

December 2, 2018 - Lev. 25:35 – 26:2 - Treatment and Redemption of Slaves
Torah readings: Leviticus 25:35 – 26:2 - Treatment and Redemption of Slaves
Psalm 89:6-15
Haftarah: Isaiah 35:3-10
Ezekiel 18:17-23, 30-32

Help for the Poor

Leviticus 25:35 - "And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee."

"fallen in decay" = *mowt* - be moved, totter, slip, fall down, be shaken, threatened by ruin

Rashi - you shall support him: Do not allow him to fall down and collapse altogether, in which case it would be difficult to pick him up again [from his dire poverty]. Rather, "support him" while his hand is still faltering [for then it is easier to help him out of his trouble]. To what can this be compared? To a load on a donkey-while it is still on the donkey, one person can grasp it and hold it in place. Once it falls to the ground, however, [even] five people cannot pick it up. - [Torath Kohanim 25:71]

No Lending with Interest

Leviticus 25:36-38 - "Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee. Thou shalt not give him thy money upon usury, nor lend him thy victuals for increase. I am the LORD your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God."

The biblical Hebrew term for interest is *neshekh* (Hebrew: נִשְׁכָּה), literally meaning "a bite" as from a serpent. Usury is also prohibited in **Exodus 22:25–27** and **Deuteronomy 23:20–21**. Talmudic Law even regards any witnesses to usury contracts, as well as the scribe writing the contract for the parties, to be as culpable for usury as the lender and debtor themselves.

Rashi - A person's desire is naturally attracted to [taking] interest, and it is difficult to stay away from it, for he [rationalizes and] grants himself [false] permission because of his money which was lying idle while in his [the debtor's] hands. [Therefore, Scripture] found it necessary to state here "and you shall fear your God." Or if someone ascribes his money to a non-Jew in order to lend it to a Jew with interest. This is a matter held [secretly] in a man's heart and thought. Therefore, Scripture deems it necessary to state, "and you shall fear your God" [Who is privy to all inner thoughts]. — [B.M. 61b]

Remember that a Hebrew Slave is Your Brother

The subject of a Hebrew slave is dealt with briefly in **Exodus 21:1-6**, noting that in the seventh year he will go free, unless he chooses to stay. Then his ear would be bored

through with an awl, and he would serve his master forever. The rabbis insisted this boring of the ear was because that slave had not "heard" correctly that God had freed the slaves from Pharaoh.

Leviticus 25:39 - "And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant: But as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee, and shall serve thee unto the year of jubilee: And then shall he depart from thee, both he and his children with him, and shall return unto his own family, and unto the possession of his fathers shall he return. For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as bondmen. Thou shalt not rule over him with rigor; but shalt fear thy God."

"they are my servants" - The Torah has no special term for servant and master. Instead, everyone who works is called "*eved*" - servant/slave. A God-fearing man is called a servant of God. And even the Messiah is called the Servant of the Lord. All humans are servants of God.

In the New Testament, Paul continually referred to himself as the "*doulos*" or slave of God. He did not belong to himself, and neither do we.

"He shall be with thee" -

Sifra, the Midrash to Leviticus - "With thee" as regards food; "with thee" as regards drink; "with thee" as regards clean apparel, that thou should not dine on white bread while he dines on black; thou should not drink old wine while he drinketh new; thou should not sleep on a featherbed while he sleeps on straw.

Rashi - "Thou shalt not rule over him with rigor" - Unnecessary jobs, for the purpose of tormenting him. E.g., do not say to him: "Warm up this drink for me," when you do not need it; or "Hoe under this vine until I come back" [and you may never come back there (Sifthei Chachamim on verse 53)]. Perhaps you will say, "No one really knows whether it is necessary or not, and I say that it is necessary!" This matter is held [secretly] in a man's heart [for no one knows his true intentions]. Therefore, Scripture states, "and you shall fear [your God] for He is privy to all inner thoughts". — [Torath Kohanim 25: 86]

Miamonides - What is meant by rigorous labor? This is work which has no fixed time and is needed by no man; but is simply imposed for the sake of working him, that he should not be idle. Our sages state in this respect: He may not say to him 'Hoe these vines until I return, since he has given him no fixed time, but he should rather say to him: 'Hoe as far as that place.' And because it is already a humiliation for a fellow Hebrew to be reduced to selling himself into slavery, he should not be forced to do any menial tasks publicly.

Remember Pharaoh

This all recalls Pharaoh's command: "Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labor therein; and let them not regard vain words." Making bricks without straw

was because he thought the Jewish slaves were idle:

- **Exodus 5:17** - "But he said, Ye are idle, ye are idle..."

"For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as bondmen." - Because being slaves of God already, they could not be bought and sold by any other. What is paramount is the submission of every human being to his Maker, who alone is Master of all.

And alongside that is the fact that we all are made in the image of God.

- **Job 31:15** - "Did not He that made me in the womb make him (my servant)? And did not One fashion us in the womb?"

But Slavery Not Yet Abolished

"And when thou lettest him go free from thee, thou shalt not let him go empty; thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy threshing floor, and out of thy wine-press; of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee" (**Deuteronomy 15:13–14**).

Maimonides - And thus the early sages used to do – they gave their slaves of everything they ate and drank themselves, and had food served to their slaves even before partaking of it themselves.

Thus, Hebrew slaves were to be treated more like employees or family members. So many restrictions were placed on slave-owners that a Talmudic saying (Kiddushin 20a) declares that "Whoever acquires a Hebrew servant acquires a master over himself."

