

# Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 27: Ethical Issues in Tanach 5: Slavery II

by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue



It is hard to imagine the extent to which one individual can manipulate and mistreat another human being to gain power and control over them. Slavery was the world's first global industry. One could argue

that much of the wealth, infrastructure and success enjoyed by Western liberal democracies over the last few hundred years was built on the back of exploiting others.

While the transatlantic slave trade was established in the mid-17th century, slavery had been widespread in many cultures for thousands of years. It was only in 1807 that the British government passed an Act of Parliament abolishing the slave trade throughout the British Empire. Yet just one year later, in 1808, an English Bible was published in London for "The Use of the Negro Slaves", highlighting themes of submission while omitting any parts that referenced freedom, including the entire Exodus story. Slavery continued in the British colonies until its final abolition in 1838.

The previous article discussed the nature of "slavery" sanctioned by the Torah, much more akin to indentured servitude, and highlighted the many laws in the Written and Oral Torah which both protected the basic rights of the servant and promoted their well-being and general welfare.

The servitude sanctioned by the Torah was certainly revolutionary in Biblical times. Yet Rabbi Dr. Nachum Rabinovitch, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Ma'ale Adumim, believes that it should not be considered morally ideal. His argument hinges on the fact that, as humanity has developed and matured, our moral sensitivities have become more compassionate towards individual freedoms. This moral progression is evident in many parts of the world, especially the West. Rabbi Rabinovitch sees it as part of the Torah's true intention for mankind,

stating that: "the abolition of slavery is simply a partial realisation of the exalted ideals taught by the Torah" (*Edah Journal* 3:1 p. 12). In other words, while the Torah may have sanctioned servitude under strict conditions which protected the rights of every servant, God's ultimate objective was to wean mankind off the need to own other people in order to do their work for them.

Although in contemporary times we cannot permit something the Torah has already forbidden, we are not only allowed, but compelled, to distance ourselves from practises sanctioned by the Torah that were revolutionary in their time, but are no longer acceptable. There are many similar examples of practises that the Torah permitted which are either no longer practised, or which have subsequently become forbidden by force of rabbinic law.

Other morally debatable acts, such as capital punishment, are routinely practised today. Given that 31 states, the Federal Government, the U.S. military and many non-Western countries execute criminals, the fact that the Torah sanctions capital punishment may not seem especially outrageous. While punishment for capital crimes such as murder are consistent with some Western practices, the Torah includes other seemingly minor practices. The next article will scrutinise these cases.

