

PARASHAS MISHPATIM

Gilded Bondage

This is where it was all leading. The miraculous ten plagues. The triumphant Exodus from Egypt. The incredible parting of the sea. The spectacular revelation of the Divine Presence on Mount Sinai. The declaration of the Ten Commandments. Everything was pointing toward the acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people. And now it had all come to pass. It was time to get down to the business of learning what the vast Torah was all about.

So what were the first laws Moses taught the Jewish people in the desert encampments? Did they describe the observance of the Sabbath day? The celebration of the festivals? The guidelines for kosher food?

Not at all. Moses begins by telling the people about a Jewish thief who is sold into bondage in a Jewish home for six years so that his victim can be repaid. What is so critical about these laws that they are given such high priority?

Let us take a closer look at this Jewish bondsman. What if after six years, when his term of bondage expires, he decides to stay on? After all, the Torah instructs the Jewish master to share all the comforts of home with his Jewish bondsman. What if the bondsman finds this situation secure and pleasant and doesn't want to leave? The Torah tells us he must be brought to the doorpost. Then his ear, which heard Hashem say, "The Jewish people are My servants," not servants of servants, must be drilled through with an awl.

Why does the Torah prescribe such a harsh punishment for this bondsman who chooses to remain in his master's house?

The commentators explain that the attitude of the bondsman who chooses to remain in his master's house is antithetical to the very essence of the Exodus from Egypt. Clearly, he views the redemption from Egyptian bondage in purely physical terms. In Egypt, the Jewish people suffered material privation and dreadful working conditions, but now they could enjoy the fruits of their own labor and live in relative comfort. If the Jewish master's house provided material comfort and security, then it was perfectly acceptable to live in this sort of gilded bondage.

But that was not the primary purpose of the Exodus. Hashem had not wrenched them free from the grasp of the Egyptians simply to give them the creature comforts of life. He brought them forth to spiritual freedom, to a state of personal liberation in which each individual would

have unlimited opportunities to rise to the highest levels of spiritual achievement. He brought the Jewish people forth from Egypt so that they could connect with their Creator, so that the divine spark within each of them would flare into a splendid spiritual flame.

A bondsman, under constant obligation to his master, cannot undertake this spiritual journey. Therefore, if he chooses to remain, he is choosing the material over the spiritual, completely missing the message of the Exodus. In response, his ear is drilled, symbolizing the penetration beyond the superficial to the essence within. The bondsman must learn the deeper meaning of the Exodus and the role of "My servants." Being the servant of Hashem does not connote physical bondage but rather spiritual freedom. This is the essence of the Exodus.

A successful businessman met an old schoolmate in a train station. The man was gaunt and unshaven, and his clothing was threadbare. The small satchel in his hand obviously held all his earthly belongings.

"What happened to you, my friend?" asked the businessman. "We all thought you were on the road to success."

"I have successfully found freedom. I am a travelling preacher."

"Freedom? You call this freedom?"

"Yes, I do," said the preacher. "Tell me, are you free?"

"Me?" said the businessman. "Of course, I am free."

"You are mistaken," said the preacher. "You are a prisoner of your large house with its large mortgage, your business, your employees, your customers, your bills, your investments, everything. You cannot make a move without giving accountings in every direction. I, on the other hand, am free to do whatever my spirit moves me to do."

In our own lives, we all value and cherish the opportunities available to us in the democratic and affluent society in which we live. But let us not confuse material success with freedom. If the price of our material success is the stultification of our spirits than we have only achieved a gilded bondage and cheated ourselves of the unlimited rewards which only true spiritual freedom so richly provides.