

SLAVE MENTALITY

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

Following the dramatic events of the Revelation at Sinai culminating in the gifting of Hashem's holy Torah to the Jewish people the Torah turns to a series of unrelated laws and statutes under the general heading of mishpatim. These laws discuss the details of Jewish manservant, damages and torts, loans and charity as well as many other day-to-day mundane situations. Our sages were puzzled by the fact that the Torah opens this instructional parashah with the laws pertaining to one who stole and was sold by the court in order to pay his debt rather than with the laws of something much more lofty an idealistic like one who gives loans to a friend in need or one who helps another off-load freight from a beast of burden. Why follow the story of Sinai with a lowly thief?

Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm zt'l acknowledges that if written by a novelist that is the way the sequence would have been ordered. However, Hashem in His wisdom chose another series of events in order to teach us an important lesson.

We are all children of G-d as it states: 'You are sons to Hashem your G- d'. If a father had several children all of whom behave properly except for one who left the path of righteousness and was in fact a thief - the thought of the parent would be preoccupied with the wayward son. He would seek counseling and probably lose sleep searching for solutions as to how to direct his son back to the right road in life. It is for this reason that Hashem opens the parashah with the Jewish manservant - the thief who was caught and cannot pay back his theft.

How does the Torah deal with the thief? No prison! That would have no positive effect on him. In fact, living with other criminals would result in his sinking lower morally than when he was incarcerated. After his release, without any new skills to help him earn an honest living, he would probably return to a life of crime. In fact, during his sentence, his financially destitute wife and children may be forced to steal in order to live.

But when the court sells the criminal to an upstanding citizen the thief has an opportunity to be exposed to a proper lifestyle - good manners - and positive character traits. He is also given living conditions equal to those of his master and even better. As his self-esteem grows his behavior improves. The immoral - lowly individual who entered the period of bondage leaves with capital for a new start in life and a personality that has been transformed into a sterling member of society.

The lesson to all is that each and every member of the Jewish people has a spark of Hashem in his or her holy soul. Each and every one is viewed by Hashem as His beloved child. He wants all of His

children to succeed spiritually and requires that each care for the welfare of the other. A heart responds in kind to the treatment it receives. If all of us treated our fellow man as brothers in need than the result would be one happy family successfully living according to the guidelines our Father in Heaven has set forth for His children.

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