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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

In parshat Mishpatim we witness one of the great stylistic features of the Torah, its transition from narrative to law. Until now the book of Exodus has been primarily narrative: the story of the enslavement of the Israelites and their journey to freedom. Now comes detailed legislation, the "constitution of liberty."

This is not accidental but essential. In Judaism, law grows out of the historical experience of the people. Egypt was the Jewish people's school of the soul; memory was its ongoing seminar in the art and craft of freedom. It taught them what it felt like to be on the wrong side of power. "You know what it feels like to be a stranger," says a resonant phrase in this week's parsha (23: 9). Jews were the people commanded never to forget the bitter taste of slavery so that they would never take freedom for granted. Those who do so, eventually lose it.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the opening of today's parsha. We have been reading about the Israelites' historic experience of slavery. So the social legislation of Mishpatim begins with slavery. What is fascinating is not only what it says but what it doesn't say.

It doesn't say: abolish slavery. Surely it should have done. Is that not the whole point of the story thus far? Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. He, as the Egyptian viceroy Tzofenat Paneach, threatens them with slavery. Generations later, when a pharaoh arises who "knew not Joseph," the entire Israelite people become Egypt's slaves. Slavery, like vengeance, is a vicious circle that has no natural end. Why not, then, give it a supernatural end? Why did God not say: There shall be no more slavery?

The Torah has already given us an implicit answer. Change is possible in human nature but it takes time: time on a vast scale, centuries, even millennia. There is little doubt that in terms of the Torah's value system the exercise of power by one person over another, without their consent, is a fundamental assault against human dignity. This is not just true of the relationship between master and slave. It is even true, according to many classic Jewish commentators, of the relationship between king and subjects, rulers and ruled. According to the sages it is even true of the relationship between God and human beings. The Talmud says that if God really did coerce the Jewish people to accept the Torah by "suspending the mountain over their heads" (Shabbat 88a) that would constitute an objection to the very terms of the covenant itself. We are God's avadim, servants, only because our ancestors freely chose to be (see Joshua 24, where Joshua offers the people freedom, if they so chose, to walk away from the covenant then and there).

So slavery is to be abolished, but it is a fundamental principle of God's relationship with us that he does not force us to change faster than we are able to do so of our own free will. So Mishpatim does not abolish slavery but it sets in motion a series of fundamental laws that will lead people, albeit at their own pace, to abolish it of their own accord. Here are the laws: "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything... But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life." (Ex. 21:2-6)

What is being done in these laws? First, a fundamental change is taking place in the nature of slavery. No longer is it a permanent status; it is a temporary condition. A Hebrew slave goes free after seven years. He or she knows this. Liberty awaits the slave not at the whim of the master but by divine command. When you know that within a fixed time you are going to be free, you may be a slave in body but in your own mind you are a free human being who has temporarily lost his or her liberty. That in itself is revolutionary.

This alone, though, was not enough. Six years are a long time. Hence the institution of Shabbat, ordained so that one day in seven a slave could breathe free air: no one could command him to work:

"Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you... nor your male or female servant... so that your male and female

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servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. That is why the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." (Deut. 5:12-14)

But the Torah is acutely aware that not every slave wants liberty. This too emerges out of Israelite history. More than once in the wilderness the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt. They say: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic" (Num. 11: 5). As Rashi points out, the phrase "at no cost" [chinam] cannot be understood literally. They paid for it with their labour and their lives. "At no cost" means "free of mitzvot," of commands, obligations, duties. Freedom carries a highest price, namely, moral responsibility. Many people have shown what Erich Fromm called "fear of freedom." Rousseau spoke of "forcing people to be free"-a view that led in time to the reign of terror following the French revolution.

The Torah does not force people to be free but it does insist on a ritual of stigmatization. If a slave refuses to go free, his master "shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl." Rashi explains: "Why was the ear chosen to be pierced rather than all the other limbs of the body? Said Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai:...The ear that heard on Mount Sinai: 'For to Me are the children of Israel servants' and he, nevertheless, went ahead and acquired a master for himself, should [have his ear] pierced! Rabbi Shimon expounded this verse in a beautiful manner: Why are the door and the doorpost different from other objects of the house? God, in effect, said: 'The door and doorpost were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and the two doorposts, and I said: 'For to me are the children of Israel servants"-they are My servants, not servants of servants, and this person went ahead and acquired a master for himself, he shall [have his ear] pierced in their presence."

