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The Jewish Slave: “His Master Shall Pierce His Ear”

A note on the translation: Great effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while at the same time striving for readability. However, the translation carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists. Feedback is always appreciated!

1. Regarding a Hebrew slave who declares that he does not wish to be freed in the seventh year, our *parsha* states: “His master shall pierce his ear with an awl.”¹ Rashi comments: “This refers to his right ear. Or perhaps this refers to his left ear? The Torah uses the word ‘ear’ here, and it uses the word ‘ear’ in another passage, in order to make the following analogy:² It says here ‘His master shall pierce his ear with an awl,’ and it says regarding one afflicted with *tzara’as*³, ‘the cartilage of his right ear.’⁴ Just as there, the Torah refers to his right ear, so here it is the right ear.”⁵

The simple meaning of Rashi is as follows. The verse states, “His master shall pierce his **ear**...,” using the singular form, without specifying the right or the left ear. Therefore, Rashi explains that our verse refers to the right ear, by use of the above analogy.

Still, this raises a question. Rashi is somewhat verbose in his commentary, when he says, “Or perhaps this refers to his left ear?” This phrase seems to be unnecessary, and its inclusion implies that it would be more logical for our verse to be referring to the **left** ear, but Rashi is **forced** to explain our verse as referring to the right ear, because of the analogy. What is the reason for Rashi’s *preference* for interpreting the verse as referring to the left ear?

2. Rashi continues his commentary (in the same passage): “And why was the ear chosen to be pierced rather than any other organ of the body? Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said, ‘The ear that heard on Mount Sinai, “You shall not steal,”⁶ and yet he went and stole -- let it be pierced! Or in the case of he who sold himself into slavery, The ear that heard on Mount Sinai, “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants,”⁷ and yet he went and acquired a master for himself -- let it be pierced!’ Rabbi Shimon would expound this verse like a *chomer*.⁸ ‘In what respect are door and doorpost different from all other objects in the house that they should be singled out for this purpose? Hashem said: The door and the

¹ Shemos 21:6

² This type of analogy is called a *gezeira shava*, whereby details provided in one verse are applied to another verse on the basis of the two verses sharing a similar word.

³ *Tzara’as* is a spiritual affliction with physical symptoms, affecting the skin.

⁴ Vayikra 14:14 The passage there refers to the purification process of the *metzora*, one afflicted with *tzara’as*.

⁵ Rashi on Shemos 21:6 based on Mechilisa

⁶ Shemos 20:13

⁷ Vayikra 25:55

⁸ *Chomer*, commonly translated to mean “a parable,” is explained in Section 8 below as a string of pearls and a pouch of perfume.

doorpost that were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and the two doorposts,⁹ and when I said, “for unto Me the children of Israel are servants”¹⁰ -- servants to Me but not servants of servants, and yet this man went and acquired a master for himself -- let him be pierced in their presence!”¹¹

Several difficulties arise from this passage:

- Rashi’s comment “The ear that heard on Mount Sinai... let it be pierced!” explains why the ear, rather than any other bodily organ, was pierced, but it does *not* explain why specifically the **right** ear is pierced. Since this comment is not related to Rashi’s earlier interpretation of “ear” as the right ear, Rashi should have written these two comments separately, each under its own heading.¹² Certainly, this second comment, dealing with a different issue than the first, should not begin with the connecting word “and”: It should have begun, “Why was the ear chosen...” and not, “And why was the ear chosen....”
- Rashi’s quotation of Rabbi Shimon’s interpretation later in this commentary is even more problematic . It begins with the question, “In what respect are door and doorpost different....” If Rashi’s intention in quoting this exposition is to explain why the Torah specifies the door and doorpost, he should have explained it earlier, under its own heading, on the words, “to the door or to the doorpost,” which appear earlier in this verse. The fact that Rashi does not present this explanation earlier, when those words appear in the verse, demonstrates that there is no difficulty in understanding the plain meaning of the text,¹³ as to why the door and doorpost were chosen. (Rashi is also precise in his choice of words when presenting this comment: “Rabbi Shimon would **expound**¹⁴... in what respect are door and doorpost different...?”) Rashi brings the comment of Rabbi Shimon, not to resolve a difficulty in the plain meaning of the text, but rather as a

⁹ Shemos 12:7 The night before the Exodus, freeing Israel from slavery, Hashem commanded that the blood of the Pesach sacrifice be placed on the doorposts and the lintels of their houses.

