



Mishpatim – Rejuvenation and Rehabilitation

Rabbi Shmuel Silber (Reprinted from 5778)

And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them. Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge (Exodus 21:1-2)

It is in this week's Parsha, Mishpatim, that God provides the legal foundation upon which to build a moral and ethical society. We are taught how to deal with damages, poverty and finances. We are given the necessary instruction to cultivate a meaningful relationship between man and his fellow. Yet, God teaches us about the *Eved Ivri*, the Jewish servant, first. Why is this the first mitzvah in this section? What is the message contained in this law which sets the tone for that which follows?

Rashi explains, there are two ways in which a Jew becomes a servant. If he steals and isn't able to pay it back, the *Beis Din* (Jewish court) can sell the thief and use the proceeds to repay the victim. Or, *mipnei dochko*, if he is destitute. If a person has no money, no means of financial support, he can choose to sell himself into servitude.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe focuses on the Jew who has stolen and been sold into servitude. The Rebbe builds on this concept and explains: The act of theft represents a moral failure. It is a trespass against a fellow human being. To take something from someone else, to deprive someone of something they have worked for, is a blatant disregard for the dignity of the other. But theft is not only a crime against man, it is also a crime against God. Each person is given a celestially ordained amount of material wealth. We are given what we need in order to accomplish our individual sacred mission in this world. When a person steals, he is making a dramatic statement, "God hasn't given me enough. I will take that which belongs to the other, thereby enriching myself." The act of theft violates the will of God, not only because theft is biblically forbidden, but because it is an indictment of God for having given something to someone else instead of to oneself. Furthermore, the thief feels that he will retain that which he has stolen, even though this act was against the will of God. As such, the thief has transgressed against God and his fellow man. What should we do with this individual? Logic would dictate that we cast him aside, make a pariah of him, and remove him from society. Yet, we do just the opposite. We give him a job and a place to live. His lifestyle must mirror his master's. Whatever the master provides for his own family, he must provide for the servant. We say to this thief, "We will not give up on you. You have made some mistakes, but we still believe you can turn it around. It's not too late. Use this time to rebuild and rehabilitate, use this time to introspect and reflect, use this time to figure out what has gone so wrong, and then find the courage to fix it."

The Rebbe adds one more piece. The laws of the *Eved Ivri*, are not just about the other – they are about each of us. Each of us messes up. We each make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes land us in significant trouble and life difficulty. When we feel we have stolen our potential and squandered it in a variety of fruitless initiatives and bad choices, it is easy to give up. But then we remind ourselves, the thief is sold and rehabilitates himself – we have the ability to do the same. There is an important point to remember: "*Sheysh shanim ya'avod, u'ba'shviis yetzei l'chofshi*, for six years he must work and on the on the seventh he can go free." It can take a long time to turn yourself and your life around. It can take a long time to rehabilitate and rejuvenate. But if we are willing to put in the work – our 7th year, our rehabilitative achievement will come. We can change, we can improve, we can become someone better.

The laws of the *Eved Ivri*, the Hebrew servant, teach us these two valuable lessons; never stop believing in the other, and never stop believing in yourself. No matter how badly my fellow falters, he is never beyond salvation. No matter how severe our mistakes may be, if we work hard, we can rehabilitate and renew. God chooses to place the law of *Eved Ivri* first, for it creates the foundational understanding for how we view the other and how we view ourselves.