

"Slavery"

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I heard four different people refer to themselves as a "slave" or as "being enslaved" to something this week. Each one enslaved to something different. One to a lost love she's been unable to move on from, one to his student loans and other debts that hang over him, another to health problems that dictate day-to-day activities and frame of mind, the last to a self-described "need for approval" originally from a parent who withheld such approval, and lately from everyone the person knows - boss, lover, even from me! What's the deal? Why the slave mentality this week?

Let me ask you. Can you come up with something in your life right now that you might describe yourself as being a "slave" to? Go ahead think about it for a moment, I'm not going to ask you to share them out loud and yes, s/m relationships count. So I'll give you a moment.

How many of you might use language such as "slave" or "enslaved" to describe a situation in which you find yourself? . . . Or maybe slightly different language. Something like: "I've got to break free of him or her or it;" or just, "I wish my boss would get off my back!" or "Why can't everyone just leave me alone!" Or maybe a comment like this rings true for you: "If I don't get a good night's sleep soon, I'll go crazy or maybe I am already and that's why I'm obsessing over this!"

I don't think it's that there is something particular in the air this week-well, allergens, maybe, which I suppose poses the threat of becoming enslaved to antihistamins. But I think these feelings and this language of slavery pretty much go on all the time. I suspect I'm just noticing it this week, not because I'm feeling particularly enslaved, but because the Torah portion and this season of counting the days until Shavuot, has put me in mind of slavery and of freedom, and thus I'm more aware of our tendency to feel enslaved.

Here's another context in which I often hear slavery vocabulary. Many BCC members go to 12 step groups, and people sometimes describe their addictions as a kind of slavery. Which makes the "12-steps" steps to freedom, despite the discipline and consistency required to work the steps (or maybe 12 step is freeing precisely because of the discipline and consistency it demands). People who incline toward enslavement do face risks when they try to break out -- and you see it sometimes if you hang around 12 steppers or yoga practioners or shomer shabbos Jews, for that matter, if you hang out among people who "regularly" do something, you sometimes run into folks who have become enslaved to whichever one of those paths they had chosen in an effort to set themselves free. Judaism is quite interested in slavery, especially around this time of year, from Passover to Shavuot, tzman cheruteinu, the season of our freedom, this seven week period when we count the days, when as a people and as individuals we try to re-create for ourselves in some symbolic way at least, the experience of our ancestors moving from slavery in Egypt toward the freedom that came in the wilderness and that came, perhaps ironically, came with receiving the law. Rules and regulations can help set you free, argues Judaism, but not automatically -- there are risks involved.

The Torah portion this week, Behar, that comes toward the end of the book of Leviticus, focuses in part on slavery, especially Israelite slavery. It makes an assumption, that even though God has freed

the Israelites, there will always be some Jews who need, for economic reasons, to enslave themselves again for a time. But only for a time, and under very different circumstances than they were enslaved by the Egyptians. The difference is for how long and to whom one is enslaved-it's not supposed to last your whole life, and you're only supposed to be in service to other Israelites, other Jews, who themselves are instructed to treat you in particular ways, not arbitrarily as the Egyptians did. The main point, perhaps, is this: that no one, not a person, not an animal, not even, as we read this week, a plot of land, can be totally enslaved to a human being anymore, not after the Israelites leave Egypt. All of them can be servants for a time, but all must have sabbaths, sabbatical times (even the land) -- a time after which they can go free or at least rest for a year or two.

Why? God makes it quite clear. In the case of other Israelites, we cannot enslave them forever, says God, *ki ah-va-dai hem* - because they are My servants, *asher hotzeti otam mei-eretz mitzrayim* "whom I freed from the land of Egypt, *lo yi-makh-ru mim-keret eved* "they may not give themselves over into servitude." And *lo tir-deh vo b'farekh* "you shall not rule over them ruthlessly," *v'ya-reita mei-elohekha* "but you shall fear Your God" [25:42-43]. God says something to this effect twice in this portion. "I freed them from Egypt - they are My servants."