A slave may stay a slave but not without being reminded that this is not what God wants for His people. The result of these laws was to create a dynamic that would in the end lead to an abolition of slavery, at a time of free human choosing.

And so it happened. The Quakers, Methodists and Evangelicals, most famous among them William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Britain to abolish the slave trade were driven by religious conviction, inspired not least by the biblical narrative of the Exodus, and by the challenge of Isaiah "to proclaim freedom for captives and for prisoners, release from darkness" (Is. 61:1).

Slavery was abolished in the United States only after a civil war, and there were those who cited the Bible in defence of slavery. As Abraham Lincoln put it in his second Inaugural: "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged."

Yet slavery was abolished in the United States, not least because of the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights, among them "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson, who wrote those words, was himself a slave-owner. Yet such is the latent power of ideals that eventually people see that by insisting on their right to freedom and dignity while denying it to others, they are living a contradiction. That is when change takes place, and it takes time.

If history tells us anything it is that God has patience, though it is often sorely tried. He wanted slavery abolished but he wanted it to be done by free human beings coming to see of their own accord the evil it is and the evil it does. The God of history, who taught us to study history, had faith that eventually we would learn the lesson of history: that freedom is indivisible. We must grant freedom to others if we truly seek it for ourselves.re of no avail. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel* ***zt"l*** *© 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Now these are the laws which you shall set before them. If you buy a Hebrew servant, six years shall he serve and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing." (Exodus 21:1–2) Arriving as it does immediately after the Ten Commandments, it is not surprising that Mishpatim begins with legal requirements of a society dedicated to morality and ethics, specifically, the relationship between employers and employees. Actually, these first laws of servitude coming after the Decalogue seem to be a natural expatiation of the first of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord thy God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." It is as though the Bible is saying that from now on there are to be no more slaves among the Hebrews; in a brilliant silent revolution, the Bible utilizes the term "eved" (Hebrew for slave), but totally changes its definition, turning the eved into a hard worker for a limited portion of time, who does not act in a servile fashion and must be granted the same living conditions – in terms of lodging and food – as are enjoyed by his employer. One may even cite the primacy of the placement of these laws as proof of the importance of the commandments between human beings. However, a careful examination of the text reveals that Mishpatim is not exclusively dedicated to civil and criminal law.

We also find reference to laws between human

and God: "You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people. You shall not delay offering the fullness of your harvest, and the out- flow of your presses." (Exodus 22:27–28)

Then after more ritual laws, the text returns to the laws within human society only to be followed once more with the ritual laws of Shabbat and festivals. Why this to and fro movement?

A strong argument can be made that although Torah law includes both the ritual and ethical, the Torah places priority not on the laws between human and God, but rather on the laws between human beings. We read in Vayera (Gen. 18:1) that after Abraham's circumcision he is graced by a vision of God. But then upon seeing three tired strangers in the distance, he abandons the Almighty, so to speak, to attend to the needs of his guests. The Talmud (Shabbat 127a) points to this incident as an underlying principle that it is of greater importance to be involved with hospitality – sensitivity in interpersonal relationships – than to greet the Divine Presence.

In his work Hegyonot el Ami, the former chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel, argues that this principle is not just an Aggadic hyperbole, but is a fundamental insight into the ideology of halakha. In ritual law there exists the notion of neutralization or nullification (bitul). Should a cupful of non-kosher chicken soup fall into a pot of kosher hot soup, one need not throw out the soup if the ratio of kosher to non-kosher is more than 60 to 1. The forbidden portion becomes nullified in the larger vat. When it comes to laws between human beings, however, there are no such leniencies. If, for example, the ten shekels which I pilfered become mixed into an account where I have six hundred legitimately gained shekels, I cannot invoke the 60:1 nullification concept as I do regarding pots on the stove.