¹⁰ Vayikra 25:55

¹¹ Rashi on Shemos 21:6

¹² Rashi begins each of his comments by quoting one or more words of the verse, known as the *dibbur hamaschil*. The Rebbe suggests that since each of these comments comes to explain a different issue, they should each have their own *dibbur hamaschil*.

¹³ In the original, “*p’shuto shel mikra*,” often referred to as “*pshat*.” Rashi states in his commentary to Bereishis 3:8: “I have come only to give the plain meaning of the Torah.” When the plain meaning is clearly understood, Rashi does not comment.

¹⁴ In the original, “*doresh*.” This term refers to the *drash* method of commentary, which is more analytical than *pshat*, in which the words of a verse are used as a platform to express an extrinsic idea.

continuation of Rashi's previous explanation. We must understand -- what is the connection between Rabbi Shimon's exposition and Rashi's previous comment?

- There are several difficulties with the reasoning Rashi brings for piercing a slave's ear: "The ear that heard... 'You shall not steal,'¹⁵ and yet he went and stole -- let it be pierced! The ear that heard ... 'For unto Me the children of Israel are servants,'¹⁶ and yet he went ... let it be pierced!" The difficulties are as follows:
 - Based on these verses, the slave's ear should be pierced immediately upon entering slavery and thereby violating these commandments. Why is his ear pierced only after six years, and only after "the slave declares..."¹⁷ that he does not wish to be freed?
 - Why does the Torah teach this law of piercing only with respect to a thief who, unable to pay, is sold into slavery by the Jewish court? The reason Rashi gives for the piercing ("The ear that heard... 'You shall not steal,'¹⁸ and yet he went and stole -- let it be pierced!") applies to any thief, even one who has the ability to repay his theft.
 - The reason for piercing brought by Rashi in this passage applies to all of the Torah's commands.¹⁹ Based on this reasoning, a person violating any law of the Torah should have his ear pierced. Why does the Torah limit the law of piercing to a person who violates the commandments which state, "do not steal," and "for unto Me the children of Israel are servants"?

3. Some further difficulties with Rashi's commentary:

- Why does Rashi bring an additional reason for piercing a slave's ear in the case of one sold by the Jewish court (for violating the prohibition against theft)? Since a slave's ear is pierced only after six years, and after making the **free-will** choice to remain enslaved to his master, a slave who "sells himself" also has his ear pierced, when he has "acquired a master for himself"?²⁰

¹⁵ Shemos 20:13

¹⁶ Vayikra 25:55

¹⁷ Shemos 21:6

¹⁸ Shemos 20:13

¹⁹ Rabbinic tradition teaches that the entire Jewish people heard all of the commandments at Sinai.

²⁰ This question implies that the fundamental reason for piercing the slave's ear is to be his **free-will choice** to remain enslaved **after** six years of slavery, and not, in the case of a thief, the theft itself, which took place **before** her entered slavery, leading his **involuntary** enslavement.

