

“Maimonides 613 Series”

Freedom: Being G-d's Servant

Leviticus 25:39

וְכִי יָמוּךְ אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ וְנִמְכַר לָךְ לֹא תַעֲבֹד בּוֹ עֲבֹדַת עֶבֶד

And if your brother becomes destitute with you and is sold to you, do not work him with slave labor.

Maimonides Negative Commandment #257

We are forbidden from giving a Jewish servant degrading and humiliating work as a Canaanite servant would do. The source of this prohibition is G-d's statement (exalted be He), "Do not work him like a [Canaanite] servant." The *Sifra* says, “[A Jewish servant] may be given only such jobs that an employed worker would agree to do. This is seen from G-d's statement, 'He shall be with you just like an employee or a resident hand.’” (See also Negative Commandments #258-261, Positive Commandment #137).

Five Levels of Servitude

In the parsha of *Behar*, we are instructed on the matter of a Jew who becomes destitute and is sold to you as a servant. The Torah tells us that we are not to make this servant perform any degrading labor. The laws of servants are only applicable when the Jubilee Cycle is in effect; today, we do not observe the Jubilee Cycle, so the laws of servants are seemingly not relevant to us. However, we know that each word of the Torah holds an eternal message for us. What can we learn from the laws of servitude?

Level 1: The *Eved Canaani* – The Non-Jewish Servant

Before a non-Jewish servant begins working for his Jewish master, he undergoes a partial conversion. The non-Jewish servant performs circumcision (if male), immerses in a mikvah, renounces idolatry, and accepts upon himself all the negative commandments that a Jew observes -- to refrain from forbidden foods, to refrain from work on Shabbos, etc. -- as well as the positive commandments that are not time-bound, such as loving and fearing G-d. A female servant also accepts upon herself to immerse in a mikvah after her menstrual period. While the non-Jewish servant is considered to be his master's property, the Rambam writes that those who were truly pious treated their non-Jewish servants with extreme kindness and consideration. They fed their servants any food they desired and made sure that their servants ate before they themselves ate. The non-Jewish servant of a kohen is allowed to eat *terumah*, the food tithed by the Israelites to the kohanim. In

contrast, a Jew who is not a kohen is *not* allowed to eat *terumah*. This exemplifies the fact that the non-Jewish servant became an integral part of his master's family. It also is his reward for enabling the kohen to serve in the Temple by making sure his household is cared for and running smoothly. If a non-Jewish servant rebels and runs away from his master's household, he is still allowed to eat the holy *terumah*, even outside his master's home.

The Rebbe asks, “Why is he still able to eat *terumah* after he has rebelled and run away?” The Rebbe gives us a metaphor that helps to answer the question: every Jew and every human being is a servant of G-d. G-d is like a kohen, known for His compassion and loving-kindness. If a Jew rebels against G-d and “runs away”, one might think that he is no longer privy to *terumah*, to the holy sustenance. But Halacha says the opposite: even if he runs away, G-d will still provide for all his needs. Because G-d is kind and loving, He realizes that our rebellion is not really coming from us, it is coming from the Negative Inclination. Furthermore, the servant can still eat *terumah*, because it will hopefully inspire us to return to our devotion and commitment to our Master. With love, we will be inspired to come back. We each have a part of us that is like a non-Jewish servant, the part that wants to rebel. We must have *escafia*, we must subjugate this part of ourselves to do the Will of G-d.

Levels Two & Three: The *Eved Ivri* - The Jewish Servant

A Jew becomes a servant in two ways: 1) he becomes so impoverished that he must sell himself into servitude to support his family, or 2) he is sold by the Court for having stolen money that he cannot pay back. Different laws apply to each type of Jewish servant: if you sold yourself into servitude, you can remain in servitude for as long as you wish; if the Court sold you, you go free after six years. If you sold yourself, your Master cannot provide you with a non-Jewish maidservant to marry and with whom to produce more servants; if the Court sold you, your master *can* do that.

