

# INSPIRE

MISHAPTIM

ROSH CHODESH ADAR -13 FEB 2021

## IS RELIGION STILL RELEVANT?



By Yossi Goldman

Cyberspace, outer space, inner space. Genome maps, globalization, going to Mars. Smart cards, smart bombs, stem cells and cell phones. There is no denying it: we live in a new age. Science fiction has become scientific fact.

And the question is asked: In this new world order, with science and technology changing the way we live, is religion still relevant? Do we still need to subscribe to an ancient and seemingly long-obsolete code of laws, when we are so much further advanced than our ancestors?

But let me ask you: Have the Ten Commandments passed their “sell-by” date? Are faith and doubt, murder and adultery, thievery and jealousy out of fashion? Notwithstanding all our marvellous medical and scientific developments, has human nature itself really changed? Are not the very same moral issues that faced our ancestors still challenging our own generation?

Whether it’s an oxcart or a Mercedes, road rage or courteous coexistence is still a choice we must make. Looking after aged parents is not a new problem. The very same issues dealt with in the Bible—sibling rivalry, jealous spouses and warring nations—are still the stuff of newspaper headlines today. We still struggle with knowing the difference between right and wrong, moral or immoral, ethical or sneaky, and not even the most souped-up computer on earth is able to answer those questions for us.

Science and technology address the how and what of life, but they do not answer the question of why. Why are we here in the first place? Why should I be nice to my neighbour? Why should my life be nobler than my pet Doberman’s? Science and technology have unravelled many mysteries that puzzled us for centuries. But they have not answered a single moral question. Only the Torah addresses moral minefield. And those issues are perhaps more pressing today than ever before in history.

Torah is truth, and the truth is eternal. Scenarios come and go. Lifestyles change with geography. The storylines are different, but the gut-level issues are all too familiar. If we ever needed a Torah—we need it equally today, and maybe more so. May we continue to find moral guidance and clarity in the eternal truths of our holy and eternal Torah. Amen.

# THE SLOW END OF SLAVERY

## By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

In Parshat Mishpatim we witness one of the great stylistic features of the Torah, its transition from narrative to law. Until now the book of Exodus has been primarily narrative: the story of the enslavement of the Israelites and their journey to freedom. Now comes detailed legislation, the “constitution of liberty.”

This is not accidental but essential. In Judaism, law grows out of the historical experience of the people. Egypt was the Jewish people's school of the soul; memory was its ongoing seminar in the art and craft of freedom. It taught them what it felt like to be on the wrong side of power. “You know what it feels like to be a stranger,” says a resonant phrase in this week's Parshah.<sup>1</sup> Jews were the people commanded never to forget the bitter taste of slavery, so that they would never take freedom for granted. Those who do so, eventually lose it.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the opening of today's Parshah. We have been reading about the Israelites' historic experience of slavery. So the social legislation of Mishpatim begins with slavery. What is fascinating is not only what it says, but what it doesn't say.

It doesn't say: Abolish slavery. Surely it should have done so. Is that not the whole point of the story thus far? Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. He, as the Egyptian viceroy Tzafenat Paane'ach, threatens them with slavery. Generations later, when a pharaoh arises who “knew not Joseph,” the entire Israelite people become Egypt's slaves. Slavery, like vengeance, is a vicious circle that has no natural end. Why not, then, give it a supernatural end? Why did G d not say: There shall be no more slavery?

The Torah has already given us an implicit answer. Change is possible in human nature, but it takes time: time on a vast scale, centuries, even millennia. There is little doubt that, in terms of the Torah's value system, the exercise of power by one person over another, without their consent, is a fundamental assault against human dignity. This is not just true of the relationship between master and slave. It is even true, according to many classic Jewish commentators, of the relationship between king and subjects, rulers and ruled. According to the sages, it is even true of the relationship between G d and human beings. The Talmud says that if G d really did coerce the Jewish people to accept the Torah by “suspending the mountain over their heads,” that would constitute an objection to the very terms of the covenant itself. We are G d's avadim, servants, only because our ancestors freely chose to be.

