

Parsfiat Behar 5771

HARD TO KICK THE HABIT

A legacy of Cham's mistreatment of his father, No'ach – who responded by issuing a harsh curse against his son's progeny – is the long-term enslavement of the Cana'anites (Cham's descendants) to the nation of Shem (Cham's brother). A part of this legacy is manifest in this week's *parshah*, which discusses the institution known as "*eved Cana'ani*" (Cana'anite slave). While the retention of such individuals is sanctioned, their mistreatment is not (and, in some instances, leads to their freedom).

There are situations wherein one may keep a Jewish slave, as well ("*eved Ivri*"). For example, a Jew who is down on his luck may actually sell himself to another Jew, wherein he enters into a formal slave/master relationship. Although officially termed an "*eved*," there are serious limitations on the master's authority. The Torah in this week's *parshah* emphasizes the extreme caution one must exercise regarding his *eved Ivri* (over and above the fair treatment he must accord his standard *avadim* [slaves]). Thus, the verse states: "You shall retain them (referring to an *eved Cana'ani*) as *avadim*; but concerning your brothers, B'nei Yisrael (an *eved Ivri*)... you must not impose on him harsh labor" (*Vayikra* 25:46).

There is a difficulty with this directive, though. It was actually just mentioned – word for word – just a few verses back. Verse 43 also stated (concerning the *eved Ivri*), "You must not impose on him harsh labor"; why, then, was it repeated?

"GUESTIMATION"

The answer can be derived from a very different topic, dealt

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with in the Mishnah in Avos (*1:16*), which states:

רבן גמליאל היה אומר... אל תרבה לעשר אַמְדוּת.

"Rabban Gamaliel would say: Do not make it a practice to separate tithes through estimation."

Rabban Gamaliel speaks of a normal tendency that arises regarding the obligation to separate a tenth of one's crops. For simplicity's sake, we choose an example of Farmer Bob and his apples. Upon discovering a yield of ninety-three apples, Farmer Bob is somewhat dismayed. "I almost wish there were only ninety," he declares. "That'd be easy – just separate nine for the Levite. Now I have to deal with fractions. Never was good at them fractions," he observes. And so, to avoid the prospect of slicing and measuring (to arrive at an exact 10% figure), Farmer Bob decides to just separate ten whole apples, figuring that this way he's playing it safe. Unfortunately for him, it was just such an endeavor that Rabban Gamaliel sought to decry.

But this itself seems somewhat perplexing: what, indeed, is wrong with Farmer Bob's approach? After all, he definitely provided *at least* one-tenth; even added some for good measure. What could possibly be wrong with simply rounding up?

Providing much insight on all of the issues above, the Chassid Ya'avetz (*Avos, ibid.*) explains that – truth be told – there is nothing inherently wrong with tithing through estimation. Rabban Gamaliel was warning against making this tactic a habitual practice. Once one gets used to imprecision, he will introduce this strategy to other areas as well. In other words, he will develop a general tendency toward laxity, which will end up corrupting other facets of his Torah observance.

This notion is also manifest in the *avadim* issue. We

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
שׁוֹלֵם בֶּן מַרְדְּכַי ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives
to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

mentioned previously that no maltreatment of *avadim* is sanctioned, no matter which kind. A heightened level of care, however, is mandated regarding an *eved Ivri*, as the verse states (*first in v. 43*): “You must not impose on him harsh labor.” A few verses later, the Torah turns to the topic of *eved Cana’ani*, where the laws governing his employment are comparatively less strict. Once a relaxation of standards was mentioned (*in v. 46*) regarding the *eved Cana’ani*, however, there exists the danger of habituation. Fearful that he may extend these relaxed standards to his *eved Ivri* (i.e., he may violate the imperative to treat the *eved Ivri* with heightened sensitivity), the Torah felt it necessary to immediately reiterate the injunction (*in v. 46*).

Both of these examples (tithing by guesswork and the *avadim* issue) serve to highlight the important notion that one’s actions can have a substantial impact on his inner being. By repeatedly engaging in certain activities, an individual can develop some rather undesirable habits. Such tendencies can at times become internalized to a frightening extent.

THE DYBBUK OF KELM

One glaring illustration of just such a deeply imbedded propensity was on display in a well-known incident of circa one hundred years ago. While this remarkable account really deserves more complete treatment in and of itself (another time, perhaps), we present here the minimal details that directly relate to our subject:

The incident possesses all of the “standard” elements of such encounters. After the passing of a certain extremely wicked man, not only was his wretched soul denied access to Gan Eden, but he was barred even from Gehinom (as the sufferings of Gehinom purge the soul of its iniquities, rendering it eligible for eventual entry into Gan Eden). As such, his soul was forced to wander, endlessly pursued and tormented by angels of retribution. For these wandering souls, there is only one method to attain even temporary relief: to enter into the body of a living person (in the process, causing intense discomfort to the “host”). While taking refuge inside, the angelic agents are prevented from inflicting more damage. In this particular case, the “*dybbuk*” (disembodied soul taking “possession” of a living victim)

invaded and incapacitated a woman in the European town of Kelm. Before it was eventually evicted from the woman’s body, the soul communicated with those who witnessed the event and supplied many revelations.

When R’ Eliyahu Lopian (d. 1970) spoke of this incident to his disciples (having heard it directly from the father of the woman involved), he stressed one point in particular. Much to the dismay of the individuals present, the soul, when communicating, would liberally resort to extremely unclean language. It was quite shocking that someone in his position would not yet have learned his lesson!

But R’ Eliyahu used this phenomenon as a “teachable moment.” Obviously, amongst his many other flaws, this individual had developed this habit during his lifetime. And so ingrained had it become in his soul, that he still could not eradicate this trait – long after his worldly journey had ended (*Lev Eliyahu, vol. 1, p. 31*).

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