



Mishpatim – Salvational Servitude

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them. Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge (Exodus 21:1-2)

The Torah teaches us the details of the Hebrew servant, the *Eved Ivri*. Rashi explains, there are two ways in which a Jew becomes a servant. If he steals and is unable to pay back, the Beis Din (Jewish court) can sell the thief and use the proceeds to repay the victim, or *mipnei dochko*, if he is destitute. If a person has no money, no means of financial support, he can choose to sell himself into servitude. Why is this the first mitzvah God gives us in the aftermath of Sinaitic revelation?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe provides an incredible insight. The act of theft represents a moral failure. It is a trespass against my fellow human being. To take something from someone else, to deprive someone of something they have worked for is a blatant disregard for the dignity of the other. But theft is not only a crime against man, it is also a crime against God. Each person is given a divinely ordained amount of material wealth. I am given what I need in order to accomplish my sacred mission in this world. What I am supposed to have is what I have been given. When a person steals, he is making a dramatic statement, “*God hasn’t given me enough. I will take that which belongs to the other, thereby enriching myself.*” The act of theft violates the will of God, not only because theft is biblically forbidden, but because it is an indictment of God for having given something to someone else and not to me. Furthermore, the thief feels that he will retain that which he has stolen, even though this act was against the will of God. As such, the thief has transgressed against God and his fellow man. So, what should we do with him? Logic would dictate, cast him aside, make a pariah, and remove him from society. Yet, we do just the opposite. We give him a job and a place to live. His lifestyle must mirror his master’s. Whatever the master provides for his own family, he must provide for the servant. We say to this thief, “*we will not give up on you. You have made some mistakes, but we still believe you can turn it around. It’s not too late. Use this time to rebuild and rehabilitate, use this time to introspect and reflect. Use this time to figure out what has gone so wrong and then find the courage to fix it.*”

The Rebbe adds in one more piece. The laws of the *Eved Ivri*, are not just about the other – they are about me. Each of us messes up. We each make mistakes, and sometimes, those mistakes land us in significant trouble and life difficulty. I have stolen my potential and squandered it in a variety of fruitless initiatives and bad choices. It is easy to give up. But then I remind myself, the thief is sold and rehabilitates himself – I can do the same. But there is an important point to remember. *Sheysh shanim ya’avod, u’ba’shviis yetzei l’chofshi*, for six years he must work, on the seventh he can go free. It can take a long time to turn yourself and your life around. It can take a long time to rehabilitate and rejuvenate. But if I am willing to put in the work, my 7th year will come. I can change, I can improve, I can become someone better. God chooses to place the law of *Eved Ivri* first, for it creates the foundational understanding for how we view the other and how we view ourselves.

The laws of the *Eved Ivri*, the Hebrew servant, teach us these two valuable lessons – never stop believing in the other, never stop believing in yourself. No matter how badly my fellow messes up, he is never beyond salvation. No matter how severe my mistakes may be, if I work hard, I can rehabilitate and rejuvenate.