Similarly, when it comes to questions of ritual in the Torah, we have the principle that a positive commandment can push aside a negative prohibition. For example, although it is forbidden to wear clothes woven from a mixture of linen and wool (Lev. 19:19), the Torah nevertheless commands that the ritual fringes required on all four cornered linen garments should include a string of sky-blue wool (Num. 15:38). Here the positive commandment to wear tzitzit overrides the commandment forbidding a garment woven from wool and linen.

When it comes to laws between human beings and God, however, the same principle does not apply. Building a sukka is a positive commandment, but if one steals the necessary wood for construction, we call this a mitzva achieved through sin and the sukka is rendered invalid; no one suggests that the positive command to build a sukka overrides the negative prohibition against stealing.

Finally, emotional intent and devotion (kavana) are an important part of ritual law. Without proper intent, ritual becomes a mechanical act, its value diminished. According to many authorities, such performance of a ritual is of no account whatsoever. Hence, Maimonides rules that if one recites the Shema, expressing each syllable aloud and emphasizing each of the necessary consonants, but does not have the internal commitment to accept the kingship of the divine, the entire recitation is of no religious significance whatsoever. It is as if the Shema had never been recited. However, proper intent is not required in laws between human beings because the deed itself is so important that any lack of inner intent cannot undermine the accomplishment of the act. Therefore, if one gives money to a poor person, even if one only did it in order to make an impression on one's companion, the mitzva is nevertheless valid.

The court system in ancient Israel likewise reflects the seriousness with which we deal with interpersonal relationships. Property litigations require three judges, and questions of life and death require twenty-three judges. To rule on ritual law, however, kosher or traif, all we need is a solitary judge. From this perspective, we may readily understand the mishna regarding Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yom Kipper (automatically, or at least, when accompanied by repentance) forgives all transgressions between humans and God. But as far as the transgressions between people are concerned, only the wronged party has the right to grant forgiveness (Mishna Yoma 8:9).

The sages were less worried about the realm of divine rituals than about the realm of human relationships. The strongest statement I know on this subject is boldly declared by our sages: "Does God really care if you slaughter an animal from the back or the front? The whole purpose of the commandments is to purify and to unite humanity." (Tanḥuma Shemini 65)

Our midrash is not questioning the necessity of the detailed laws of slaughtering animals, which it certainly accepts; it is, however, making the rhetorical point as to who benefits from ritual commandments. God is not in need of purification or unity, but we human beings certainly are. That this is the purpose of the commandments, all of them, is one of the subtle messages of Mishpatim. On the surface some commandments may seem to be directed toward societal betterment and some directed toward divine connection, but common to all the commandments is their unifying and purifying principle. In the laws between human beings, whose objective nature is about bringing people closer together, this unifying principle is self-evident. Multiplied enough times, love thy neighbor as thyself translates into a golden age of peace for all mankind. But as we shall endeavor to show, the same message is to be found within the ritual laws as well.

The Shabbat, a ritual which takes over our lives

every seventh day, and is the climactic event for which we prepare the other six days, is biblically ordained as both a reminder of God's creation of the world as well as His redeeming us from Egypt. I have already explained the connection between these two events in my commentary on Va'era, if God is the creator of the world and we are all His creatures, no human has the right to enslave another. On this day of reverence for life, we cannot even pluck a blade of grass or pick fruit from a tree. Every creature of God has a right to be. We must recognize and respect every creature as a unique, separate and inviolate entity. Hence, the Shabbat, which seemingly comes to intensify our relationship to God, in reality strengthens our reverence for all life and our sensitivity towards all of existence, towards the whole of the universe. As Martin Buber magnificently taught, anyone who is incapable of saying Shabbat Shalom to a tree or to a dog simply doesn't understand the deepest meaning of the Shabbat.

Similarly, the laws of kashrut. After all, the Torah itself expresses the prohibition of mixing meat and milk with the compassionate command "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 34:26) and the necessity of salting and soaking meat to remove most of the blood because "the blood is the life" (Deuteronomy 12:23).

