

## Parashah Ninety-Five

Leviticus 25:39–26:2; Isaiah 24:1–6; John 13:12–20

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notes by Tim Hegg

### *The Laws of Slavery*

In the modern western world, and particularly in the USA, the idea of slavery is reprehensible. The idea that one person should own another seems contrary to all human decency. The despicable manner in which African slaves were sometimes treated in the history of our own nation has made it nearly impossible to read the history of slavery in the Ancient Near East without prejudice. Yet while in all periods of mankind's history where slavery existed there were those who treated slaves wrongly, it is also true that there often existed a good relationship between slaves and owners of slaves. In some cases, acquiring slaves was a means of sustaining their lives. This is not to condone in any manner the barbaric treatment of another human being who was created in the image of God, examples of which are readily at hand in the history of slavery in our own nation. But our *parashah* this Shabbat deals with the matter of slavery as part of the economic structure of ANE society, and particularly of the Israelite society. In addition, when the various law codes of the ANE are compared, the Torah of Israel is markedly civil and humane in terms of the treatment of slaves. In the Torah, slaves were given many rights, and slave owners were obliged to maintain these rights as an act of obedience to God. Slaves were to be given rest on Sabbath days, given equal opportunity to engage in the worship of Israel's God, and had legal recourse if mis-treated. Indeed, if a slave sustained a severe injury by his master, he was given his freedom (Ex 21:26–27). Slaves who were not indentured for life could be redeemed, and could even redeem themselves if their means were sufficient. Most interesting is the contrast between the Torah and other ANE law codes in regard to returning runaway slaves. For instance, in the Code of Hammurapi, sheltering a runaway slave drew the death penalty. Just the opposite is the case in Deut 23:

- 15 You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.  
16 He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him.

Since a slave owned by a fellow Israelite was considered his property, and the Torah prohibits retaining what belongs to someone else, how does this law not condone theft? Most likely this law is prohibiting the extradition of a slave who had escaped from a foreign land and who sought refuge within the community of Israel. Since the law codes of pagan nations did not guard the life of a slave from his master (taking the life of a slave was only penalized by payment of a monetary fine in Hammurapi's Code; in contrast, cf. Ex 21:20), the mandated refuge within Israel was a matter of preserving the runaway slave's life. Once again we see that the Torah provided justice for all people regardless of their ethnicity or economic status, considering the preservation of life more important than compliance with the laws of pagan nations.

In our *parashah*, the clear contrast is made between one's "countryman" (אֶחָיִךָ, *'achicha*, literally "your brother") and people from foreign countries (מֵאֵת הַגּוֹיִם, *mei'et hagoyim*, "from the nations"). The Israelite is never to be a purchased slave, meaning that while he will do the work of a common purchased slave, his position as a slave or servant ends at the *Sh'mittah* (sabbatical year, cf. Ex 21:2), including the Yovel (Jubilee). In other words, he is never to be considered the prop-

erty of another Israelite—his position as a slave is only temporary, like that of a hired worker. The text explains why: “For they are My servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt; they are not to be sold in a slave sale” (v. 42). The Israelites belong to God because He purchased them via the redemption from Egypt. They cannot, therefore, become the property of someone else. This is not the case with a slave or servant purchased from the pagan nations, or from the foreigners who may live within the community of Israel. Such a slave or servant may become the perpetual property of the one who purchases them, meaning that their families will continue to be the purchased slaves or servants from generation to generation. “You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession; you can use them as permanent slaves” (v. 46). Thus, in the Jubilee, only Israelites are released, not slaves from pagan nations.