- Regarding one who sells himself into slavery, Rashi writes, “The ear that heard... ‘For unto Me the children of Israel are servants,’²¹ and yet **he went and acquired** a master for himself -- let it be pierced!” This implies that he is punished because **he went and sold himself at the outset**, before the commencement of the period of slavery. Why does Rashi *not* interpret that his ear is pierced for his pronouncement, “I will not go free,” made by the slave **at the conclusion** of six years of slavery, which accords with the plain meaning of the verses?
 - It is a well known principle of Rashi’s methodology that when he quotes from the Talmud or from *midrashim*, he only quotes the words necessary to explain the simple meaning of the text. Based on this principle, Rashi’s commentary poses a couple of difficulties:
 - Rashi quotes the words, “...that heard **on Mount Sinai**.” It would seem sufficient for Rashi to have quoted just the words, “...that heard,” leaving out the reference to Mount Sinai.
 - In introducing Rabbi Shimon’s exposition, Rashi quotes, “Rabbi Shimon would **expound this verse** like a *chomer*.” Why is this introduction necessary?
 - It has been mentioned several times that when Rashi notes the name of the author of a teaching, he does so in order to further clarify an issue in the simple understanding of the text. When Rashi does so, the issue at hand is not overly difficult, but an eager and sharp student will raise the issue, and so Rashi **hints** at the solution to the issue, by mentioning the name of the author. In Rashi’s commentary quoted above, we must determine in the simple meaning of the verse, what issue led Rashi to mention the name of the sages he cites.
4. The explanation of the above difficulties is as follows. Rashi’s primary intent in asking, “And why was the ear chosen to be pierced,” is not to explain why the Torah chose specifically the ear rather than any other organ (because the simple method of interpretation²² does not **require** us to give reasons behind the details of the Torah’s laws). Rather what bothers Rashi is a **difficulty** that arises (in the simple meaning of the verse) in his explanation that “ear” refers to “the right ear,” as will be explained.

We must first make sense of a baffling aspect of this procedure: Why does this slave, whose ear is pierced, deserve such a humiliating punishment, being

²¹ Vayikra 25:55

²² i.e. *pshat*

inflicted with a permanent blemish? After all, we are dealing with a person who stole and is neither able to return the stolen object nor to repay it. Usually, only extreme poverty brings a person to steal, in order to satiate his hunger and that of his family. His poverty causes him to become unhinged, and causes him to transgress against his Creator.²³ Why then should he receive such a severe punishment? (As the verse states: “They will not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his soul, for he is hungry.”²⁴)

The same applies to a person who sells himself into slavery as a result of grueling poverty. The fact that he humiliates himself by accepting the authority of a master demonstrates how severely he suffers privation, to the extent that he is willing to do what goes against human nature.

Similar to the thief described above, such a person should not be punished to such a degree, because **now** he wishes to remain enslaved to his master, (“I will not go free”), for after all he has a reasonable claim: “I love... my **wife** and my **children**...”²⁵ (This refers to the wife who his master gave him, and the children whom she bore to him.) When he goes free, he will be compelled to leave them, as the Torah writes, “The woman and her children shall belong to her master,” and regarding such love is written, “For **He** said and it came about; **He** commanded and it endured.”²⁶

5. Based on all the above, the reason the ear was chosen to be pierced (according to the plain meaning of the verse) is in order to **lessen** the punishment. Understandably, lessening the punishment means piercing specifically the slave’s left ear. Since the left is of lesser importance than the right -- as Rashi comments regarding the left arm: “Your arm²⁷ -- this is the left arm ... the weak arm”²⁸ -- it makes sense that the left ear should be pierced since it is of lesser importance -- and not the right ear, which is of greater importance.

That is why Rashi asks, “Or perhaps this refers to his left ear?” immediately after explaining that “ear” refers to the right ear, because it is more logical for the

²³ Eruvin 41b. In the original, *he’evira oso al da’aso, v’al da’as kono*

²⁴ Mishlei 6:30

²⁵ Shemos 21:5

²⁶ Tehillim 33:9, Shabbos 152a, Which views this verse as allegorically referring to the love Hashem implants in a person for his wife and children.(Rashi). See Tanya ch. 49, which explains that “With all your heart” in the *Shema* relates to a person’s wife and children, “For his heart is by nature bound to them.”

²⁷ Shemos 12:16

²⁸ Rashi on Shemos, 12:9. Regarding the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, the unusual spelling of “your arm” -- “*yad’chah*” with a final letter “*heh*” is understood by Rashi to indicate the weaker, left arm.