Hence the to and fro movement throughout the portion of Mishpatim between the ethical and the ritual: They are intertwined, with the bottom line being compassion and sensitivity for all of God's creatures.

And this is precisely as it should and must be. When Moses made of God the request of requests, "Reveal to me your glory" [the secret of your ways] (Exodus 33:18), God responds: "The Lord, the Lord is a God of compassion and beneficence, long suffering, replete with loving-kindness and truth…" (Exodus 34:6)

Our sages teach us, "Just as God is compassionate, so must we humans be compassionate – because we are created in His image and we are commanded: 'You shall walk in His ways[1]"'.

Indeed, the very term "halakha"[2] is most probably derived from the command of walking in God's ways. Hence every ritual, such as prayers and blessings, which brings me close to God must, at the same time, bring me closer to an emulation of His ways, make me become more compassionate and loving, more sensitive in my human relationships.

Conversely, if my behavior towards my fellow human helps me understand the part of God within every human being, then it is clear that the laws between humans will likewise bring me closer to God. Ultimately, these two dimensions are spokes on the same wheel, creating a magnificent human and cosmic unity. The commandments are there to help me see that godliness exists in every aspect of existence, and the goal of all the mitzvot is to create a more compassionate and sensitive human being to help bring about a world of peace and harmony. Hear O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One. Just as God is One, so the purpose of His Torah and His commandments are one: to make all of humanity – indeed all of creation – one, the one in the One. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid.*

[1] Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Knowledge, 1:10

[2] This is the Hebrew word for "Jewish Law," from the root halakh (to walk).

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

A viable legal system is of necessity composed of two parts. One is the law itself, the rules that govern society and are enforced by the proper designated legal authorities. The other part of the legal system is the moral, transcendental value system that governs human and societal behavior generally. If the legalities and rules are the body - the corpus of the legal system, then the value system and moral imperatives that accompany those rules are the soul and spirit of that legal system.

In a general sense, we can say that the Written Law represents the body of the legal system while the accompanying Oral Law represents the soul and spirit of Jewish jurisprudence and Jewish societal life and its mores and behavior. The Written Law is interpreted and tempered by the Oral Law that accompanies it, and both of these systems are Divine in origin.

And, it is perfectly understandable how, for instance, "an eye for an eye" in Jewish law means the monetary value of the injury must be paid to the victim of that injury but not that the perpetrator's eye should also be put out as punishment for his behavior. In the Talmud we have many examples of the overriding moral influence of the Oral Law when applied to the seemingly strict literal words of the Written Law. The rabbis of the Talmud taught us that there is even a third layer to Jewish law that governs those that wish to be considered righteous in the eyes of man and God and that is the concept of going beyond what the law – even the Oral Law – requires of us.

So, when studying this week's parsha of laws, rules and commandments we must always bear in mind the whole picture of Jewish jurisprudence in its many layers and not be blinded by adopting a purely literal stance on the subject matter being discussed by the Torah in the parsha. Throughout the ages, the process of halachic decision-making has been subject to this ability to see the forest and not just the trees, to deal with the actual people involved and not only with the books and precedents available concerning the issue at hand. Every issue is thus debated, argued over, buttressed and sometimes refuted by opposing or

supporting sources. Independence of thought and creativity of solutions are the hallmarks of the history of rabbinic responsa on all halachic issues.

There are issues that are seemingly decided on the preponderance of soul and spirit over the pure letter of the law. There is the famous responsa of the great Rabbi Chaim Rabinowitz of Volozhin who allowed a woman, whose husband had disappeared, to remarry though the proof of her husband's death was not literally conclusive. He stated there that he made "an arrangement with my God" that permitted her to remarry.

This is but one example of many similar instances strewn throughout rabbinic responsa of the necessary components of spirit and soul that combine with literal precedents that always exist in order to arrive at correct interpretations of the holy and Divine books of law that govern Jewish life.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As the Jews stood at Mount Sinai receiving the Torah, they "ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11). Isn't this inappropriate, considering the holiness of the moment?

