



He Has Acquired a Master for Himself Parshas Mishpatim

Charlie was a young Moroccan, a sensitive man with an innocent appearance. He came to Armentier, France, directly from Morocco. Like all his friends, he felt a desire to taste freedom. He was with a group of refugees, owning no possession of their own, without parents and no real support. My uncle, Rabbi Yisrael David Neivner OB" M, welcomed them all into his Yeshiva. He spent a lot of time with them, educating them in the ways of Judaism. One day my uncle noticed that Charlie was absent. It turned out that he had spent a night out on the town, he had tried to break into a liquor store, and was subsequently arrested. My uncle did his utmost to have him released, but to no avail. The local police decided to make an example of him.

I told this story at a convention which was recently held by the Israel Prison Service on the topic of punishment methods.

"And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them"¹ – I quoted from our weekly Parsha. Our sages teach us that the letter Vav in Hebrew², added before a word, in this context, means "and" – "**And** these are the ordinances", as an addition to what was previously mentioned. Here, we are taught that this section, which discusses the laws of a Hebrew slave, is related to the previous section which discusses the laws of the construction of the altar. The previous section ends with the verse: "And you shall not ascend with steps upon My altar, so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it."³ Rashi comments on this verse: "Now these matters are a *Kal Vachomer*, a fortiori conclusion, that if concerning these stones which have no intelligence to object to their humiliation, the Torah said that because they are necessary, you shall not behave toward them in a humiliating manner. Your friend, who is created in the image of your Creator and who does object to being humiliated, how much more must you be careful not to embarrass him!".

Our Parsha, which discusses a variety of laws, commences with the laws of a Hebrew slave, and is a direct extension of last week's Parsha which concluded with the issue of being meticulous about respecting one's companion. This teaches us about the proper attitude toward the Hebrew slave.

"He who acquires a slave is (in essence) acquiring a master for himself"⁴ – This is what we are taught by our sages, and they elaborate: "The slave shall be equal to you in food and drink, that you should not eat white bread and he black bread, you drink old wine and he new wine,

you sleep on a feather bed and he on straw". This issue is taken to the extent that Tosfos teach us that if the master owns only one pillow, he is obligated to give it to the slave, and he himself must do without one.

"Who is this Hebrew slave? A leader, a rabbi?", I asked. "He is only a thief who was caught and sold into slavery because he could not afford to return what he stole. Even so, the Torah teaches us – "For it is good for him with you"⁵ – you must respect him and do your best to ensure his comfort, and while he is under your ownership, you are obligated to sustain his wife and children as well.



"We have gathered here", I continued, "To address the issue of the penal code. Let us view the Torah's opinion on it. Why has someone gone out and committed a crime? Has he lost his morality? He has come to it only because he lacked the proper love and appreciation and felt empty inside".

The Torah teaches us how to reform a lowly thief into a properly functioning member of society, who works and enjoys the fruits of his efforts – we do so by giving him the pillow from beneath our heads. That is the correct course of action. "Let's not seek methods of isolation and food deprivation", I called out, "The Torah presents to us a unique method of behavior correction, the true method which we must follow".

This teaching served as my guideline the first time I entered the Shatah Prison forty years ago. The convicts confessed that they encountered love and warmth for the first time in their lives, only when they met me. Only thus we can turn a slave into a master.

In some ways I was inspired by my uncle. During those years he worked tirelessly to save as many souls as he could. We based the Migdal Ohr – Shaked – rehabilitation through religion program on this concept. The program has been active for decades, working for the convicts and their rehabilitation.

My uncle hired lawyers to represent Charlie. They explained that he had suffered many hardships throughout his life, with no parental guidance, and was now struggling with adjustment issues. My uncle vouched for him. Charlie returned physically and emotionally wounded, but in time healed, becoming an exemplary citizen.

¹ Shmot 21,1.

² "צאלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפניהם."

³ Shmot, 20, 23.

⁴ Tractate Kidushin, 20a.

⁵ Dvarim, 15, 16.