Torah to be referring to the left ear. Rashi then goes on to say that the analogy between the ear of the slave and the ear of the *metzora* **forces** him to conclude that it is the right ear that is pierced (which is contrary to simple logic.)

This also answers the question asked later in Rashi, “And why was the ear chosen to be pierced?” The fact that the Torah commanded us to pierce the slave’s **right** ear suggests that the reason the ear was chosen was not to lessen the slave’s punishment, but for another reason. That is why Rashi asks, “Why was the ear chosen to be pierced rather than any other organ of the body?”

Rashi goes on to explain, “The ear that heard on Mount Sinai... -- let it be pierced!” The punishment must specifically be inflicted on the ear, since the ear heard these commandments on Mount Sinai, which the person violated. (Therefore, the right ear, the superior ear, is specifically the one to be pierced.)

6. Rashi goes on explain that the reason the thief, sold into slavery by the Jewish court, is given such a humiliating punishment, is because his ear heard the command, “**You shall not steal**,” at Sinai. (This punishment is **not** given on account of declaring, “I will not go free,” after hearing, “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants.”) An impoverished person who sells himself into slavery receives the same punishment but for a different reason. It is because **he went and sold himself at the outset**, before the commencement of the period of slavery, (and not because of the pronouncement “I will not go free,” that the slave says **at the conclusion** of six years of slavery).

We explained above²⁹ that when a person steals and thereby violates the commandment, “You shall not steal,” he is likely **compelled** by extreme distress, and therefore he should not be punished by being pierced. (That is not to justify his improper conduct, yet we see that not **every** thief is punished by having his ear pierced. Clearly, piercing is not the usual punishment for theft.)

It is understood that a person who feels compelled to steal by his desperate situation is embarrassed by what he has done, and does not want his shameful act of theft publicized. If he is sold into slavery, and the reason for his servitude becomes publicized, it will pain him greatly. As long as he remains enslaved, he feels tremendous shame, and anticipates the moment he will be set free.

²⁹ Section 4.

However, if he does not yearn for freedom, and on the contrary, he **wants** to remain enslaved, he demonstrates that from the outset he felt no shame. It would not bother him if news of his theft and his subsequent enslavement were publicized. His desire to extend his period of servitude reveals his depravity at the outset. He stole not out of desperation, but due to his debased nature. And so, “The ear that heard on Mount Sinai, “You shall not steal,”³⁰ and yet he went and stole -- let it be pierced!”

We can similarly understand the punishment of one who sells himself into slavery due to his **oppressive** situation. He does not deserve to have his ear pierced when he enters slavery; such a punishment is not appropriate, as he feels compelled by desperate circumstances. But if, afterwards, he claims, “I love my master...,”³¹ and he does not want to go free, he demonstrates that slavery is not so onerous for him, and when he sold himself into slavery **at the outset**, he did so not because he felt that he was **compelled** by desperate circumstances but because being enslaved doesn't bother him.

Therefore, although he desires to remain enslaved at the conclusion of six years, for this alone he does not deserve to be punished by having his ear pierced, for he is (at least partially) compelled by his natural love for his wife and children, as mentioned above.³² Nonetheless, when he claims, “I love **my master...**”³³, he demonstrates that he doesn't really mind being a slave, and his desire to continue to subject himself to his master's control demonstrates that from the outset, he did not feel compelled to sell himself into slavery out of desperation; rather, he did so willingly. Thus, his ear is pierced because, “he **went** and **acquired** a master for himself.”³⁴

We now understand that a slave sold by the Jewish court **against** his will, who declares, “I love my master...,” does not deserve to be punished based on the verse, “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants,” for at the time of his declaration he felt compelled,³⁵ as mentioned above. Therefore, Rashi is forced

³⁰ Shemos 20:13

³¹ Shemos 21:5

³² Section 4.

³³ Shemos 21:5

³⁴ Rashi on Shemos 21:6

³⁵ Earlier in this section. He is compelled by love of his wife and children. His mention of the love for his master is not held against him, as it does not enlighten us about his willingness to enter slavery at the outset, which that phrase indicates with respect to the slave who sold himself, because the slave sold by the court entered slavery against his will.

to explain that a slave sold by the Jewish court has his ear pierced for violating the prohibition, “Do not steal.”