Midrash Tanchuma maintains that the people acted improperly. Only because of divine mercy were the Jews spared punishment. At the very moment of revelation, God manifests Himself as loving and forgiving.

Unlike that Midrash, Targum Onkelos insists the Jews did not literally eat and drink, for it would never enter their minds to do so at such an intense religious moment. He suggests instead that the moment of revelation was so exalting, it was as if they ate and drank.

Although the Midrash and Targum Onkelos disagree as to whether the Jews actually ate or drank, both maintain that it is wrong to do so during a deep spiritual experience.

Nachmanides has a different view. He maintains that while the Jews did eat and drink, doing so was not inappropriate. They ate the peace offerings and drank joyously, making it "an occasion for rejoicing and festival.… Such is one's duty to rejoice at the receiving of the Torah."

Nachmanides's position reflects mainstream Jewish philosophical thought. While some insist that the pathway to spirituality is suppression of the body, Judaism maintains that the pathway to godliness is to sanctify the physical. In fact, the very essence of halachah teaches that the body is not to be extolled or repressed but elevated, lifting earth to heaven and bringing heaven down to earth. The Jewish goal is to meld spirituality and earthliness.

In this spirit, the students of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook have quoted their teacher as saying, "There is no such thing as the unholy. There is only the holy and the not yet holy." For Rabbi Kook, the way one eats, engages in business, or makes love has the same capacity for holiness as fasting, meditation, or prayer. Every act of life has the potential to be suffused with kedushah – with godly spirituality.

A Chassidic story helps to illustrate this point. A Chassid living in Minsk decided to seek the heavenly world, which he had been told was in Pinsk. Overnight, he slept in an open field, carefully leaving his shoes pointing in the direction of Pinsk so he would know which way to go in the morning. As he slept, a scoundrel came by and turned his shoes around. The next morning, the Chassid continued in the direction his shoes were pointing toward. When he reached his destination, he noticed that all the streets, homes, and people looked familiar. He was puzzled but delighted to have found heaven on earth.

Revelation at Sinai teaches that Torah is not meant to separate us from the real world of physical needs and desires. Eating and drinking can become holy experiences.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Fire

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"When a fire is started and spreads . . . the one who started the fire must make restitution" (*Shemot* 22:5). A number of scenarios can result in fire causing damage. In the three cases discussed below, the person lighting the fire or fanning the flame is responsible for the damage done.

1. A person lights a fire on his own property, and it spreads beyond the fence enclosing his property and damages his neighbor's property. The fence could not have been expected to stop the fire.

2. A person lights a fire on his own property and there is a fence which should have been able to stop the fire, but unfortunately did not.

3. A fire was already burning on a neighbor's property. Someone fanned the flames and the fire spread, ultimately destroying the neighbor's property.

Rav Yochanan and Resh Lakish disagree on the reason a person is liable if he starts a fire which causes damage.

Rav Yochanan states that he is liable because "his fire is like his arrows" (*isho mishum chitzav*). Someone who shoots an arrow is accountable for any damage the arrow does. Similarly, a person who starts a fire is accountable for any damage his fire causes. If

this is correct, though, in Case 2 the person should be exempt. The fact that the fence should have stopped the spread of the fire should be the equivalent of his arrows having come to rest (*kalu lo chitzav*), at which point he is exempt from damages.

Resh Lakish disagrees. He maintains that fire cannot be compared to an arrow, because fire can spread on its own. Rather, the reason the fire-setter is liable is that just as a person is responsible for damage done by something he owns (like his ox), so too he is responsible for damage done by a fire he set. In other words, "his fire is like his property" (*isho mishum mammono*). If this is correct, though, then in Case 3 the person should be exempt since he did not set the fire. We can resolve this problem if we assume that it is the additional fire (which he caused by fanning the flames) which is considered his property that caused damage.

This disagreement is not absolute. For in some instances, Rav Yochanan agrees that one can become liable because the fire is deemed his property. For example, in Case 2, although *isho mishum chitzav* might not apply, the person is still responsible because *isho mishum mammono* applies.