Despite these restrictions, the rabbis interpreted the following passages to mean that if men came from surrounding nations, married Jewish wives, and had children, then those children *could* be acquired as slaves. (Although not from the seven Canaanite nations, who were all supposed to be wiped out).

Leviticus 25:44 - "Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids."

Alien slaves would serve in perpetuity:

Leviticus 25:46 - "Ye may make them an inheritance for your children after you, to hold for a possession, of them ye may take your bondmen forever"

The same rule would appear to apply to prisoners of war.

Slaves are members of the master's household, and as such enjoy the benefit and are liable to the duty of keeping the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10, 23:12; Deut. 5:14–15) and holidays (Deut. 16:11–14, 12:18). They must be circumcised (Gen. 17:12–13); partake of

Passover sacrifices when circumcised (Ex. 12:44), as distinguished from resident hirelings (Ex. 12:45); and may inherit the master's estate where there is no direct issue (Gen. 15:3) or perhaps even where there is (Prov. 17:2). Although slaves are the master's property (Lev. 22:11, etc.), they may acquire and hold property of their own; a slave who "prosper," i.e., can afford it, may redeem himself (Lev. 25:29; instances of property held by slaves are to be found in II Sam. 9:10; 16:4; 19:18, 30; cf. I Sam. 9:8). The killing of a slave is punishable in the same way as that of any freeman, even if the act is committed by the master (Ex. 21:20).

Interestingly, a fugitive slave must not be turned over to his master but given refuge (Deut. 23:16).

— See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/slavery-in-judaism>

With Paul's announcement that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (**Galatians 3:28**) this distinction between a Hebrew or an alien slave was eliminated, making slavery of any kind effectively impossible within the Christian community. (Of course, history shows that this was ignored, especially in America, where chattel slavery was defended using select Bible verses).

In **1 Timothy 1:10**, "Men-stealers" or slave traders, are listed as one class of sinners that the Law was designed to punish. This is right before Paul confesses that he is the "chief of sinners."

Slavery in the ancient near east was different from slavery as experienced in the New World and America. For a pretty comprehensive treatment of the Bible's view on slavery in the Old Testament, see here: <http://christianthinktank.com/qnoslave.html> ...and in the New Testament, here: <http://christianthinktank.com/qnoslavent.html>

Redemption of a Hebrew Slave from a Non-Jew (Leviticus 25:47-55)

In **Leviticus 25**, this is the last in a scale of increasingly bad outcomes related to covetousness: You end up selling yourself to an idolator.

If a Hebrew slave has been sold to an alien, he must be redeemed at once; he then enters into the redeemer's service, which terminates with the jubilee year.

Leviticus 25:47-48 - "And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother that dwelleth by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger or sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family: After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him:"

Targum: "His redemption must be effected forthwith!" because all Israelites belong to God. He would be in danger of being swallowed up in assimilation among the heathen.

stock = *`eqer* - a shoot or stock of a plant, used for a man of a foreign race who had

settled or been “planted” in Israel. But it also represented idolatry.

Rashi - This [expression] means [the Jew is sold to] an idolater; but when Scripture says לְעֵקֶר [literally “to uproot,” making it לְעֵקֶר מִשְׁפַּחַת גֵּר], it refers to [a Jew] who is sold to the idol itself [לְעֵקֶר meaning “that which is to be uprooted”] - i.e., he becomes an attendant to it. He does not worship it as a deity, but to chop wood and draw water. — [Torath Kohanim 25:94]

This non-Jew master is settled in Israel, doing business there, and so must abide by the rule of the Jubilee Year. Redemption of one's relative from such a situation is urged, but it must abide by payment according to the number of years remaining until the Jubilee.

Spiritually, this pictures a condition in which we have become bound to idolatry, serving yet not entirely believing in it. We're entangled, "workin' for the man' - We can't break free because of some commitment, either to habit, debt or a vow - and our freedom requires intervention by a kinsman-redeemer.

The Kinsman-Redeemer

The kinsman-redeemer was employed in redeeming a slave, redeeming an inheritance (like that in the book of Ruth) or in prosecuting vengeance in a blood feud between clans.

Christ is the spiritual kinsman-redeemer - our redeemer, avenger and vindicator.

- **Psalm 49:15** - "But God will redeem my life from Sheol, for He will surely take me to Himself."

- **Job 19:25** - "But I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last He will stand upon the earth."

Leviticus 25:49 - "Either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or any that is nigh of kin unto him of his family may redeem him; or if he be able, he may redeem himself."

Why is the slave's father not mentioned here?

Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel says - "Because it cannot be thought that a father would suffer his son to be sold, if it was in his power to redeem him, since a father is pitiful to his son."

Leviticus 25:53 - "And as a yearly hired servant shall he be with him: and the other shall not rule with rigor over him in thy sight."

The non-Jewish master was still subject to the restrictions placed on a Hebrew master of a Hebrew slave.

Leviticus 25:55 - "For unto me the children of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."

Stated again - God already owns them, so they cannot/should not be slaves of another.

Idolatry Forbidden Again

In the Torah reading for the week, this example of an Israelite bound to idolatry and needing to be redeemed is followed by this admonition in the next chapter:

Leviticus 26:1-2 - "Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the LORD your God. Ye shall keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD."

Covetousness - wanting more than you have - begins with not letting your land "rest" and leads to a cascade of self-seeking that eventually ends in bondage to idolatry. This is as true today as it was then.

- **Colossians 3:5** - "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience"

The opposite of covetousness - and therefore of idolatry - is contentment:

Philippians 4:11-13 - "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."