For both types of Jewish servants, it is not only the servant who enters his master's home, but his entire family. The master must provide for the servant's wife and children also, even though they are free people. The Talmud says that one who acquires himself a Jewish servant, actually acquires himself a master! A person must provide their Jewish servant with everything equal to themselves: if you're having steak, you must feed your servant steak also; if you sleep on a luxury mattress, you have to provide your servant a luxury mattress also. The *Chinuch* writes that the message in this stipulation, is that we must remember to treat those less fortunate than us as equals. The wheel of fortune can change at any moment – today you may be rich and on top, but tomorrow you could be

at the bottom of the wheel. If you have the money or resources to help others, you must help them.

The concept of these two levels of Jewish servants answers a beautiful question from the commentaries: when the Jews were standing at Sinai, and G-d asked if they would accept the Torah, they responded, “We will do, and we will understand!” The Talmud says that G-d then put the mountain over their heads and threatened to drop it on them if they would not accept. Why did He do this if the Jews had already agreed to accept the Torah?! The Rebbe answers: if a servant sold himself, the master cannot compel him to marry a non-Jewish maidservant, but if the servant was sold by the Court, the master can give him a maidservant with whom to provide more servants for the master. When G-d took us out of Egypt, it was so that we would “serve Him on the mountain.” We became his servants voluntarily -- we were not forced into it. This type of servitude would limit our commitment to G-d. We would only accept those commandments we like and enjoy, and neglect the others. And so G-d put the mountain over our heads to “force us to accept all the commandments for all times, good or bad, to obey unconditionally.

Levels 4 & 5 – The *Amah Ivriah* – The Jewish Maidservant

A father who is poor can sell his daughter who is a minor into servitude. Once his daughter reaches the age of majority, twelve years old, he no longer has the right to sell her into servitude. What is the difference between the service of a male servant and that of a female? The male goes into the field and gathers grain, goes and slaughters an animal and returns with raw meat. The woman takes these unrefined materials and makes a loaf of bread, a delicious meal out of them, which is then eaten and internalized. Her job is to transform raw materials and elevate them to G-d, which is a higher service than that of a male servant. Spiritually, this is the service of transformation, of sweetening our animal souls, a process called *es'hapcha*.

A girl who is sold by her father can only be sold to a man who is capable of marrying. The objective of her being sold into servitude is so she can marry into a wealthy family. Similarly, the purpose of our soul coming into this world to serve G-d is so that we can marry Him – to unite and become one with Him. This is the fifth level. The soul of the maidservant is on the level of the World of Creation. When she is married, her soul ascends to the World of Emanation, the highest world. She is no longer an *amah*, a maidservant, but a *kallah*, a bride! Her desire to unite with G-d has been fulfilled! And this is the objective of every one of us – not just to have *escafia*, subjugation to G-d, or even to enjoy our service, but to literally unite with our Supernal Master in the most

intimate and complete of ways.

A Story

The *Chozeh* of Lublin said to his disciple, Reb Tzvi of Zhidachov, “I know that while I am alive, you are going to be okay, but after I leave this world, I don't know if you'll continue to have the same high spiritual level. I'm afraid you might fall.” Reb Tzvi replied, “I agree. That's why I want to die when you die.” The *Chozeh* gasped, “What do you mean?! You're very young; I am old!” Reb Tzvi said, “I pray that you will live forever!” The *Chozeh* asked, “How can one live forever?” Reb Tzvi answered, “Then I pray you live for 120 years like Moshe.” The *Chozeh* said, “Why did you change your tone? First I should live forever, now I should live only to 120?” Reb Tzvi told him, “It's the same thing! We are taught that 120 years represents the 120 Jubilee Cycles until Moshiach comes! Also, in the Torah, the jubilee is called 'forever', expressing eternity.” The *Chozeh* nodded, “Okay, I accept. But where did you find this interpretation?” Reb Tzvi replied, “It could have been mine.”

What is the lesson? We are all souls that have come into this world, and we must work like servants for six years – six millennia – until the true Jubilee, with the coming of Moshiach. May it be immediately, amen!