If this is so, would Rav Yochanan assert that a person is liable if he fanned the flames of someone else's fire, which then spread beyond a fence that should have been able to stop it? Commentators disagree. Some say that if neither *mammono* nor *chitzav* can apply, Rav Yochanan would exempt the person from liability.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Canaanite Slave Wife

Parashat Mishpatim contains a set of laws concerning a male Jewish slave. The Torah clarifies that we are talking here of a Jew who is sold to a fellow-Jew. This is most often a response to his poverty: he either stole an object (often an animal that his family needed for food) and cannot pay the fine, or he chose to sell himself as a slave because he cannot support his family. The Torah mentions one of the rights of the Jewish master, but we also find here a series of limitations placed on this right that are a clear indication of why one must learn both the Written Law, Torah Shebichtav, and the Oral Law, Torah Sheb'al Peh.

The Torah states, "If his master will give him (a Jewish slave) a woman and she bears sons or daughters, the woman and her children will belong to her master, and he shall go out (after six years) by himself. But if the servant shall say, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children – I shall not go free,' then his master shall bring him to the judges and shall bring him to the door or to the doorpost, and his master shall bore through his ear with the awl, and he shall serve him forever."

The slave-woman who is given to this Jewish slave must be a Canaanite slave-woman as is proven in several different ways. Rashi uses the words of our text to show that when it says "the woman and her children belong to her master," it can only be talking about a Canaanite slave-woman. This is also proven from the repetition of these laws in Devarim 15:12, where Rashi explains that the text proves that a Jewish slave-woman would also go free after six years. A Jewish woman and her children could never be under permanent ownership of a master. The Ramban also explains that a Jewish woman-slave goes free even before six years if she shows physical signs of maturity. This would preclude giving her to the male Jewish slave as she would be incapable of pregnancy prior to showing signs of maturity, at which point she would go free and be of no value to the owner for producing children. There is also the problem that a young, not yet mature girl given as a slave could only be given by her father, and in that case, the slavery had the intent of marriage to the Jewish owner or his sons. The owner would never have the right to "marry her off" to one of his male Jewish slaves.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that there are two ways that a Jewish male can become a slave: (1) he is sold by the court as a slave because he stole and was unable to pay the fine (though he is sold because of the theft but not the fine), or (2) he sells himself as a slave because of his poverty. These two cases are covered by two separate sentences in the Torah. Here, the beginning of our section (which was not quoted) says, "When you buy a Hebrew servant (slave)," must refer to only a slave who stole, as it speaks of buying a man who was already declared a slave buy the court. A Jew who sells himself because of poverty is not sold by the court, and his sentence from the Torah is found in Vayikra 25:39, "When your brother becomes impoverished." Only this impoverished Jewish man can decide to sell himself as a slave for longer than six years. The thief sold by the courts can only be for six years, though this time can be extended if he is unable to work for a period of time. It also appears that this "poverty" slave is not eligible to receive a Canaanite woman-slave as a wife.

There also is a difference between a man sold as a slave who is already married and one who is single. We might think that a single man is the only one who can be given a Canaanite slave-woman as a wife. A man who is already married, even though he is eligible for more than one wife by Torah Law, should not be given a Canaanite wife, even though the children and the wife will remain with the owner when he goes free. Rashi states that if the man who is sold as a slave does not already have a wife, his master may not give him a Canaanite woman as a wife. It is more likely that a single man would form a stronger relationship with his Canaanite wife than a married man who already has a

wife and children with him. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that, according to Rashi, this restriction is true even if the man and his Jewish wife do not have any children. HaRav Sorotzkin points out that, even though the Torah limits itself to speaking only of a wife, "if he has a wife," the Mishnah LaMelech states that we find in Tractate Kiddushin that the Jewish, married slave must also have children before he can be given a Canaanite slave-woman. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the Torah did not want this Canaanite slave-woman to be known as the mother of his children. If he had previous children, she would not be given this title. He compares this to the words uttered by Leah when she gave birth to Levi: "this time my husband will become attached to me." This attachment was due Leah because she was the "mother of his children." A single slave would become attached to this Canaanite woman and wish to remain with her and his children. This was greatly discouraged by the ceremony of the awl and the fact that he would remain a slave until the Jubilee year.

