



## Parades's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

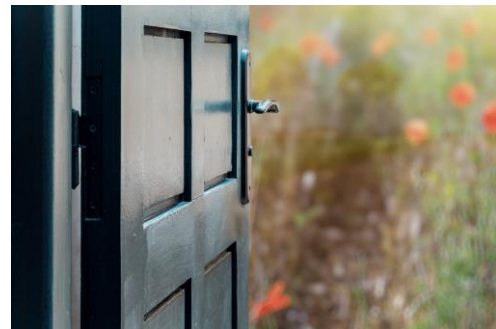
TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

### Mishpatim. Choosing Slavery - The Burden of Freedom

Ironically, our parsha opens with the laws of a Jewish slave. Ironic because Israel have just been freed from slavery in Egypt, and the Torah is already addressing a time in which they own slaves of their own!

It is on this backdrop that we read:

When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh year he shall go free, without payment...  
 If the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to go free," his master shall take him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl ... (21:1-5)



This seems to be saying, every Hebrew man and woman should WANT to be free. If they CHOOSE servitude, their ear is pierced.

The servant is quoted as saying: "I love my master".

The slave prefers slavery!

Who would CHOOSE servitude?

#### Please discuss

- How can this be so?
- Is this a reality in human nature? Do people prefer to be enslaved rather than free?
- Might freedom be an unbearable burden, and some people might prefer a limited, prescribed life?
- Why is his ear pierced specifically at the doorway?

"He is like a prisoner for whom they open the prison gates and so: "Escape! Run for your Life!" and he chooses the supposed comforts of the food and drink within the prison walls. Similarly, this man stands by the open door but doesn't leave." (Kli Yakar)

Here is a man who is, so to speak, nailed to the open doorpost!

I am reminded of the scene, in the movie "The Shawshank Redemption" of an inmate ("Brooksy") who prefers to stay in jail rather than face the challenges of the outside world. Servitude is living in a regimented, closed environment, where success and failure are clear and simple. The free world with its myriad choices is overwhelming.

"...Nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom ... People can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts ... the great difficulty is to say Yes to life." (Giovanni's Room, James Baldwin)

Our parsha then, depicts how freedom can be daunting, intimidating.

- Are we each enslaved to something that we don't want to walk away from, where it is easier to remain in status quo rather than making the change?
- How do people nowadays escape from the unbearable weight of freedom?

So, what does Judaism want? After all, life, freedom is bewildering, dazzling, disorienting! We all need an anchor, a doorpost, a mooring, a structure.

"God said: The door and the doorpost were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and the doorposts and said: "For to Me the children of Israel are slaves," (Lev 25:55) – not be slaves to slaves... and yet this man went and acquired a master for himself! - Let him be pierced before them." (Talmud Kiddushin 22a)

The piercing of the ear is a constant reminder that God prefers human beings to be free; subservient to God but not to other humans.

As for direction, structure, a lifestyle to help us navigate our freedoms, God says: "For to Me the children of Israel are slaves." Judaism provides the framework and guidelines that we need.

"Sefat Emeth asks: Why should the ear be mutilated, since the sin is basically one of action, not of hearing? His answer places the faculty of hearing at the center of the Jewish spiritual enterprise. When the Israelites committed themselves to the covenant saying, "We shall do and we shall hear" they ...signified an aspiration to respond at any moment to God's will... it was not for this that Israel were created. Their destiny is not a slavish robotlike performance of prescribed acts, but a life of passionately "listening" to God" (Dr. Avivah Zornberg. The particulars of Rapture, pg. 308)

Shabbat Shalom!