

## **“Jewish Servants...Born To Serve”**

The Jewish nation was slaves to the Egyptians during their exile.

Intent on demoralizing the Israelites, their brutal captors cruelly subjected them to backbreaking work described as porech, “crushing harshness” (Shemos 1:13). After originally ensnaring them to work, the Israelites had to endure terrible conditions and hardships. Slaves to their Egyptian masters, this tortuous ordeal lasted until Moshe emancipated them as he wrought G-d’s infliction upon the Egyptians with the Ten Plagues.

The redemption celebrated the Jewish nation’s transition from “servants of Pharaoh” to “servants of G-d” as stressed in the opening of the Ten Commandments: “I am Hashem Your G-d Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (Shemos 20:2).

Jewish law deals with an eved Ivrei, Jewish servant. But as evident from how such he is treated, this is a far cry from the general notion of slavery throughout human history until modern times.

No ownership rights exist over our Jewish brethren. No Jew can subjugate himself to a human master. The circumstances of his enslavement can only ever be temporary; it is never a permanent state. He was not born to serve you. Typically, a Jewish servant works for six years and goes free in the seventh. And even if he voluntarily remains enslaved thereafter, he nevertheless goes free in the Yoivel, Jubilee Year.

While in the capacity of a servant, his master cannot demean him in any way whatsoever. His dignity must be protected at each and every occasion. The Jewish servant cannot be ordered to perform tasks that are unnecessary except to keep him gainfully employed. Nor can he aggrieve him.

He can never forget that he is, in actual fact, his brother. The Jewish servant has met upon unfortunate circumstances in the ever turning wheel of fortune. And this is an opportunity to bestow kindness upon his brethren. But the master should not ever think that he is superior in any respect. On the contrary, the halacha imposes parity between Jewish master and Jewish servant. So if there is only one pillow in the house, the Jewish servant gets it.

The Jewish people experienced first-hand what it meant being a nation of slaves to Pharaoh. And they are sensitive not to inflict the harsh labor of Egypt onto a servant in their care. In this regard, it is interesting to note the identical usage of the word porech, “harsh labor” used to describe both the Egyptian oppression and how not to behave to the Jewish servant.

Actually, all servitude has a higher calling.

Every human being has one and only one Master – the Ribbonei shel Olam, “Master of the Universe”. Insofar as the Jew is given the epithet oved Hashem, “servant of G-d”, his Creator reminds him “You are my servant – you are not a servant of a servant” (Bava Metzia 10a).

We were born to serve Him – and only Him. He is the only Master that we must answer to.

(Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene)