

Our Sidra begins with the law of <sup>אִשָּׁה עֲבֵדָה</sup>, the Hebrew bondsman who became a slave to his fellow Israelite either because he was apprehended stealing and was unable to pay back the principle and the fine, and hence must work off his debt; or who, because of his own poverty, sold himself into slavery as a way of providing for his basic needs. This Hebrew bondsman must serve until the Sabbatical year, that is, for a maximum of six years. But, the Torah tells us, at the end of this period he has the option of remaining with his master until the Jubilee year, a maximum of 49 or 50 years. It is interesting to note the contempt the Torah has for the man who chooses servitude, for the one who scorns freedom and prefers the security of slavery. The man who is too comfortable with what he is doing, too satisfied where he is, who refuses to accept the challenges and responsibilities of freedom, must undergo humiliation.

והגישו אצלו את האלהים, והגישו את הצלח את הגמול, וצדק  
אצלו את אמתו בחרצו וצדקו וצדקו וצדקו.

The master must take him to the court, and in its presence, bring the slave to the door-post, and with an awl bore a hole through his ear to the door-post. Thus he becomes his slave "forever," i.e., until the Jubilee year.

Consider this man who was originally sold into slavery as a thief or, according to others, who sold himself out of poverty. For some years, up to six, he has proven more than adequate to his task, he has found his niche in life. At the end of this period he announces: *Yankel veltene, yaltene waltene*, I love my master and my wife and my children. He is a loyal worker, a loving husband, and a good father. Yet the Torah legislates this humiliation for him and reproves him. Why? Because of the three words that he appends to this statement of love: *'eben l'et le*, I do not want to go free. And therefore he must undergo the rite of the boring of the ear.

Why must this be done with the מזוזות, the doorpost? There are many interpretations. Rashi quotes one on behalf of Rabbi Simeon who says that the מזוזות serve as witnesses. For when the Israelites were yet in Egypt, they were commanded to place blood on the doorpost as a sign that אֵלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה, Jews know only one Master, and that is God; none other. The doorpost was, then, a symbol of the rejection of slavery. This man, in opting for slavery, has thus rejected the freedom that God granted the Israelites when He



of work or entertainment, he has nothing to do; and if he has nothing to do, there is nothing to be. Without these external stimulæ, demands, duties, and functions, he becomes suddenly aware of the gaping void in his own soul, the existential vacume that fills him with dread and anxiety. Take away these external distractions, the telephone calls, the little tasks, the forms of entertainment, and it is like peeling an onion -- ultimately, nothing is left.

This is my major objection to children who over-indulge in television, which for most of us is a losing battle, although not altogether lost. It is not so much because of the violence and the sex on television, though that gets worse month by month. It is not so much because of the inanity and silliness of television, because there are occasionally some very good programs. It is not because it disturbs homework and is the source of *מחלוקת*, although it certainly is that. It is more because of the feeling that parents and children have: if not for these programs, what then will the child do? It is the last resort for developing and maturing young people, to distract themselves and prevent themselves from developing an inner life. It is an electronic crutch for spiritual and psychological cripples, as if without television a young person cannot read or draw or walk or exercise or study or think or talk, instead of shouting. *מלבד זה אין אדם חופשי אלא האדם של תורה*, the only truly free man is the man of Torah.

So, to be yourself is to be free. To allow your inner life to atrophy, is a sign of *מלצות* or servitude. To choose slavery is to abandon selfhood, to rely upon others and live off the material, emotional, social, spiritual, and psychological crumbs that fall from the tables of others.

Hence, the door or *שף* is the symbol of waiting on others, their going out and coming in, and knowing full well that no one will stop there on the threshold! The door is a symbol of servitude because a slave must rely upon those coming in to give him company and validity and society, a compliment and a "thank you"; and on their going out to give him relief and respite and rest and privacy.

He himself is a "threshold man" -- neither here nor there, neither in nor out; or, better, both in and out, but never himself. Like the threshold on the door -- which is considered outside by the insiders, and inside by the outsiders -- the slave is everything and anything, but he is not his own man. And the Torah has contempt and pity and scorn for a person who is everything but

but not himself. Hence, his gallant statement

אני אוהב את אדוני ואיני רוצה להיפטר, "I love my master and my wife and my children," is vitiated by a concluding clause, ואלוהי יצילני, "I will not go free." His love is no love, his loyalty is not loyalty, his family attraction worthless. He is not an authentic man.

Indeed, this is perhaps exactly what the midrash quoted by Rashi meant. When the Israelites were in Egypt, God told them to smear the blood on the doorpost, וְהָיָה לְאֵימֹתֶיךָ, "it shall be for you for a sign." And the Rabbis added:

וְהָיָה לְאֵימֹתֶיךָ, it will be a sign to you, not to others. God's angel did not need the sign of blood to know which household to skip when smiting the first-born; a God who knows everything can know that too. It was necessary to teach the Israelites a lesson: you are now leaving slavery and you must get it out of your system. You must no longer be threshold people. You must learn how to be yourselves, even if it means wandering in the cruel and perilous desert -- but not waiting upon and relying upon others. And the bondsman who is now willing to forego such freedom, must have the awl pierce his ear attaching him to the doorpost, as if to say: you are no longer a real man, you are a threshold man, a man who only lives by virtue of others and is neither in nor out, never a man for himself.

Perhaps all of this is summed up in a quaint midrash which is still found in manuscript (quoted by R. Kasher in his מגן אברהם), the מגן אברהם. According to this מגן אברהם, the mezuzah is interpreted not as a doorpost, but as a modern word indicates, the scroll which we attach to the mezuzah. מגן אברהם (מגן אברהם)

The slave's ear is bored to the mezuzah because the mezuzah has 248 letters in its writing on the parchment, and this slave is one who sinned with all his 248 organs when he opted for slavery. What the Midrash means to teach us that it is not just his labor and service, not just the work of his hand and his feet, that a slave forfeits to his master when he is a slave. It includes all of him -- the vision of his eyes, the tilt of his head, the strength of his spine, even the venting of his spleen, certainly the thoughts on his mind, and above all, his heart and his soul, his נפש.

So slavery is not only a matter of contract and ownership, but a spiritual condition, an attitude, an awareness within.

Our is a generation that has known war all its life, that



has heard of and experienced slavery and fought against it. We have been promised revolution and emancipation by liberation movements of various kinds. But we have been disappointed in all. Some of them held aloft great dreams, and they soured, they never came true. Still others extended the concept of liberation to opening the sewers within the human soul, interpreting liberation as the freedom to flaunt in public the demons within that ought always remain incarcerated and never exposed -- hence, "gay liberation," lack of inhibition, raging obscenity and pornography. We are less liberated than we ever were before. For us, the *שער* is the symbol of the doors to be closed on false prophets and to be opened to the world of Torah, for *מִן הַשַּׁעַר יִשְׁכַּח הָאִשָּׁרִי*, only thereby can we be free.

For the man of Torah and faith has opened a door to his own inner life, and there has discovered untold riches.

*וְהָיָה שַׁעַר הַיְיָ מִכְשָׁל וְהָיָה לְבָרִיךְ הַיֵּשֶׁב בָּהּ*, this is the door or the gate to the Lord himself; let the righteous enter it.