7. Based on the above, we can understand why Rashi specifically quotes the words, “The ear that heard **on Mount Sinai**.”³⁶ Mention of Mount Sinai stresses the severity of the sin, and the reason for the severe punishment of ear-piercing.

These commandments were heard from Hashem on Mount Sinai. Hashem knows that a person may become impoverished, and will as a result feel compelled to steal or to sell himself into slavery in order to support himself and his family. Nonetheless, Hashem commands him: “Do not steal,” “for unto Me the children of Israel are servants.” Hashem feeds and supports all of his creations,³⁷ and He is certain to provide sustenance to the poor man through other means, without him being **compelled** to violate Hashem’s will. Therefore, even when in a state of adversity, a person must trust in Hashem, who most certainly will come to the person’s aid, and extricate him from his distress. It is because the person did not trust in Hashem and violated His commandments, that, “The ear that heard... ‘You shall not steal’³⁸... -- let it be pierced! The ear that heard... ‘For unto Me the children of Israel are servants’...³⁹ -- let it be pierced!”

8. In order to add clarity and to “sweeten” the above explanation,⁴⁰ Rashi brings, as a **continuation** of his explanation: “Rabbi Shimon would expound **this verse**....” We see from here that the Torah is very precise in each detail of the punishment, stressing and hinting at the nature of the slave’s sin. In the actual words of the verse, “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants....”

Rashi himself explains his reason for citing Rabbi Shimon’s exposition, by also quoting the remark, “Rabbi Shimon would expound this verse like a *chomer*.” “*Chomer*” means “a string of pearls and a pouch of perfume.”⁴¹ Rashi includes Rabbi Shimon’s teaching in his commentary to indicate that his explanation functions in a manner similar to, “a string of pearls and a pouch of perfume.” Pearls shine, and a string of pearls will brighten up a room and everything in the room. When a person wears pearl jewelry as ornaments, although the pearls are

³⁶ This relates to a question the Rebbe asked in section 3.

³⁷ See Shabbos 107b: “Hashem sits and provides sustenance, from the horns of antelopes to lice eggs.”

³⁸ Shemos 20:13

³⁹ Vayikra 25:55

⁴⁰ regarding the reason for piercing the ear, “that heard... ‘For unto Me the children of Israel are servants...’”(In the main body of the text, in the original.)

⁴¹ Rashi on Kiddushin 22b

worn on a particular part of the body, they actually adorn the entire person wearing them. Similarly, a “pouch of perfume” disperses a pleasant fragrance to its entire surroundings.

Rashi refers to this explanation as a *chomer* because this explanation of Rabbi Shimon also “dispersed,” in a sense, adding clarity to Rashi’s previous interpretation. Rashi explained previously that the slave’s ear was pierced because it “heard... **‘For unto Me the children of Israel are servants...’**” and Rabbi Shimon’s exposition clarifies that the, “door and doorpost are different” because they were “witnesses in Egypt... when I said, **‘for unto Me the children of Israel are servants...’**”

Based on all the above, it is clear that Rashi’s intention in asking, “And why was the ear chosen to be pierced...” was not in order to give a reason why the Torah chose specifically the ear, rather than any other organ. Rashi’s methodology in explaining the simple meaning of the Torah text does not include giving reasons for the details of the Torah’s laws, nor explaining the rationale behind the Torah’s punishments.⁴² The reason Rashi is forced to give a reason for the piercing of the ear is in order to address a difficulty arising at the **beginning** of Rashi’s commentary on the word, “his ear,” which Rashi interprets as “his right ear,” (as is explained in section 2 at length.) That is why Rashi begins his quote of Rabbi Shimon’s exposition with the word, “and,” and he does not quote Rabbi Shimon’s teaching earlier, under its own heading, on the words, “to the door...” Rashi does not cite this exposition to explain the **reason** behind the choice of the right ear, as his commentary is intended to explain the plain meaning of the verse. That is why Rashi quotes Rabbi Shimon by name: **“Rabbi Shimon would expound...,”** in order to hint to us that the intent of this explanation is to give a reason behind the Torah’s law. Rashi informs us that Rabbi Shimon, whose methodology was to “expound the reasoning behind the Torah’s laws,”⁴³ was the author of this passage.⁴⁴ Although its primary intent is not to explain the plain meaning of the text, Rashi quotes this teaching of Rabbi Shimon following that of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, because it is “like a *chomer*,” adding clarity to the verse , as discussed above.