The German Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen [1848-1918] (in Nahama Leibowitz, p. 272 of her Leviticus commentary), who lived at the end of the 19th c and into the 20th c., noted that Torah has no special term for servant and master. Everyone who works is called *eved*-servant. So is a person who has sold himself into slavery or has been sold to a master. It's also the term for one who "serves" God (the messiah is called "servant of God"). The Torah, says Cohen, does not allow a person to become chattel, a person is always an individual, a human being (perhaps we should say this about a male servant only, although I think an argument could even be made suggesting women too are seen as human in ancient - and modern - Judaism - not always equal to men, but still human). Cohen's point is well-taken, but let's go further. In this Torah portion, humans don't get to have any chattel at all. Not even land is property that we can own and treat anyway we choose. We must give it sabbatical time, we must allow it to rest. And why? Among other reasons, because it's not really ours. The verse of the week: "But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me." [25:23]

God and Woody Guthrie have different versions of Woody's song. While Woody sings, "This land is my land, this land is your land," God would sing, "this land is My land, this land is My landŠ" God is talking here about HA-aretz, THE Land that I am giving you. Giving us, but not giving usŠ *ki gei-rim v'toshavim atem ema-di* "you are but strangers residing with Me." [25:23] In other words, 'Don't cut down those redwood forests. They are not yours to mutilate.' *Ki li ha-aretz* "for the Land is Mine." [25:23]

It's not so easy. God might not bother saying the land does not truly belong to us, if we didn't have a tendency to want to make things and people our own, and do whatever we please with them. And God might not make such a lot about slavery if it were an easy thing for humans to avoid - if human beings were by nature disinclined to enslave one another or disinclined to enslave ourselves to other people or things. If, by nature, we understood the difference between serving God and being slaves to people or places, to money or material wealth, to food or drugs or sex, to feeling sorry for ourselves or being arrogant. If we didn't often enslave ourselves to the way we think things should be, or to the way things used to be, if we didn't always think we were right and others wrong. If we didn't have a tendency to enslave our selves - body and soul, heart and mind - then probably Judaism wouldn't make the centerpiece of our religion a story of liberation. But we humans do tend toward slavery of all sorts, and we don't much understand the other meaning of the word *eved* "servant, service," we don't much understand what service can do for us. And so, God and Jewish tradition try, in all sorts of ways, to get us to sit up and take notice of these human tendencies and human failings. And they try to get

us to think about what service to God might mean, might do, for us.

One expects this Torah portion to end the second time God says, "the Children of Israel are My servants, I brought them out of Egypt, I am your God." Instead it goes on, surprisingly, into the next two verses of the next chapter. But for good reason, I think, even though some readers might think they change the subject suddenly: "You shall not," says God in those next verses, "make idols for yourselves, don't set up carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship them, for it is I, Adonai, I who am your God." Don't, says God, enslave yourselves to other gods, to false gods - not to your job, not to art, not to money, not to human beings, not to your own selfish desires - don't bow down to things or beings that would take My place in your life. No, says God in the portion's last verse: [Instead,] "keep My sabbaths" - which I understand to mean not just the ones talked about in this Torah portion, the sabbatical year for the land, or even the weekly day of the sabbath, but rather, God is saying here take the rest, take the sabbaths you need in order to be yourself, in order to be in relationship to God. If you don't keep My Sabbaths, if every day is just like every other day, if you never stop to breathe or to think about Me or to be there for yourself, you are worshipping false gods. And finally, the Torah portion ends with "be in awe of My sanctuary, My mikdash," [My holiness,] ani Adonai - I am God." [26:1-2] I give You the opportunity to understand holy time - My Sabbaths -- and holy place - My sanctuary --, I'm giving you the opportunity to understand what it means to bring holiness into your life, or to bring your self into holy space and holy time. Do so, and be in awe of how you feel when you do so, how you feel when holiness enters your life. Do these things and you will no longer be a slave.

Do these things and know true peace, true completeness, true Shabbat Shalom.