

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 26: Slavery

by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue



The mention of slavery conjures up tragic images of dehumanisation, exploitation and abuse. The idea of owning another person reviles us, and for good reason. In many parts of the world, traditional slavery

sadly continues to exist. Although slavery has been illegal in the UK since 1807, modern slavery is a growing problem, with impoverished workers, often from Eastern European or Asian countries, brought to the UK with the promise of work. Their new employers then take their passports away, in order to trap them with fabricated debts and the fear of repercussions if they try to escape.

Tragically, many of these people do not even realise they are victims, as the pitiful pay they receive and the appalling conditions in which they are kept are often similar to what they experienced back home. It is a growing and lucrative form of organised crime. Whereas a slave in the 19th Century American mid-South would have cost around £30,000 in today's money, modern criminal gangs can acquire a slave for the price of a cheap plane ticket.

Despite our moral aversion to such practises, the Torah at least appears to permit something which may at first seem akin to slavery. Many note that such arrangements were an essential part of ancient farming economies. Even in contemporary times, it is a sobering thought that much of the wealth and infrastructure of modern Western countries was built on exploitation of others. Yet surely the end cannot justify the means? Although the Torah describes at length the suffering and anguish of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt, the first laws given after the redemption from Egypt and the giving of the Torah openly discuss the regulations of keeping a servant (Shemot 21:1-11).

The resolution to this conundrum requires understanding the nature of servitude

sanctioned by the Torah and the laws which detail the responsibilities towards the worker. Given that exploitative slavery was widespread in Biblical times, the fact that the Torah established legal conditions to ownership was itself revolutionary. Both the Written and Oral Torah deal extensively with the laws pertaining to the master, which include a variety of laws to protect the worker from exploitation.

These include, but are not limited to, fixed financial repercussions if the servant is physically harmed and the servant may not be given unfair or demeaning labour. In addition, the master must provide food and lodgings equal to his own, offer daily breaks and is forbidden to work the servant on Shabbat. There are in fact so many responsibilities placed on the master that the Talmud comments that: "Anyone who acquires a servant, acquires a master over himself" (Kiddushin 20b).

In fact, what the Torah and subsequent halachic texts appear to describe is more akin to indentured servitude, the act of contracting servants to work in order to pay off a debt, but who retain their rights and dignity through rigorous legislation.

Yet despite what appear to be the first employment laws, perhaps the very notion of owning another person seems at odds with the concept of God creating all human beings equally in the Divine image (Bereishit 1:27). The next article will look at why the Torah allowed such an arrangement in the first place.