⁴² As explained at the beginning of section 4 above.

⁴³ Yoma 42b, Yevamos 23a

⁴⁴ Since explaining the reason for the Torah’s law deviates from Rashi’s usual methodology, Rashi informs us that he is not the author of this teaching, rather Rabbi Shimon is.

9. We mentioned above⁴⁵ that when quoting a passage, Rashi will mention the author's name in order to answer a subtle question that an eager and sharp student might raise. Why does Rashi quote Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai? A sharp student might very well want to know why a person who had no malicious intent, and stole as a result of oppressive poverty, receives such a harsh punishment of having his ear pierced. The slave's claim, "I love my master," also does not seem to justify the piercing of his ear, for he also claims to love his wife and children, as explained above.

In response to this question, Rashi quotes Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai by name. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's mission in life was Torah learning (after receiving the title Rabban).⁴⁶ Although he lived during the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and in the period immediately following its destruction, a time of severe poverty, he persevered in his life mission. Our sages say about him, "For forty years he was in business; for forty years he studied Torah; and for forty years he taught."⁴⁷ "He did not walk four cubits without (reciting) words of Torah... and no one arrived at the study hall earlier than he."⁴⁸ At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, he ensured the survival of Torah study by requesting from the Roman emperor Vespasian, "Give me Yavneh and its scholars."⁴⁹

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's famous maxim, which he taught to the masses, is recorded in Pirkei Avos: "If you have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself, since **that is the very purpose for which you were created.**"⁵⁰ He taught that Torah study is the ultimate purpose and primary occupation of each and every person, including business people.

The reason why Rashi deliberately quoted **Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai**, (whose mission in life was **Torah learning**), by name, is because the Torah commands a person to get married. The verse, "For he said and it came about" refers to the love one has for one's wife, as mentioned above.⁵¹ In spite of the command to love one's wife, the Torah commands the Jewish slave to leave his

⁴⁵ Section 3

⁴⁶ Parentheses in the original. Rabban was the title given to the head of the *Sanhedrin*, the Jewish High Court.

⁴⁷ Sanhedrin 41a

⁴⁸ Sukkah 28a

⁴⁹ Gittin 56b

⁵⁰ Avos 2:8

⁵¹ In section 4. Tehillim 33:9; Shabbos 152a, Which views this verse as allegorically referring to the love Hashem implants in a person for his wife.(Rashi on Shabbos 152a).

wife after six years and to go free. The Torah also teaches that “there will never cease to be needy within the land,” yet despite the inevitability of poverty the Torah instructs us not to steal.

10. We also find that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was exceptionally charitable. Avos d’Rabbi Nosson⁵² relates that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and his student Rabbi Yehoshua were passing by the site of the Temple, and they saw the site in ruins. Rabbi Yehoshua exclaimed, “Woe upon us, for the Temple lies in ruins.” Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai responded, “Do not be distressed, for we are able to achieve atonement in a manner similar to the way Temple sacrifices atoned, by performing acts of kindness.”⁵³ In this passage, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai equates acts of kindness with the Holy Temple.

By quoting Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai by name, Rashi sheds greater understanding upon the reason for piercing the slave’s ear, and its justness. The Torah is concerned about the desperate circumstances of the poor, and commands: “‘When you lend money to my people’ -- this is obligatory!”⁵⁴ Since it is an obligation to support the poor by lending them money, the poor person will certainly find many people willing to lend him money. He should therefore make and effort to borrow money and not violate the commands prohibiting theft and extending one’s state of slavery. By quoting the author by name, Rashi reminds the keen student of Torah of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s emphasis of acts of kindness toward the poor, and justifies the punishment of the slave for refusing to take advantage of the community’s philanthropy.

