

Slavery - In a Good Way

Developing an open-door policy with G-d.

Israeli Politeness

When Israel celebrated its 60th anniversary, many world leaders came to participate in the festivities, and the guest of honor was former American president George W. Bush. During his address to Israel's Knesset, Bush pointed out that it was the first time in Israel's history that an American president addressed the Knesset—and also, he joked, the first time in Israel's history that one person was speaking in the Knesset at a time.

You see, Israeli competitiveness is of a category all its own. In Israel, there is none of the American politeness in which everyone stands in line and waits. In Israel, everyone simply pushes, and if you stand nicely and wait, you can stand nicely and wait forever.

This is something that everyone who visits Israel sees right away.

But there are many more things that Israelis notice when they move here.

For example, if you get on a bus with your kids in Israel, someone will immediately start yelling at you for not dressing your kids more warmly when it's so cold outside. If your kids are fighting among themselves in a store in Israel, someone is sure

to give them a lesson in respect for others. Those things don't happen here.

But one of the biggest differences is this: Here in America, if you want to visit someone at home, you first need to call and set up an appointment. Even kids who want to play together need to arrange it first—it's called a "play date."

It takes Israelis who move here a lot of time to digest how two four-year-old kids who simply want to play together first need to check their calendars and set dates and times for when they can play together.

In Israel, after all, people just drop into your house without any prior notice, sometimes even in the middle of the night. I know of one family that made aliyah but then came back to the States, primarily because of this "primitive" social norm— they simply couldn't bear how people would just drop in without any advance planning whatsoever.

Who's Slaves Are We?

In this week's Torah portion, we learn about a special mitzvah that comes only once every 50 years: Yovel, the jubilee year, in which all land sold in previous years goes back to its original owners.

Additionally, we learn another law connected to Yovel, this one connected to slaves.

Now, when I say the word "slaves," we all immediately picture the slaves in America 200 years ago, the black people forced into slave labor.

Let us be explicit: Slavery of that sort is forbidden by the Torah. The Ten Commandments tell us, “Do not steal,” which Rashi explains to mean stealing people. The Commandment is not referring to money but rather, to souls — commonly known as kidnapping. In the Torah portion of Mishpatim, the Torah’s punishment for kidnapping is death: “He who steals a man and sells him, and the man is found in his hand, he shall surely die.”

In the same Torah portion, however, the laws governing slaves are mentioned.

In Judaism, a “slave” is a person who chooses to sell himself as a sort of personal assistant or butler, since he has no other options. He looks for a foster home of sorts, which he finds at the home of another Jew, and there are many rules about how far the Jewish employer must go to protect his “slave’s” dignity. As the Talmud tells us, “Anyone who acquires a Hebrew slave for himself is as if he acquired a master for himself.” And one who indeed acquires such a “slave” does so simply because he wants to do a mitzvah.

On slaves of this category, our Torah portion this week states that they are to be set free at the Yovel year. Why? The Torah says, “because they are my slaves whom I redeemed from the land of Egypt.” In other words, why is it prohibited for a Jew to be a slave? Because all Jews are already slaves to G-d.

But to say “we are G-d’s slaves” in today’s world doesn’t exactly sound good— what exactly does it mean that we are His “slaves”? Does G-d need someone to polish His shoes? Why would G-d need slaves? It sounds degrading and humiliating; it

leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

The Minister and the Slave

The Talmud tells us (Brachos 34b) about Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa, who lived at the end of the Second Temple Era. He was known as a tzadik, as one whose prayers were answered, and anyone who needed him to pray on their behalf to G-d would go to see him, and he eventually developed a reputation as a miracle worker.

The Talmud tells us the story of Rabban Gamliel's son who fell sick. Rabban Gamliel was the leader of the Jews in Rabbi Chanina's time—one of the greatest people of the era and a tzadik in his own right. However, when his son fell sick and needed a blessing, he didn't rely on himself but rather, sent two scholars to Rabbi Chanina to ask him to ask G-d for mercy.

When Rabbi Chanina saw them, he knew why they had come and he went up to his attic, where he would pray, and asked for mercy for Rabban Gamliel's son. When he shortly came back down, he told the scholars, "go back home," essentially saying that the child is well again.

They asked him, "Are you a prophet?" He said, "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but this is what I was taught: If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that it has been positively accepted, and if not, I know that I am distracted." In other words, if his prayer flowed smoothly, if he had a certain feeling that his prayer had been accepted, then he knew that the child had recovered.

The Talmud continues and tells us that the scholars sat down to calculate Rabbi Chanina's precise moment of prayer, and that when they returned to Rabban Gamliel, they discovered, to their amazement, that Rabban Gamliel's son had miraculously recovered at the same time.

What was Rabbi Chanina's secret? How did he do it? We'd also like to know how to reach such a high level.

The Talmud continues with a similar story. Rabbi Chanina once traveled to study Torah under Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Yochanan's son fell ill.

Rabbi Yochanan, of course, asked Rabbi Chanina to pray for him. "My son, ask for mercy for him that he may live," the Talmud tells us. And the Talmud continues: "Rabbi Chanina placed his head between his knees," which is how they prayed in those days, "and asked for mercy for him, and he lived." It worked—G-d heard his prayers and the child recovered. The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai then said, "If Ben Zakkai were to put his own head between his knees all day long, he would not be looked upon [from Heaven]." In other words, he admitted that if he had prayed all day himself, his prayers would not have been answered and that it was all in Rabbi Chanina's merit.

Rabbi Yochanan's wife then said to him, "Is then Rabbi Chanina greater than you?" His wife essentially asked him, "What's going on here? You're the great scholar, the Rosh Yeshivah and the leader of the Jewish people!" Indeed, the Talmud is filled with laws attributed to Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai. But his

prayers didn't help—while Rabbi Chanina's did. Thus, Rabbi Yochanan's wife was essentially saying, "I thought I was married to a tzadik! Are you telling me that you've been lying to me all these years?"

(By the way, my wife tells me the same thing all day: "I thought you were a tzadik! When we got married, I thought I was marrying a person of stature! What happened?)

Rabbi Yochanan responded with something very interesting: "It's just that Rabbi Chanina is like a slave before the king and I am like a minister before the king."

The Open Door Policy

Now, a "minister" is a very important person whose opinions are taken seriously. But he can't just pop into the king's throne room whenever he wants—there are set times when he can see the king. For example, every Tuesday at 4:00 p.m., he has a regular meeting with the king—otherwise he has to wait.

On the other hand, the "slave" or servant is not an important person at all. No one considers him important or asks his opinion—all he does is keep house and polish the king's shoes. However, he has constant access to the king's room. He does not have regular hours; he can come and go as he wishes; he lives in the palace as if it's his own home. This is because he needs to be constantly at hand to serve the king, so he's there 24/7—which is why he can ask questions of the king whenever he wants.

This is what "My slaves" means—G-d wants us to have a

relationship with Him like a servant has a relationship with a king, an open-door policy that allows us to enter without an appointment made three months in advance but rather, whenever we want.

G-d wanted to give us this gift of being His household members. That's what "My slaves" means. We don't need to polish G-d's shoes. He just wants us around all the time. We might even say he wants us to be Israelis, not Americans, when it comes to our relationship with him.

Someone asked me this week what he needs to do to be G-d's servant. I thought about it and then told him, "You're a married man and you still ask that question?! Go ask your wife!"