There is another important difference between an Israelite slave and a slave from the nations in the Torah: an Israelite slave always has the option of redemption, either by the intervention of a family member, or through his own means if he is able to acquire the redemption price. The manner in which the redemption price is calculated relates to the remaining years up to the Yovel. This explains what would otherwise appear as a contradiction between our *parashah* and Exodus 21, where an Israelite slave is released in the *Sh'mittah*, whereas in our text it appears his release is only in the Yovel. The explanation is that our *parashah* is focusing upon the method for calculating the redemption price, which is predicated on the Yovel alone. Essentially, the calculation would be figured this way: the price paid for the slave would be divided by the number of years remaining until the Yovel. The redemption price would then be the amount of the remaining years. To illustrate (using modern day monetary units): say an Israelite sold himself into slavery 10 years before the Yovel year, and the purchase price was \$100. That would calculate to \$10 per year. If after serving two years, the slave was able to pay for his redemption, the price would be \$80. It seems clear that the years were calculated beginning with Yom Teruah. Though the text does not give explicit instructions on this, one would presume that a partial year would be pro-rated in accordance with the amount equal to a full year.

Finally, if an Israelite slave was not redeemed, he still would go free at the *Sh'mittah* year, including the Yovel. In this way, no Israelite family could ever be indentured permanently, and not even for a period longer than seven years against his will. Of course, if an Israelite sold himself into slavery in order to pay a debt, and the debt required serving longer than seven years, then he would be required to serve the full amount unless sufficient means were found to buy his redemption. Yet even if the debt had not been paid by the time of the Yovel, then it was cancelled. All debts were “marked paid” at the Yovel year. This is what is meant by the phrase “he shall not rule over him with severity in your sight” (v. 53). “Severity” translates פְּרַךְ, *perech*, meaning “to crush,” and in terms of slavery jargon, to denote perpetual slavery, or slavery that was generational. Such could never be the case for an Israelite slave.

One of the several difficulties that arise from our *parashah* is the meaning of “sojourner” in this text (גֵּר, *ger*; תּוֹשָׁב, *toshav*). Often these terms apply to someone of non-Israelite extraction who has joined himself to Israel. Does our *parashah* make a distinction between the native born and the foreigner within Israel, in terms of the laws of servitude? At first it would appear as though this is the case, but on further study, another option is evident. Those who could be permanent slaves (i.e., who do not go free at the *Sh'mittah* or the *Yovel*) are characterized as foreigners or descendants of foreigners from the pagan nations outside of Israel (v. 44). The following verse that allows permanent slaves of those who “sojourn” within Israel is therefore qualified by the previous verse:

these are foreigners who have not become a permanent part of Israel through their commitment to the God of Israel. They are like those purchased from foreign nations. This interpretation is in harmony with other statements of the Torah, to the effect that there is one law for the native born and sojourner, where “sojourner” in these contexts must mean one who has become permanently attached to Israel through faith in Israel’s God.

It seems obvious that the *parashah* before us formed the backdrop from which the metaphoric use of slavery and redemption pertaining to eternal salvation became so central to the message of the prophets and apostles. The primary point of departure is the repeated notice that an Israelite could never become a permanent slave, because God had redeemed Israel and thus every Israelite belonged to Him. Only He is the rightful owner of those He redeems.

Moreover, God is the God of great reversals. An Israelite who was enslaved one day, became entirely free at the appointed time. This is the connection to the *haftarah* passage. Through the power of redemption, the “servant becomes like his master.” Granted, the context of Isaiah 24 is one of destruction and punishment, but the concept of immediate reversal is the connection to the Torah portion. In the same way, the sinner who is enslaved to sin, and who could never acquire sufficient means to redeem himself, becomes instantly free through the redemptive power of Yeshua’s sacrifice applied by faith through the life-giving work of the Spirit! Furthermore, the distinction between the Israelite and the slave acquired from the pagan nations of our *parashah* illustrates the reality of God’s sovereign election. Those who are His, whom He has chosen, are alone those who are given the privilege of redemption and freedom. All others are permanently enslaved. This emphasizes the awesome and unexplainable sovereignty of the Almighty.

Finally, the words of Yeshua in our Apostolic portion reminds us of the true nature of freedom. We have been redeemed from the enslaving tyrant of sin and death in order to serve our Master. And if we serve Him, we will serve others as He did—willingly putting ourselves in the position of a servant. It is when we act as His permanent servants that we enjoy the true reality of freedom.