11. From the “wine of Torah”⁵⁵ in Rashi’s commentary: There are those who are so busy with business affairs during the six days of the week that they become “enslaved to slaves,”⁵⁶ enslaved to their physical desires in a manner similar to a person who enslaves himself for six years; even as the *seventh* day comes, the holy *Shabbos* when a person must go free, to refrain and desist from all mundane endeavors, they do not wish to go free and release themselves from their love for materiality, and their servitude to it. They toil in, and are troubled by worldly matters.

⁵² An *aggadic* work, printed among the “minor” tractates of the Talmud.

⁵³ Avos d’Rabbi Nosson 4:5

⁵⁴ Shemos 22:24; Rashi on the verse. See also *Sicha 2* on this *parsha*.

⁵⁵ I.e. the teachings of *Chassidus*.

⁵⁶ “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants.” (Vayikra 25:55) The Talmud comments, “They are My servants; they shall not be servants to servants.” (Bava Metzia 10a)

In response to this mindset, the Torah teaches: Hashem commands, “For unto **Me** the children of Israel are servants.”⁵⁷ A Jew’s mission in life is to learn Torah (and observe the *mitzvos*),⁵⁸ “that is the very purpose for which you were created.” That is the purpose for which his soul came down into this world. Since this is the command of Hashem, who gives life and existence to all of creation, He certainly gives a Jew the power and ability necessary to fulfill their mission in the world. Even during the weekdays, when a person is involved with their own material matters, he must know that he is not **enslaved to his work**, and he shall not conduct himself in the manner of “a slave to slaves.” On the contrary, he should **utilize his profession** for its true purpose -- in order to serve Hashem. When the holy *Shabbos* arrives, he should recite *kiddush*⁵⁹ and *havdalah*,⁶⁰ and elevate himself entirely above mundane, weekday matters. He should occupy himself with Torah study and the service of Hashem.

When a person conducts himself in the manner described above, his involvement in Torah (and *mitzvos*)⁶¹ frees him from his personal state of exile.⁶² This in turn hastens the Jewish people’s departure from their national state of exile. The power of an individual’s Torah to liberate not only the person himself, but the entire nation from their state of exile, is exemplified in the incident involving Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, described above.⁶³ At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, he was able to persuade the one responsible for **destroying** the Temple to spare for **him** Yavne and its sages, thereby preserving the Torah of the Great Sanhedrin.⁶⁴ When a person involves himself with Torah, he becomes free, analogous to a slave being freed by his master. We shall soon merit the coming of *Moshiach* and the rebuilding of the Temple. At that time, the “door and the doorpost”⁶⁵ (that were “witnesses” in Egypt), “her gates that were sunk into the ground”⁶⁶ will be revealed and will complete the ultimate rebuilding of the Temple.

-- From a *sicha* on *Shabbos parshas Beshalach* 5730 (1970)

⁵⁷ Vayikra 25:55

⁵⁸ Parentheses in the original

⁵⁹ Sanctification of *Shabbos* at its onset.

⁶⁰ Sanctification of *Shabbos* at its conclusion. See Rambam, M.T., Laws of *Shabbos* 29:1

⁶¹ Parentheses in the original

⁶² Exile or “*galus*” in the original implies a state of separation from Hashem.

⁶³ Section 9

⁶⁴ Rosh Hashana 29b, 31a. The Jewish High Court, charged with teaching the Torah’s laws to the Jewish people, was saved by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai upon the destruction of the Second Temple, when he secured permission from Vespasian to move it from Jerusalem to Yavne.

⁶⁵ Shemos 21:6

⁶⁶ Eicha 2:9. Referring to the gates of Jerusalem, at the time of the destruction of the First Temple.