Our Rabbis ask why the slave who wishes to remain with his master, his Canaanite wife, and her children, is pierced in his ear to the doorpost. The Kli Yakar quotes the Mechilta that says Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai stated that the ear is pierced because it heard the command not to steal and he stole. The Kli Yakar question why his ear is not pierced when the slave was first sold. The thief acted as if Hashem did not hear or see what he did, so he is punished because he doubted the ear of Hashem, not because he disobeyed the command. The Kli Yakar also asks why this was not the punishment for all the commandments, since every infraction indicates that Hashem does not hear or see man's actions. The Jew who sells himself as a slave should be punished by piercing his ear, since he turns away from listening to Hashem and focuses instead on listening to the commands of his "master." Neither is pierced immediately because their punishment (slavery) is the payment for their sin. Only when he chooses to remain with his master does he choose to ignore Hashem's voice and follow his earthly master.

The Torah indicates that one must choose between Hashem and one's earthly masters. This is true for the Jewish slave, but it is also true of all free men. Our allegiance must be to the Laws of Hashem and not to the laws of man. We are required to follow man's laws, but only when they do not contradict the voice of Hashem.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And I will set your borders from the Reed Sea to the [Mediterranean] and from the desert to the [Euphrates] River, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hands and cast them out from before you. (Shmos 23:31) The Torah was given at Sinai amidst noise and lightning, yet the whole world was silent and awestruck by it. The Jews, for their part, were quick to accept Hashem's Torah and His role for them in the world. The nations of the earth were fearful, but the wicked prophet Bilaam assured them that Torah was just for the Jews and they didn't need to be concerned with it.

Even before Moshe went up to spend forty days on the mountain receiving the Torah, Hashem told the Jews that their destiny was to inherit the Land of Israel, center of the world, which was promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, to be given to their children.

Here, the Torah tells us that any indigenous people would be cast out, not by the Jews, but by Hashem, Himself. This is, as the very first Rashi in the Torah tells us, because the world belongs to Hashem and He can take land from anyone and give it to whomever He wishes.

In fact, in history, there really were no indigenous peoples, because at various times, conquerors came and moved people from place to place. This was done partly so the Jews would not feel bad when they were exiled. However, the rationale for giving the Jews this land, and the means for them to stay in it, are very specific.

In order for the Jews to merit the Land of Israel, we must follow the Torah and live up to Hashem's plan for us. We must do the mitzvos and study the Torah, as alluded to this week when we said, "Naaseh V'Nishma," we will do (the mitzvos) and listen (to words of Torah.) This is also suggested by the borders given of Eretz Yisrael.

The four landmarks given for the land's borders are very specific. There are three bodies of water, the Reed Sea, the Mediterranean (here referred to as the Sea of the Philistines, known as the Gazan shoreline, today), and the Euphrates River. Water is a euphemism for Torah, which quenches our thirst for knowledge, purifies us, and is our source of life.

The fourth border is the desert, the one in which the Jews wandered for forty years. However, they didn't wander aimlessly. Rather, they were guided specifically by the Providence of Hashem. It is where we learned to rely on Him and trust that He can and will provide all our needs.

Perhaps Hashem wanted us to know, at the beginning of our journey, that our ultimate destination was a world in which we look to Him for everything and seek to fulfill his will. Our goals are framed by these guideposts, which remind us of why we are on this planet. That is how we merited the land in the past, and how we will one day soon merit it again, may that be speedily and in our days.

In Radin, there was a widow who lived in a rented house with her young children. When she

couldn't pay her rent, the landlord told her to leave. Winter was approaching and she had nowhere else to go so she pleaded with him to let her stay. The heartless man removed the roof of the shack and she had no choice but to leave.

The townspeople were aghast and went to the Chofetz Chaim. He said one word: "Wait."

Years later, this landlord's son died of a very contagious disease. The Chevra Kadisha was afraid to touch the dead body for fear of contamination. In the freezing cold, the man had to dig a grave and bury his son with his own hands.