So slavery is to be abolished, but it is a fundamental principle of G d's relationship with us that he does not force us to change faster than we are able to do of our own free will. So Mishpatim does not abolish slavery, but it sets in motion a series of fundamental laws that will lead people, albeit at their own pace, to abolish it of their own accord. Here are the laws:

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything . . . But if the servant declares, “I love my master and my wife and children, and do not want to go free,” then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost, and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.<sup>3</sup> What is being done in these laws? First, a fundamental change is taking place in the nature of slavery. No longer is it a permanent status; it is a temporary condition. A Hebrew slave goes free after seven years. He or she knows this. Liberty awaits the slave, not at the whim of the master, but by divine command. When you know that within a fixed time you are going to be free, you may be a slave in body, but in your own mind, you are a free human being who has temporarily lost his or her liberty. That in itself is revolutionary.

This alone, though, was not enough. Six years are a long time. Hence the institution of Shabbat ordained so that one day in seven a slave could breathe free air: no one could command him to work.

Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the L rd your G d. On it you shall not do any work, neither you . . . nor your male or female servant . . . so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the L rd your Gd brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

That is why the L rd your Gd has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.<sup>4</sup>

But the Torah is acutely aware that not every slave wants liberty. This, too, emerges out of Israelite history. More than once in the wilderness, the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt. They say: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.” As Rashi points out, the phrase “at no cost” (chinam) cannot be understood literally. They paid for it with their labour and their lives. “At no cost” means “free of mitzvot,” of commands, obligations, duties. Freedom carries the highest price, namely, moral responsibility. Many people have shown what Erich Fromm called “fear of freedom.”

Rousseau spoke of “forcing people to be free”—a view that led in time to the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution.

The Torah does not force people to be free, but it does insist on a ritual of stigmatization. If a slave refuses to go free, his master “shall take him to the door or the doorpost, and pierce his ear with an awl.” Rashi explains:

Why was the ear chosen to be pierced, rather than all the other limbs of the body? Said Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai: . . . The ear that heard on Mount Sinai: “For to Me are the children of Israel servants,” and he, nevertheless, went ahead and acquired a master for himself, should [have his ear] pierced! Rabbi Shimon expounded this verse in a beautiful manner: Why are the door and the doorpost different from other objects of the house? G d, in effect, said: “The door and doorpost were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and the two doorposts, and I said: ‘For to me are the children of Israel servants’”—they are My servants, not servants of servants—and this person went ahead and acquired a master for himself, he shall [have his ear] pierced in their presence.

A slave may stay a slave, but not without being reminded that this is not what G d wants for His people. The result of these laws was to create a dynamic that would, in the end, lead to an abolition of slavery, at a time of free human choosing.

And so it happened. The Quakers, Methodists and Evangelicals, most famous among them William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Britain to abolish the slave trade, were driven by religious conviction, inspired not least by the biblical narrative of the Exodus, and by the challenge of Isaiah “to proclaim freedom for captives, and for prisoners, release from darkness.”<sup>6</sup>

Slavery was abolished in the United States only after a civil war, and there were those who cited the Bible in defence of slavery. As Abraham Lincoln put it in his Second Inaugural: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same G d, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just G d's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.”

Yet slavery was abolished in the United States, not least because of the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights, among them “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Jefferson, who wrote those words, was himself a slaveowner. Yet such is the latent power of ideals that eventually people see that by insisting on their right to freedom and dignity while denying it to others, they are living a contradiction. That is when the change takes place, and it takes time.

If history tells us anything, it is that G d has patience, though it is often sorely tried. He wanted slavery abolished, but He wanted it to be done by free human beings coming to see of their own accord the evil it is and the evil it does. The G d of history, who taught us

## PARSHA SUMMARY

Following the revelation at Sinai, G-d legislates a series of laws for the people of Israel. These include the laws of the indentured servant; the penalties for murder, kidnapping, assault and theft; civil laws pertaining to redress of damages, the granting of loans and the responsibilities of the "Four Guardians"; and the rules governing the conduct of justice by courts of law. Also included are laws warning against mistreatment of foreigners; the observance of the seasonal festivals, and the agricultural gifts that are to be brought to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem; the prohibition against cooking meat with milk; and the mitzvah of prayer. Altogether, the Parshah of Mishpatim contains 53 mitzvot—23 imperative commandments and 30 prohibitions. G-d promises to bring the people of Israel to the Holy Land, and warns them against assuming the pagan ways of its current inhabitants. The people of Israel proclaim, "We will do and we will hear all that G-d commands us." Leaving Aaron and Hur in charge in the Israelite camp, Moses ascends Mount Sinai and remains there for forty days and forty nights to receive the Torah from G-d.

