

The Jewish liturgical year contains a number of special Shabbatot that coincide with our holidays and have their own specific readings. This week we celebrate the first of the four Shabbatot around Purim and Pesach. Shabbat Shekalim is named for the maftir reading (Exodus 30:11-16), which commands every Israelite man from the age of 20 upward, rich and poor alike, to contribute a half-shekel toward the communal sacrifices. Revolutionary in its time although it clearly places a hardship on the less wealthy, it ensures the equality and dignity of all men. Men yes, but we're still working on equality for women. And speaking of equality, although the laws and statutes introduced in our parashah mandate compassion and justice for all, the beginning is painful reading for us today. These newly freed slaves themselves owning slaves, and Israelite slaves at that? But this is hardly as preposterous as it seems. First of all, slavery in its many forms was simply an intrinsic part of their culture. Then, we must examine the word עֶבֶד (*eved*), which does mean slave, but also denotes servant in all its many connotations, which include indentured servant, household servant, worker, court official, subject, subsidiary nation, army officer or soldier, and last but not least, Levitical singer and prophet, i.e., servant of HaShem. Indeed, our covenantal role is to be *avdei Adonai*, servants of HaShem. The verb derived from this root simply means to work. In other words, the "Hebrew slaves" in verses 21:2-21 are actually indentured workers, and the Torah limits their time of service to six years. In his *Mishneh Torah*, a compilation of Rabbinic law, Maimonides divides them into two categories: those whom the court has sold without their consent, and those who voluntarily sell themselves. The Torah narrowly defines the former as thieves who are unable to pay restitution for their crimes: "If he has no money, he shall be sold for his theft." (22:2) All others are debtors who have no recourse but to work in order to pay off their debts, and girls whose indigent fathers are forced to sell them into servitude. Having experienced slavery the way it was practiced all over their world, the Israelites are ready for a new perspective based on the premise that all humans are created *b'tzelem Adonai* (in the image of HaShem – Genesis 1:26). In radical departure from the prevailing notion of slaves as mere objects to be disposed of at will, the Torah creates clear rules for equitable treatment. But then, in stark contradiction, a seemingly harsh rule: "If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children. I shall not go free,' his master shall bring him to the judges, and he shall bring him to the door or to the doorpost, and his master shall bore his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him forever." (21:4.6) This obviously troubled our sages as well, since they discussed it at length, concluding that based on the ruling in Deuteronomy 15:12 that also frees an Israelite maidservant after six years, the wife given to the servant is Canaanite and thus subject to other laws. However, they do add restrictions: "If he was unmarried originally when he came in, his master is not allowed to give him against his will a Canaanite handmaid with the object of raising slaves." (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 21) The midrash also discusses the ear piercing ritual for Israelite slaves who want to keep their families intact: "That ear which heard on Mount Sinai, 'Do not steal,' and yet its owner went and stole and was therefore sold as a slave – let it be pierced. And in the case of him who sold himself from destitution, having committed no theft, ... That ear which heard on Mount Sinai, (Lev. 25:55) 'To me the children of Israel are servants,' and yet its owner went and procured for himself another master – let it be pierced." And the door and doorposts were chosen because they were "eyewitnesses in Egypt when I (HaShem) passed over the lintel and the two doorposts, freeing Israel from slavery." (Talmud Tractate Kiddushin 22b) The tractate goes on to stipulate equality in food, drink, and sleeping quarters, "Anyone who acquires a Hebrew slave is considered like one who acquires a master for himself, because he must be careful that the slave's living conditions are equal to his own." Canaanite slaves do not fare so well, unfortunately. Tractate Kiddushin continues by discussing the permanence of their enslavement, as well as various means of acquisition, which, in the case of women, includes sexual intercourse, (seen in certain circumstances as benefitting both parties!) Although our parashah establishes rules of restitution for injured slaves, and for freeing slaves whose master has destroyed an eye or a tooth, it hardly establishes true equality for all. But with its emphasis on compassion for all, including aliens, it is still an important milestone. Relegating the Hebrew slave who wishes to remain with his Canaanite wife and family to permanent servitude at least allowed them to be together in relative economic stability. Throughout history poverty and ensuing debt have been a tragic reality that can strike anyone at any time – even today, in the wake of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, natural disasters, and climate change. And egregious forms of slavery still exist in many parts of our world. There are no simple answers to this complexity of problems, but the system of laws in our parashah introduces valuable, timeless guidelines for safeguarding the dignity of all human beings.

Shabbat shalom!