"Hashem does not just let things go," said the Chofetz Chaim. "He is very methodical but gives people time to repent. Eventually, though, if he does not make amends for his sins, a person will be punished as he deserves." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

The urgency for good chinuch -- education -- is made even clearer when you consider what we're selling: 613 mitzvos. We're basically telling every child that they can either have what is behind Door #1, a secular life that includes limited moral responsibility and a lot of fun and excitement, or what's behind Door #2, 613 commandments, a Torah education that is never supposed to end, and reward for which will be in a world they can't yet see.

In the beginning of a frum child's life it is not so hard. The expectations are still relatively few, isolation from the outside world is more controllable, and familial and peer pressure still has impact. But as the child grows up and becomes increasingly more independent and exposed to the outside world, the challenges begin. Seichel has still yet to play a central role in their decision-making process, even after becoming a "Bar Da'as" at Bar Mitzvah.

I go to shul very early in the morning, including on Shabbos. I often see groups of young men and women who did not make it through. I don't know at what age they succumbed to the temptations of Door #1, or if anything about Door #2 ever appealed to them. But the choice they have made is clear and set them on a path in the opposite direction of Torah and mitzvos.

Tragic? Of course. This world will end one day and be replaced by the next one, the World to Come, in whatever form it takes. Where a person ends up in that world depends entirely upon where they ended up in this world, spiritually speaking. It is an eternal world, which means we'll have to live with the consequences of our decisions for a very long time. In this temporal world of ours, consequences come and go all the time.

The good news is that our "final resting place" in Eternity will not be the result of only one lifetime, but the result of all of our lifetimes. As mentioned in last week's parsha, reincarnation is very much a Jewish thing, and the Zohar discusses it in detail on this week's parsha. No one is here for the first time and it is more than likely they have been here several times already, which might explain some of that extra fatigue we sometimes feel (not really).

So a person might have been a tzaddik a few times already in previous lifetimes, and not being one in their current life doesn't wipe that away. Besides, for all we know, God set them up to become this way now to complete a mitzvah while not very religious because of the additional challenge it creates. When we return, it is usually to fix up sins from previous gilgulim, or to perform others that we never fulfilled.

Does knowing this change what a parent feels when they see their child, God forbid, turn their back on a life of Torah and mitzvos...and the World to Come? Not at all. Does it lessen responsibility to make sure our children are getting quality chinuch? How can it? As Rashi explains on the first few verses of the parsha, we have a separate obligation to provide "good" chinuch.

Last Shabbos while waiting for members of my chaburah to arrive, I read some of Feldheim's book on the life of the legendary Rabbi Aharon Kotler, zt"l. Among the many amazing things I saw and learned, one was about the need for honest communication. But the rabbi's explanation of honest communication to a shadchan was not what I expected.

They were talking about the shidduch of a twenty-eight year-old man with a twenty-seven year-old woman. After hearing that the man had rejected the shidduch, Rabbi Kotler asked, "How old did you say the woman was?" to which the shadchan answered, "Twenty-seven." The rav then said, "But she is not!" "But she is!" the shadchan defended. "I know it for a fact!" Rabbi Kotler then explained, "When you tell a twenty-eight year-old man that a woman is twenty-seven years old, he hears thirty years old. You should have told him a younger age. The accuracy of communication also depends upon what the listener hears!"

Likewise, the accuracy of education is not only about the information being taught. It is mostly about, at least in the early years, what is being heard by the student. If love of learning Torah and the performance of mitzvos doesn't come over with the message, the children instead hear the opposite. And when that happens, can we really expect them to pass up the very appealing fruit of the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" for the hidden fruit of the Tree of Life (Torah)?

This is why the word for education -- chinuch -- is similar to the world chanukah -- dedication, the root of both being the word chayn. Everybody will dedicate themselves to something that inspires them to get out of bed each morning. A child is far less impressed by knowledge than they are by a parent's or teacher's passion for a life of Torah and mitzvos. *© 2025 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org*