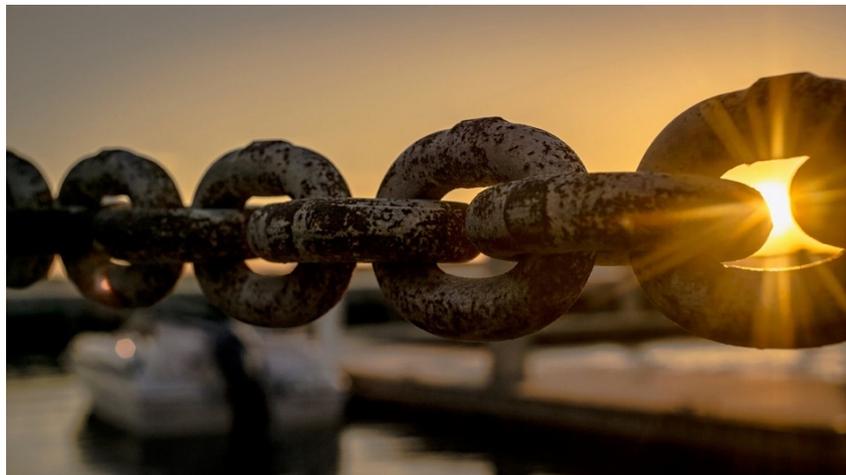


THE LAW OF SERVANTS

In this week's Torah portion, the Creator starts to zoom in a bit and provide more detailed laws that deal with several civil issues. We're going to go through several and not only dispel the myths about Yahweh endorsing slavery, but also pull out the spiritual principle behind those laws, a principle relevant for us today. As a matter of fact, this portion is so packed with amazing instructions that if we all knew just these, we would get along far better on this blue planet than we do now. Let's get started.

THE LAW OF SERVANTS

The first six verses of Exodus 21 are all about how Hebrew servants are to be treated. Contrary to what bible skeptics believe, Yahweh's Word does not promote slavery in the way the western mind has been trained to define it. In Hebrew, the word for slave is *ebed* and means *bondservant*. It has the idea of serving for a reason and has nothing to do with western slavery. In American history, Africans were forced from their homeland and brought to America to work on farms under, in many cases, extremely brutal conditions. As we shall see, this concept does not exist in the biblical context.



Yahweh is very concerned about the bondservant system that was in place in all ancient cultures and wanted to make sure that bondservants in His kingdom were treated fairly and taken care of. The Israelites were forced to sell themselves into slavery in Egypt but they were not treated fairly by any stretch of the imagination. This is why Yahweh addresses the issue here in this passage; He doesn't want His people treating their slaves the way they were treated. This entire section is bent toward the humane and civil treatment of people forced by life's circumstances to sell themselves into servitude.

Life was very difficult in these ancient cultures, and sometimes people would find themselves becoming servants just to stay alive. There were two main types of servants/slaves. The first was when the borrower became a slave to the lender. If, for whatever reason, a person borrowed

money that they could not pay back, or had any type of catastrophic situation that forced him into debt, he would many times be forced to become the servant of the one they were indebted to for up to six years. Insurance did not exist in those times, so if a person was not careful with his finances and his debt, he could easily end up a servant to the lender. This is the concept of Hebrew "**slavery**."

The law here in the opening section of this chapter says that if this happened, the slave was only to serve up to six years and was to be set free in the seventh. In many cases, these families actually desired to stay when their time of servitude was up because it may have been better for them to do that than to start a new life on their own, and many loved their masters so much that they did not want to leave. It was very much like an employee/employer relationship. The main difference was that they were not *allowed* to leave until the seventh year. Because they did not have the ability to pay their master back, their labor became currency. In effect, their bodies became the collateral property of the master until the debt was paid off. This is why the bible says that the servant is, in fact, the property of the master due to the fact that he is producing assets with his physical body.

The second type of slave was one that came from war. If the men were defeated when they went to war, the loss would create instant widows and children who had no way to survive. If the men were not killed in battle, they could be taken as slaves. And what the bible skeptic doesn't realize is that these bereft, war-torn people **WANTED** to be taken as servants. As a matter of fact, most of the time, the women dressed in their finest on the days of war so as to present themselves in the best possible light that they might be taken back to the winning country if their husband was killed. It was a survival technique. Without the support of a man, it was almost impossible to survive in those agricultural societies. Yahweh's concern was to make sure that everyone was treated fairly.

SELLING A SERVANT

By the time we get to Exodus 21:7, most people start to cross their eyes because we westerners have little grid for a person selling his daughter. But again, sometimes a family would find themselves in such dire peril that they would be forced to sell their daughter into marriage just to survive. It's similar to a normal marriage where a seeking husband would pay a dowry, or bridal price, to the family for their daughter. In this case the bridal price could very well be the daughter herself. It's all in how you look at it. The difference here is that the daughter may not want to marry the man she's being sold to but needs to in order for her family to survive.

