BS”D

Parshas Behar

*The person who loses his spiritual sense of value because of his greed eventually becomes a slave to a soul-less way of life.*

A Slave Redeemed

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

At the end of our Parsha, *Behar*, after discussing the law of a Jew who sells himself as a slave to a non-Jew, the Torah reiterates several commandments: “Do not make idols.” “Keep the Shabbos.” “Have respect for my Sanctuary.”

Rashi has two comments, one based on Toras Cohanim and the other on the Talmud (Kiddushin 20a):

The Torah is addressing the Jew who is a slave to a non-Jew. The Torah is telling him, “Don’t say my master is immoral, so I will be immoral. My master worships idols, so I will worship idols. My master does not keep Shabbos, so neither will I.” As a response to that attitude, the Torah encourages the slave to be strong, abstain from idolatry, and keep the Shabbos.

It’s interesting that both Rashi and his source, the Toras Cohanim, mention immoral behavior as an example of the temptation of the slave. Yet the end of our Parsha makes no mention of it, so why bring this up here as an example of what the slave thinks? We’ll get back to that question later.

Rashi then brings a shortened version of the Gemora in Kiddushin that explains the connection of the various laws of the Parsha to each other. First the Torah tells us the laws of the seventh year (to abstain from agricultural work). If the person starts off by being avaricious and is suspected of violating the laws of the seventh year, he will eventually suffer financial loss and be forced to sell his personal property. (The Torah talks about the law of not cheating when buying or selling merchandise). If he does not repent of his evil ways, he becomes even more financially troubled and winds up selling his land. (The Torah speaks of not cheating when buying or selling land). If he does not repent, he winds up having to sell his house. (The Torah deals with the laws of selling one’s house). If he still does not repent, he winds up having to borrow money and having to make payments with interest. (The Torah forbids lending and borrowing with interest.) If he still does not repent, he winds up selling himself as a slave to a Jew or even to a non-Jew. (The Torah concludes with the laws of someone who sold himself either to a Jew or a non-Jew.)

In the Gemora there is an interesting distinction made between a person’s first sin and his subsequent descent into more sin. After his first sin, the Talmud says, “If he doesn’t feel that he did wrong [and continues to sin].” Afterwards, the Talmud simply states, “The next thing happens,” then “the next thing happens,” without mentioning that he doesn’t feel that he did wrong. The reason is that the first time a person sins, his conscience bothers him; he may feel that he did wrong and repent or he may reject his conscience and say that he did no wrong. But if he continues to do bad, his conscience doesn’t even bother him. It’s no longer a question of feeling or not feeling responsibility. His actions become almost inevitable with no moral brakes. The Talmud doesn’t mean to say that you *can’t* repent. It’s just that when improper conduct becomes normal and average, the person no longer recognizes that he is doing anything bad and is unlikely to have remorse.

Where did it all start? It started with the person being avaricious. He was interested in making money. Instead of life being about doing good and serving G-d, it became about acquiring things. It’s interesting that Rashi and the Talmud use the expression “suspected;” he is “*suspected* of violating the law of the seventh year.” He has not brazenly violated the law. Outwardly, he’s a good religious Jew and esteemed member of the community. But those are only the outer trappings. Beneath the veneer, we find the suspicion of wrongdoing.

The seventh year represents the Torah value that the earth belongs to G-d. We are visitors on G-d’s earth. We acknowledge this every seventh day by abstaining from all work and every seventh year by not working the land. By observing these laws, we affirm that life is about serving G-d by doing good, by Torah and Mitzvos. The person who is “suspect” of not keeping the law of the seventh year is saying to himself, life is not about G-d’s world, it’s about *me*. How much money can I make? How can I succeed? Once this attitude is evinced, it becomes really difficult to change. Once the focus is shifted and a different direction is pursued, one is unlikely to turn back, to remember the true way and true purpose of life.

Now, back to the first Rashi. The person who lost his spiritual sense of value because of his own greed, eventually becomes a slave to a soul-less way of life. He is the lowliest slave, but he wants to be like his master. In fact, he doesn’t realize he’s a slave. He thinks he’s free. “My master is immoral, so I will be immoral.” This is the first mark of a true slave—the Torah doesn’t even have to cite the law here because it’s so obvious. I’m free and have no moral restraints, says the slave. I can do anything I want. I’m free. But he is actually a slave to his passion; his life has become a meaningless pursuit of pleasure. He doesn’t know the sanctity of family, the holiness of marriage, the joy of modesty and holiness. These are lost forever to the immoral person. Yet he thinks this is freedom.

The slave says, “My master worships idols, so I can worship idols. Then I’ll be just as free as my master. I reject my G-d and follow the idol *de jour*. Whatever society worships at the moment, I worship. Whatever is popular, I follow. Whatever is new, I pursue.”

Ironically, the slave thinks he’s free. He doesn’t realize he has lost his self. He is no longer an individual human, made in G-d’s image. He is merely the blind follower of whatever is society’s whim. There is no growth of self, for there is no self. Yet he thinks he’s free.

“My master doesn’t keep Shabbos,” says the slave. The slave thinks he is free like his master because he doesn’t have the restraint of Shabbos. He can do anything anytime. But he forgets what the holy radiance of Shabbos is—Shabbos, the day that we acknowledge that the world is G-d’s and that we live in it to further G-d’s plan. The slave sees no noble life, no life of purpose, no life beyond one’s own selfish needs. And yet he thinks he’s free, free like his master.

So the Torah tells the slave, “Don’t give up! You’ve gone down, down to being the lowliest slave, and you don’t even know it. Stop! Reject idolatry. Reject self-centeredness and unholiness. Stop! Keep the Shabbos! Your life can still have holiness. You can still feel the warmth and the glow of G-d’s presence on the holy Shabbos day. You can still be redeemed. You can still be *truly* free. Be the servant of G-d, not the servant of man, and you will be free.”

In the Gemara, a student asks a Rabbi, perhaps we should not be hasty in redeeming a Jew who has lapsed so badly that he sells himself to a non-Jew. It’s his own fault. It was his own poor choices that brought him down.

The Rabbi answered by quoting a passage, “After the sale, he shall be redeemed; one of his brothers shall redeem him.”

We owe it to all of our Jewish brothers and sisters. It is our responsibility to redeem them, to offer them a way of life that is truly free, that is not merely slavery. To reach our brethren, we must live this kind of life ourselves. If we live in the light of G-d, if we live truly holy lives, then
our brethren whom we approach will see what true freedom is. They will choose to be redeemed.