

**PARASHAS MISHPATIM**

# The Slavery Riddle

The gavel bangs down, and the room falls silent. The defendant approaches and stands before the three solemn judges. One of them begins to speak. "Young man, you have completed your six-year term of indenture and are free to return to a life of liberty. But you wish to remain a Jewish slave in your Jewish master's house and not take on the responsibilities of liberty. You heard the Creator declare, 'The Jewish people are my slaves,' and yet you choose to be the slave of a slave! Therefore, we will drill your right ear. Then you may remain indentured until the Jubilee year."

This scene dramatizes the instructions with which this week's *parashah* opens. But how are we to understand them? When a person violates any of the commandments he "heard," the Torah does not require that we physically drill a hole into his ear. Why then are we instructed to use this drastic method to point out the folly of choosing slavery to humans over slavery to Hashem?

Let us consider for a moment. A master has complete control over his slave and demands absolute obedience. We consider this a negative relationship to which we attach the pejorative term slavery. Parents and kings also have complete control and demand absolute obedience. Yet we consider these positive relationships. How do they differ from each other?

The answer is really quite simple. The slavemaster exercises authority to serve his own interests. The parent and the king exercise authority for the benefit of their children and subjects, and if they lose sight of this purpose, their authority loses its legitimacy.

When Hashem took the Jewish people out of Egyptian bondage on the condition of their absolute subordination and obedience, it was clearly not to serve His own needs. What could we possibly give Him that He does not already have? Hashem, by definition, is perfect and without needs. Rather, our subordination was completely for our own benefit. By loving Hashem unreservedly and submitting completely to His wisdom and will, we would rise above our mundane physical existence and elevate ourselves to the realm of the divine. By accepting the values and ideals of the Torah, we would free ourselves from the tyranny of our corporeal needs and pursuits, and experience the exhilaration of the transcendent expansion of our souls, minds and spirits. This was not slavery in the negative sense. It was the priceless

gift of absolute attachment to the Creator of the Universe. It was an opportunity to bring ourselves to the highest levels of existence and fulfillment.

The Jewish slave who chose to remain in bondage heard Hashem speak of us as His “slaves” - but he did not really hear. To him, slavery to Hashem and to a man were one and the same, and to suit his comfort and convenience, he chose slavery to a man. Therefore, we drill his ear as a symbolic penetration to his consciousness, to help him truly “hear” what Hashem had said. As a “slave” of the Creator, he had been given the opportunity to gain eternal life on the very highest level, and instead, he chose the base existence of a bonded slave who lived only to fill his master’s needs.

*Two friends went to study in the school of a famous philosopher in a distant city. The older one, a brilliant fellow, attended all the lectures of the philosopher religiously. The younger one, however, also devoted every waking moment to the philosopher, hanging onto his every word, observing his every movement, running to fulfill his slightest wish.*

*Two years later, when their course of study was completed, both friends did extremely well on their examinations. Nevertheless, only the younger was invited to join the faculty.*

*“Why not me?” the older fellow wanted to know. “I did even better than my friend. I got a perfect score on my examination, didn’t I?”*

*“Indeed, you did,” the philosopher replied. “You know all the answers about philosophy, but it has never become part of you. You are no philosopher. Your friend, however, subordinated himself to me completely and became a philosopher.”*

In our own lives, we sometimes need to take a step back and evaluate the focus and direction of our lives. We struggle and strive in order to live as we choose - to be free. But somehow, we never seem to break free. Even when we achieve financial success, there are always responsibilities, obligations and distractions that direct our lives. Although we can never escape the entanglements of life, we can find freedom in another direction. We can subordinate ourselves completely to the will of our loving Creator. By welding ourselves to Him, our spirits can drink the heady wine of true liberty even as we continue to grapple with the demands of living in this world.