In verse 8 the text says, "If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has dealt deceitfully with her." What's happening here is that if the man she marries changes his mind about her, he is not allowed to sell her to anyone. Because he broke his word in allowing her to become his wife, her family must be allowed to purchase her back. To go back on your word was a great treachery in those days and would put the woman and her family at risk because an agreement had already been made. Again, all of these instructions are to protect the ones who, because of life's perils, are forced to sell themselves into slavery.

MAKING THIS FOR TODAY

The above section teaches us many things not only about our Creator, but also about how we can apply this section of Torah for today. First, it tells us that we serve (*ebed*...the same Hebrew word for slave) a loving Creator who is concerned about every person, regardless of where they are on the social ladder. He's trying to teach us that everyone deserves respect, even when they're at their lowest points in life.

Today in our civil judicial system here in the United States, if you're accused of committing a crime and there's restitution to be made, you get sent to a prison where you do nothing but wait out your sentence, producing nothing with which to pay back the victims. This system is against what Torah teaches: that the person who is in debt and owes restitution should be forced to work for or on behalf of the person he owes money to. Sending the person to prison does nothing for the person in need of the finances they lost. According to Torah, if someone accidentally loses someone's money, they are to become their servant until the money is paid off or, in certain situations, pay double. If they purposely set out to defraud the person they are to pay double if the stolen goods are found in their possession (Exo. 22:4). But if the sheep or oxen are sold or slaughtered, the thief is to pay 4-500% in restitution. There are very serious consequences for intentional stealing.

The principle is very clear. The heart of the individual and their original intent is what's at stake here. If the person had no intention of destroying the assets of another, but through some sort of external circumstance the asset was lost, he would be forced to take care of the debt. If the person was, in fact, a real thief that set out to defraud someone, the penalty would be at least double and possibly much higher. In both cases, the focus is on making things right to the one who is owed. In no case is the person put into prison with no way to pay restitution. This would be punishing the one who is owed the restitution as much as the one who's in debt. If the U.S. government was really concerned about prison reform, they would do well to consider the law of God as the standard since the Creator is more interested in making people whole rather than punishing the offender.

PARENTING

This principle of making whole should be what every parent seeks to teach their children. Far too often my wife and I see children punished for doing something wrong and the punishment does nothing to make the situation or their heart whole. Sometimes we parents are so used to punishing out of our frustration that we don't realize that we're not accomplishing our goal: to shape the heart to serve the King. We're not supposed to *punish*, we're supposed to *correct*...there's a very big difference. In the context of this portion, Yahweh is concerned about correcting the individual at fault and making people whole.

When a child steals something, we can either punish him or teach him restitution and making the person he wronged whole again. The latter teaches that the stealing will cost him double in the long run and will lead to punishment by authorities if left unchecked. We teach him the laws of servanthood, which show us that each person is to be treated with the utmost respect because each person is made in the image of God. We do not teach our children that we don't steal

because it's "wrong," we teach them that it's wrong because it defames the image of God to take something from them that was given to them by the Creator. And so the act is not so much the physical act of stealing something material but is, in fact, stealing from Yahweh the image He is trying to establish in the earth.

BOTTOM LINE

As you can see, there is much to learn from each of Yahweh's commandments. All of them have a spiritual principle attached to them that transcends the time period in which they were given. There's the black text of that time period and then there's the white fire principle *behind* the text that brings it to life for us today. It is **that** message that is the real Torah that exists for all time. It is the heart of the Creator and His original intent that we're looking for. And in this section of scripture, His intent is that we treat others with the utmost respect no matter if they are rich or poor, slave or free. **Everyone** is to be treated fairly and **everyone** is to focus on making each other as whole as possible.

In the grand scheme of things, the greatest lesson we can learn from this passage on being forced into slavery because we cannot pay the debt we owe is the story of what Yeshua did for His people. The Torah required us to be sold into slavery because of our sin. When we sin against Yahweh by breaking His law, the penalty is eternal death (Romans 6:23) and before we reach that death, we are confined to a life of slavery to the elementary principles the world teaches. But the Father, seeing our plight in our modern-day Egypt, sent His Son to pay the bridal price, redeeming us from that life of slavery and death by His own blood. This allowed us to be set free from the law of sin and death to serve (be a slave to) another Master who treats us like heirs to **His** throne. The entire gospel is built into this week's portion. And because we could never pay Him back for the debt He paid for us, we gladly choose to be His bondservant for the rest of our lives. Amen!

Shalom,

Jim Staley

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