

THE SIN OF THE SLAVE OWNER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 405, Litigating in Secular Courts. Good Shabbos!

The Sin of the Slave Owner

In this week's parsha, the Torah describes the law of the Hebrew indentured servant. He is sold into "slavery" for a six year period, at the end of which, he goes out free. However, the Torah stipulates that if at the end of that period he chooses to remain with his master, he is brought to court, his ear is pierced at the door and then he remains in servitude 'forever'.

Our Sages explain the appropriateness of the slave's punishment: "the ear that heard on Sinai: 'You shall be servants unto Me,' and then accepts another master, that ear shall be pierced!"

Rav Yisroel Salanter notes that the ritual of piercing the ear is not only a punishment for the slave; it is an unpleasant ordeal for the master as well. After all, it is not a very pleasant experience to have to put a peg through someone else's ear. Rav Yisroel Salanter asks, why is the master being punished? What did he do wrong? On the contrary, the master is a wonderful person. He is such a nice guy that his slave wants to stay with him after six years of service. What is his reward for being so nice? He experiences the bloody process of maiming the ear of his servant.

Rav Yisroel Salanter answers that the master's guilt was in fostering an environment in which the slave feels that it is appropriate to remain in servitude rather than being a free man. If the master's house was the type of home that a Jewish home should be, the slave who lived there for six years would understand that man's role in life is not just to serve a human master. He would not even consider extending his stay beyond the required six years.

No Jew should be happy working as a slave, living with a maid-servant, having children that will not be his own, and being totally nullified and subjugated to another person. "I have my three meals a day; my needs are taken care of" is not sufficient. There is no desire for growth or for elevation. This is a life of complacency that a Jew should not live. Therefore, the master who fosters such an environment of complacency, shares in the guilt and, as such, he is subject to part of the trauma of

the process of piercing the ear.

Both Illness and Insult Come From G-d

The parsha discusses the laws of two people fighting, with resultant injury to one of them. The Torah specifies the payment of damages and states among other things that compensation includes reimbursement for lost work and medical expenses (rak shivto yeshalem, v'rapo yerapeh) [Shemos 21:19]. The Talmud [Bava Kamma 85a] derives from here that permission is given for a doctor to heal.

Rashi explains the reason why we need a pasuk to give license for doctors to practice medicine. Without the pasuk, we might have taken the fatalistic attitude "G-d caused me to suffer; let G-d heal me".

The Chofetz Chaim asks that this argument only seems to make sense in the case of illness -- illness is clearly caused by Heaven, so we might have thought that only G-d could provide the cure. However, when someone hits another person and the pain is induced, not by G-d, but by another human being, the logic of the necessity for this license to practice medicine seems to break down. Why should doctors require a license to heal a wound that is caused by another person?

The Chofetz Chaim explains that we see from this Gemara [Talmudic Passage] that the philosophy of a Jew must be that if a person hits him, it is really G-d that is causing the suffering. There is no difference between suffering from a virus -- where we clearly think 'this came from G-d' -- and suffering that comes from the hurt inflicted by one's fellow man. That too -- we should see -- as coming to us from G-d.

The Sefer HaChinuch writes (in the mitzvah prohibiting the taking of revenge): Therefore, when one is smitten or insulted by another person, he should know that G-d decreed this to happen to him. A person does not suffer pain or anguish in this world without G-d decreeing it upon him. Therefore, a person should not focus on what the other person did to him, but on what he himself did that caused him to deserve the pain or anguish!

The classic example that the Sefer HaChinuch cites is the situation when Shimee ben Gerah cursed Dovid HaMelech [King David] with a vicious curse. Dovid HaMelech did not take revenge against Shimee. Dovid HaMelech's attitude was that G-d told him to curse [Shmuel II 16:10]. "Leave Shimee alone. He will have to give his ultimate reckoning. I need to consider what I did to deserve this, rather than Shimee's action."

Rav Matisyahu Solomon wrote that at the end of Yom Kippur -- after the conclusion of Elul, at the end of the Ten Days of Repentance, and at the end of the whole day of Yom Kippur itself -- at the apex of the service, we recite the words "Hashem is the Elokim". "Hashem is the Elokim" is the 'theory'. What is the other side of the coin? What is the 'practice'? The practice is "G-d told him to curse".

If Hashem is really the G-d who calls the shots, then when a person suffers -- as we all do

throughout the year as we experience the ups and downs of life and its uncertainties and insults and aggravations -- the person must tell himself "G-d is the Elokim" and "G-d is the one who told him to curse".

The Chofetz Chaim explains that is what the Gemara is teaching us. If not for the pasuk, I would have thought that when I got hit by this person, I should not seek a doctor's treatment because the bruise from my friend really came from G-d. Although the other person had no right to hit, and of course he will face an ultimate reckoning for his actions, I must view it as, ultimately, a hit that was directed at me from Heaven.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion.

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