

# Mishpotim - Serving the Master

By Robert Kremnizer

The laws of the Torah are fundamentally different from the laws of secular society.

Those of modern life need to be constantly changed to remain relevant, reflecting as they do the current mores of society. If a majority of people believe that divorce should be as simple as going to the supermarket, the “political system” will ensure that the law will reflect this belief in due course. Ultimately, changing spouses becomes no more complicated than changing a wardrobe.

Torah, however, is eternal. Because it is the Wisdom of *HaShem*, the laws enumerated cannot change, because *HaShem*'s wisdom is limitless and must be applicable to all situations and environments.

Now, what happens when we learn laws which appear irrelevant today? Orthodox Jews have no trouble in believing that the laws will ultimately remain relevant. This however, is simply not enough for many people. With the benefit of *Chabad Chassidus* all such laws are suddenly brought into focus and become rivetingly significant to each and every Jew, so illustrating, in a practical way, the breathtaking eternity of the Torah. Many examples of this exist in this week's *Sedra*, which articulates many laws. We take one of the apparently totally irrelevant ones to marvel at the depth of wisdom of the Torah's legal system.

This week's *Sedra* discuss the laws of slavery.<sup>1</sup> What could be less relevant to our egalitarian society? How can learning these laws add any meaning to the life of a twenty-first century sophisticate?

The Torah distinguishes various categories of slave. One of them is an *Eved Canaani*,<sup>2</sup> a non-Jewish slave bought by a Jew or acquired by conquest. The fate of this non-Jewish slave is to remain in the Jew's household, forever denied freedom. His wife and children are the master's property, as are his belongings. Nonetheless an *Eved Canaani* enjoyed much comfort. He did not have any responsibilities for food or shelter. Furthermore, the laws relating to the master's

responsibilities to the *Eved Canaani* are such that there is a saying in the Talmud,<sup>3</sup> that one who acquires a slave has really bought a master for himself. If there is one pillow in the house, the master must go without and give it to the *Eved Canaani*. In relation to everything, if the master can provide enough for two, then there is enough for two; if not, the *Eved Canaani* takes first, with the master second. The slave even eats before the master.

The second is an *Eved Ivri*. An *Eved Ivri* is a Jew, acquired because he has committed a civil wrong. An example is theft. In Torah law, there is a complex set of damage calculations for wrongs against people or property. Damages can be double or four to five times the value of the trespass. If the offender cannot pay he is not jailed to become a burden on the public purse, eventually released to repeat his harm. Rather, he enters the service of the master to work off the debt. After six years he goes free. If he had married a Jewish woman, either before or during his service, he goes free with the Jewish woman and with their children, who are of course Jewish.

Now, what can any of this have to do with us? Having learned these laws, are they not proof, G-d forbid, for the very opposite position, namely that the Torah is in some way outdated?

The chilling fact is that we are learning here about our very relationship with Almighty G-d Himself. The whole topic of slaves is really about the relationship between *HaShem* (the Master) and the various forms of slaves who are of course *Am Yisrael*. The Rebbe explains<sup>4</sup> there is a difference in the *avodah* (service) of an *Eved Canaani* and an *Eved Ivri*. The way of service of an *Eved Canaani* who has been brought or captured is obedience. His motivation is fear of the rod. His level of doing his work has as its perspective, reward and punishment for himself. He is not really interested in the welfare of the master, nor is he concerned with the quality of his work, other than as a focus for reward or punishment.

In contrast, an *Eved Ivri* who looks forward to receiving his freedom, is motivated to please the master. He wants to do the job well and is interested in the master benefiting from his effort. The same is true of a son, who goes to work for his father, who will work differently than he does for a stranger. For the son, it is important that the business does well, as ultimately he is an interested party and loves the father.

The *Eved Ivri* works out of a sense of love. The *Eved Canaani* works out of a sense of fear.

In both cases however, whether serving out of love or fear, the service requires obedience. This is a very deep and important requirement. So it is with us. Primary and fundamental to our service of G-d is obedience. Prior to any inquiry as to the reason for *mitzvos* is the commitment to obey because the *mitzvos* are the will of *HaShem*. We can either obey out of fear or we can obey out of love.

An *Eved Ivri*, a Jewish slave, is a person who is on the one hand obedient, because he is an *eved*, but on the other hand his level of service is with life, enthusiasm and energy because it is performed out of love. An *Eved Canaani*, who is obedient out of fear, is at a lower level.

Where does all this take us? To the deep realization that every Jew is from time to time at both levels. We serve *HaShem* as an *Eved Canaani*, out of obedience and fear. But even though essential, this is not enough. Our real status as a Jew is that of the *Eved Ivri* who serves in addition, out of love for his master.

We learn that *HaShem* observes the Torah given to *Am Yisrael*. Just as, therefore, lessons can be learned from the level of slave for each Jew, there is insight given to us about the Master. When we serve *HaShem* properly, in obedience, He is bound to provide for us — and provide the best. As explained elsewhere repeatedly in this book, the way for a Jew to be provided for, is to live like a Jew. Service of the Master with total obedience necessitates the Master's bounty being complete.

This week's *Sedra* highlights how every Jew should serve his Master, as a loving son in joy and enthusiasm, secure in the knowledge that this brings the ultimate and greatest freedom.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *Mishpotim* 21:2-11.
2. *Rashi*, *Mishpotim* 21:20, 26, 32.
3. *Kiddushin* 20a.
4. See *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XVI, p. 257; *Sefer HaMaamarim Meluket*, Vol. I, p. 308.

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