



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Mishpatim

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God's Belief In Us To Build A Better Society

By Becky Gabin Nissani

When my husband was dispatched to Africa as a volunteer in a local hospital, something quite incredible, at least in the eyes of a Westerner, happened to him. A father approached him with his teenage daughter and begged him to take her back with him to Europe to grant her a better future. My husband, of course, kindly declined and has never judged the poor man, as it is foolish to judge destitute people in desperate situations far away from your familiar corner of the world.

This week's sidra reminded me of this story:

וכי ימכר איש את בתו לאמה לא תצא כצאת העבדים

אם רעה בעיני אדניה אשר לא [לו] יעדה והפדה לעם נכרי לא ימשל למכרה בבגדו בה

“When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be freed as male slaves are. If she proves to be displeasing to her master, who designated her for himself, he must let her be redeemed; he shall not have the right to sell her to outsiders since he broke faith with her.” (Exodus, 21, 7-8)

For Modern Orthodox Jews, the idea of slavery is inconceivable: we struggle to understand why the Torah would even allow it. Selling your daughter as a maidservant or a potential wife for a master is even more challenging. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, may his memory be blessed, gave the following explanation: *“God does not abolish it [slavery], but He so circumscribes it that He sets in motion a process that will foreseeably, even if only after many centuries, lead people to abandon it of their own accord... There are some issues on which God gives us a nudge. The rest is up to us.”*

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The Torah plants the seeds in our soul to empower us over generations to create a better world.

From some seemingly dry and straightforward verses, our Rabbis were able to see textual hints for such insights. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, connects the expression **בבגדו בה** in our verses to **בגדתה בה** in the following verse from the Prophets:

ואמרתם על מה על כי ה' העיד בינך ובין אשת נעורייך אשר אתה בגדתה בה והיא חברתך ואשת בריתך

“But you ask, “Because of what?” Because the LORD is a witness between you and the wife of your youth with whom you have broken faith, though she is your partner and covenanted spouse.” (Malachi, 2, 14)

If the master did not keep his commitments with the girl, says Rashbam, he should be considered treasonous, in the same way that a husband is treasonous to the sweetheart of his youth, his life companion, his lawful wife. And if we were to continue in Rashbam's line of thought, if the girl cannot build this kind of relationship with her master/husband in the first place, then a father that sells his daughter to a master is just morally wrong, at least according to the spirit of the law. With two additional odd words — **בבגדו בה** — the Torah suggests to us the kind of society we should strive for.

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Becky Nissani is the mother of two children with a third on the way; she is also an educator. Currently, she is homeschooling her children, Kaleb and Salomè, which she says is a most rewarding endeavor. Becky grew up in the Young Israel of Scarsdale, and since her marriage, attends Sephardic Minyan in support of her husband's traditions.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
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