## HAFTORAH SUMMARY

In this week's haftorah, Jeremiah describes the punishment that would befall the Jews because they continued enslaving their Hebrew slaves after six years of service—transgressing the commandment discussed in the beginning of this week's Torah reading. King Zedekiah made a pact with the people according to which they would all release their Jewish slaves after six years of service—as commanded in the Torah. Shortly thereafter, the Jews reneged on this pact and forced their freed slaves to re-enter into service. G-d then dispatched Jeremiah with a message of rebuke: "Therefore, so says the Lord: You have not hearkened to Me to proclaim freedom, everyone to his brother and every one to his neighbour; behold I proclaim freedom to you, says the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine, and I will make you an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth." The haftorah then vividly depicts the destruction and devastation that the Jews would experience. The haftorah concludes with words of reassurance: "Just as I would not cancel My covenant with the day and night and I would not cancel the laws of heaven and earth, so too I will not cast away the descendants of Jacob . . . for I will return their captivity [to their land] and have mercy on them."

## WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Cohen, Barbara mother Levitt, Mirium Mirium Bas Beril Sunday 14/2/21 Adar 2, 5781

Steinberg, Ian father Steinberg, Yerachmiel Yerachmiel ben Binyamin Monday 15/2/21 Adar 3, 5781

Trainis, Avril husband Trainis, Greg Yisroel Yaakov ben Yosef Monday 15/2/21 Adar 3, 5781

Leigh, Ruth brother Moss, Mark Mordechai Ben Yisroel Zev Tuesday 16/2/21 Adar 4, 5781

Selwyn, Maurice wife Selwyn, Sheila Sheina bas Moishe Tuesday 16/2/21 Adar 4, 5781

Berg, Harvey mother Berg, Freda Freyda Bas Meir Thursday 18/2/21 Adar 6, 5781

Wrightman, Hilary father Goldman, Abraham (Alf) Joseph Avraham Yosef ben Gedalia Aria Thursday 18/2/21 Adar 6, 5781

## JEWISH HUMOUR

A physicist is giving a lecture at a Jewish seniors residence and explaining that in 4 and 1/2 billion years the sun will exhaust itself of fuel and burn out and all life at we know it in the solar system will end. Upset, Saul Epstein yells out, "Is there anything we can do professor? Can we form any congressional committees, or donate money for research?" The physicist responds, "Sir, why are you so upset? This won't happen for 4 and a half billion years?" "Oh, thank God," says Mr. Epstein. "I thought you said it would happen in 4 and a half million years."

## RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

The person who makes it has no need of it; the person who buys it has no use for it. The person who uses it can neither see nor feel it. What is it?

Answer for last week by

They have six daughters which makes the total count to eight people including Mr and Mrs Mustard. Then the riddle says each daughter has one brother. Therefore since they are siblings, they all share the same brother meaning they only have one brother.

