

Slaves

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week's reading from the Torah is concerned with the concept of servitude in all its various forms. The Torah tries, way ahead of its time, to ameliorate the psychological damage of servitude, of never knowing when one's life might be one's own again, free from obligations to others, free from carrying the burden of debt perpetually. Even today so many human beings are indentured or enslaved by circumstances. Legislation was designed to limit indebtedness, to give people the opportunity to try again, a second chance. As well as the command to employers not to be harsh or oppress their workers.

There were different types of slaves. Hebrew slaves remained full citizens with religious and civil rights. They were enslaved either to pay off financial debts or to find a way of sustaining their families. The Talmud says that they had to live at the same standard as their masters. "Whoever acquires a Hebrew Slave acquires a master." And they had to keep all their religious obligations. And any mistreatment would be treated as any civil injury suit providing compensation and penalties.

They could be redeemed by relatives and served for a maximum of seven years. But if they chose to go on serving they could but had their ears pierced to discourage people from such long-term dependency. Perhaps this is where we get our aversion to men wearing ear rings from.

Very different was the Canaanite slave, bought or captured in war. He or she became the property of their masters. First, they were circumcised and or immersed in a mikvah. They had to observe basic Jewish commands except those related to time because their obligations to be available to their masters. But should they be freed, they automatically became full Jews. Although not fully protected by civil law, any serious injuries could result in their freedom.

This latter category is the one we find most disturbing nowadays. We are bound to wonder why the Torah did not forbid it altogether. But like so many other examples, the cultures of the times had an impact and influence and the Torah legislated for what was common. The Torah's approach seems to have been to lay out certain protective measures and to expect humane behavior. Just as other laws of the Torah have fallen into obsolescence, so have these. But the moral message remains.