

# SLAVERY

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

One of the most puzzling, if not even disturbing subjects, discussed in biblical and halachic detail, appears in this week's Torah reading. That subject matter concerns itself with the institution of slavery - of literally owning another human being and defining them as human chattel. Certainly, the entire subject matter grates on the ears and sensibilities of Western citizens in our current twenty-first century.

We remember the words of Abraham Lincoln that if there is any wrong in human society, slavery is certainly that wrong. Yet, as a matter of cold hard fact and reality, slavery still exists in a large part of human society today and was certainly the norm in all human societies for many millennia. Only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did Western societies begin the slow, painful and always violent change of mindset and practice and legally abolish slavery.

Large parts of the Moslem world today still incorporate slavery as part of their social and economic fabric of life. So, we moderns ask the question, certainly to ourselves if not publicly, why does it seem that the Torah accepts and even condones the practice of slavery? It devotes a great deal of space and thought to regulating it, limiting it, and making it more humane and less brutal.

Yet, in the final analysis it does not speak out against the practice nor does it forbid it as being a moral and legal wrong. To the true believer, this question like all questions regarding religion and faith, has really no validity. To the nonbeliever, there never is an acceptable answer to any of one's doubts and questions regarding faith and revelation.

To many if not most of us who, though believing are nevertheless troubled by seeming moral inconsistencies and who search for Torah relevance in our everyday lives, this type of question gnaws at us.

The Talmud many centuries ago pointed out the inefficiencies and economic backwardness that slavery inflicts upon society. Its famous statement was: "One who purchases a slave to serve one's self is in reality acquiring a master over one's self." Yet, even here it is the impracticality of slavery that is being attacked and not the immorality of the institution itself.

Many of the great Torah commentators, especially of the last few centuries, have attempted to deal with this issue. They saw in it - in this Jewish attitude toward slavery - an institution that could rehabilitate the criminal, give opportunity to the helpless poor, educate the ignorant and bring the pagan to monotheistic society and its enlightened practices and attitudes.

As true and high sounding as these goals are at best, they still do not sound a ringing condemnation of the institution of slavery itself. I think that we are forced to say that since the Torah was given to all societies and all times - an idea emphasized by Maimonides throughout his works - the Torah, as was its wont in many cases, spoke to a current and long-lasting society that could not imagine a world where slavery should no longer exist.

It regulated the institution and look forward to a time such as ours where, in most human societies, that institution would no longer exist. The Torah never commanded the acquisition of slaves. It tempered the practice, waiting for the time when it would cease to be an issue.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)