of the Final Redemption will be its ability to unify the nation. Elsewhere the GR"A states that one of the most important aspects of Kibbutz Golios, of ingathering the exiles is the Kiddush Hashem that Jewish unity creates in the eyes of the nations of the world.

The Gulf War ended on Purim of 1991 because of the achdus of Klal Yisroel that was achieved because of the crisis. Perhaps had we continued that achdus after the war, rather than simply celebrate the salvation and go back to our respective and individualist ways of life, Moshiach may have come at that time. Instead, there is talk of Jewish civil war for the first time in over a millennium.

Parashas Shekalim is to help us get back on track, at least to remind us how important unity of the Jewish people is to G-d. And, if we work on it on our own, then perhaps we won't require the Erev Rav to drag it out of us.

*Have a great Shabbos,*

*PW*

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