## STORY TIME

When Reb Aryeh Leib, who was known as the Shpoler Zeide, had been rebbe for three years, there was a terrible famine in the area. The tzadik (righteous person), whose love for the poor, the needy, the widowed was unbounded, felt compelled to provide for the thousands affected by the disaster. He could neither eat nor sleep, and his heartache was so great that for weeks he couldn't bring himself to eat anything more than bread and tea. As the famine spread to the furthest provinces of Russia, rebbes from the starving communities wrote to Shpola, begging Reb Aryeh Leib to raise a storm in the Heavens, and beg that the deadly decree be rescinded. Who, if not he, a tzadik, known to work wonders, could accomplish this? The Shpoler Zeide, on his part, wrote to ten of the greatest tzadikim of the day - Reb Zusya of Hanipoli, Reb Yaakov Shimshon of Shipitovka, Reb Ze'ev of Zhitomir, and others - requesting that they come to Shpola immediately. They soon arrived and were seated at the long table of the Shpoler Zeide, and heard his awesome words: "My masters, I am taking the Alm-ghty to a din Torah, a lawsuit, and you are to serve as the judges. It is true that, according to the law of the Torah, the plaintiff must take his case to the place where the defendant is, but since in this unique case, 'there is no place devoid of His presence,' and since, more particularly, 'wherever ten are assembled the Divine Presence rests,' we will hold the court case here." The holy congregation agreed, and joined in prayer, their fervent supplications battering the Gates of Heaven. The Shpoler Zeide then instructed his aide to announce: "By the order of those gathered here, I hereby proclaim that Reb Aryeh Leib, the son of Rachel, summons the Alm-ghty to a court case which will be duly conducted here in three days." The holy rebbes spent the next three days together, in fasting and prayer, and no one was permitted to interrupt their devotions. On the fourth day, after they had concluded the morning prayers and they were still wrapped in their prayer shawls and adorned by their tefillin, the Shpoler Zeide solemnly signalled his aide to announce that the court case was about to begin." In the name of all the women and children of the Jews of Russia," the tzadik declared, "I hereby state my claim against the Defendant. Why does the Creator of the Universe not provide them with food, thereby preventing their death (G-d forbid) of hunger? Doesn't the Torah itself say, 'For unto Me are the Children of Israel bondsmen; they are My bondsmen'? Do we not have His promise, recorded by the Prophet Ezekiel, that even if His children should someday desire to go in the ways of the nations of the world, that this will never happen? One can draw the conclusion that the Children of Israel are the Alm-ghty's servants for all eternity." In that case, they should, at least, be in the category of Jewish bondsmen. Jewish law teaches that a master is required to provide for the wife and children of his bondsman. Can the Al-mighty violate his own Torah so blatantly?" Now I'm well aware that some clever prosecuting angel will argue in defence of the Creator, saying that these servants are remiss in their service; that they don't serve their Master as well as they should. But to this bogus argument I have two replies: Firstly, where is it written that if a bondsman is lazy and doesn't work properly, his wife and children are too deprived of their sustenance? Secondly, if these servants are lacks in their performance, their Master can fault no one, but Himself. For who else gave each servant an evil inclination whose whole job and purpose it is to drive them to abandon their loyalty and to destroy their desire to serve? Why, I can swear that if this evil inclination, which the Master Himself created, would cease to exist, they would become the most perfect servants possible!" Ten judge-tzadikim consulted their tomes of Torah to search the law for the correct verdict. After the passage of some time, they stood to deliver the unanimous ruling: "This court finds in favour of Reb Aryeh Leib, the son of Rachel. The Alm-ghty is accordingly required, by whatever means at His disposal (and the whole world is His) to provide for the women and children of His People. And may the Heavenly Court above agree and support the verdict of this court in the World Below." The court pronounced its verdict three times. Then the Shpoler Zeide asked to have vodka and refreshments served. The tzadikim said "l'chaim" and ate together in a joyous mood before departing for home. Five days after the momentous verdict had been reached, the government announced a shipment of thousands of tons of grain. Immediately, the grain prices fell and before long, there were ample fresh supplies. For the entire following year, bread was bountiful for all.

## FOOD 4 THE SOUL

Perhaps a person will say, "I cannot fathom an infinite Creator, so why should I attempt to do so?" "And why should I attempt to awaken my heart to show Him love? What can the love of this puny creature provide Him?" "So I will just serve Him in complete surrender, doing that which is to be done, connecting to a will and desire far beyond my own." Such a person may be wise, but he is wrong. Yes, it is absurd, but G-d desires to be grasped by your human mind. Yes, it is inconceivable, but He desires to find a home within the innermost chamber of your heart, no matter how tiny that place may be. For this He created you, so that He could dwell within your world. Serve G-d with all your heart and all your mind—because that too is His unfathomable, unbounded desire.