

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Mishpatim

It seems like eons ago, though it was only sixteen years. I was preparing my senior sermon for Rabbinical school and struggled with the whole notion of slavery in the bible. Certainly, we were not slaves in Egypt, not as we use the term in American history. Certainly, there was oppression woven into the story. More certainly, Israel is not depicted as being remotely equal in status to any Egyptian. There are, however, hints as to our status. In the wilderness, the people are screaming for food. They have all of their cattle and sheep, but they want quail – quail such as they ate in Egypt. They must have seen themselves as part of the Egyptian world, adopting Egypt's Gods as their own (the Golden Calf). More telling, though, is that upon leaving Egypt, the text does not say that they took or stole the jewels and gold of their Egyptian neighbors, but that they borrowed them. No slaveholder in our country's history would have "loaned" his gold to a slave he owned. That the Torah refers to the Egyptians as our "neighbors" speaks volumes, as well. Even later on, under Solomon, we were conscripted into "slave labor," but it was more like a tax paid by time and labor rather than dollars, for workers had several months on and several months off.

All this I understood. I posited that the slavery described in this week's Torah portion was more like indentured servitude than slavery. Once a term of years had been served, the "slave" had the option of becoming part of the family household or going free. If he chose to go free, he was given a living stipend and perhaps even land by his "master." Servitude was to pay off indebtedness. Building upon all of this, my ultimate thesis was simple; to remain in servitude was a transgression. I did not deal with the slave holder or the creditor; rather I argued that "slavery" to mankind was the transgression, as we are bound only to serve God. The rest of the details are fuzzy (I am getting old), but I got the point across to the satisfaction of my professors.

As I read through this week's portion and thought about that sermon, I realized that I missed a most important detail. The Torah was not talking about servitude it was talking about the attitudes of servitude. While the entirety of the Torah speaks to the matters of t'shuvah – turning and atoning, we spend very little effort or time on the mentality of the slave holder. Surely in this process of holding people's lives in our hands (even if just to pay off a debt), we have to think about what wanting, possessing, and releasing this power must do to a man's soul. Marian Anderson responded to those who wanted to keep her from performing on the national stage by saying, "As long as you keep a person down, some part of you has to be down there to hold him down, so it means that you cannot soar as you otherwise might." Immediately before Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of his egalitarian "Dream" for humanity, Shoah survivor and civil rights leader Rabbi Joachim Prinz told us (at that same rally), "In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, He created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity." Even while the Torah cites examples of where it may allow us to hold people in servitude, one must believe that it is never the morally superior answer to the question of indebtedness, never mind dignity. That the Torah commands us to release people after a period of six years of servitude, giving them income and sustenance, gives us a hint as to the text's ultimate position, keeping a door open for one to argue with the text. Making

someone bow in servitude denies his/her dignity, and in fact is more damaging than having taken their life.

At least in our part of the world, we have relegated “slavery” to a dishonored place in our history books. While this may be true, we have hardly relegated the mentality that fed it to the books. Whether it is the way in which we cater to those of greater wealth, ignoring those without, or the way we engage or fail to engage people because of their faith or skin color, either way, we create artificial standards that give greater dignity to those who have what we want over those who don’t. Torah was not written as a disjoint document. No piece of it can be segregated from its relevance to the rest of the document. A horrid statement has to be read in context of all other statements. This way, the Torah creates conversation that helps move the world forward.

Tied to this Torah portion of only three chapters are 53 mitzvot that remind us to treat everyone as equals. Holiness is tied not to ritual, but to the spirit with which we engage each other. Amongst the commands to preserve justice, not to spread false rumors or take or give bribes, are the commitments against subverting the rights of the needy or oppressing the stranger. The last one is so important, for we have all been strangers somewhere in our lives. We have been the outsider, the one forced to bow in servitude to the reigning powers that control our lives. In this statement we find the adjuration against ever even holding slaves. We have been there – each Passover we affirm that it was not just our ancestors – it was all of us. We remember the plight of servitude and are not allowed to impose it on another. The Torah’s permission to take one into servitude is intended to make one who pays attention scream at the very injustice – it is an invitation for conversation. Our problem though, is that too few of us pay attention, and some even use the text to justify the exclusive behavior. We have a moral obligation to take care of our neighbors, to make sure that we play by the rules that recognize the dignity everyone shares, not just those we include in our own group. Shabbat Shalom.