

DEBAR TORAH *by* RABBI ROHDE

Stark and Painfully Harsh Life Choices

If he came single, he shall leave single; if he had a wife, his wife shall leave with him. If his master gave him a wife, and she has borne him children, the wife and her children shall belong to the master, and he shall leave single. But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I shall not to go free," his master shall take him before the Judges. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his master's slave unto eternity (Ex. 21:4-6)

This passage is difficult to fathom; the Talmud and later commentators struggle to flesh out the particulars of the case: After all, if the wife had been an enslaved Hebrew, wouldn't she go free, along with her children, at the end of her term of service? Hence commentators limit the case to a non-Hebrew ("Canaanite") slave-girl given to a male Hebrew slave, and legalistically-minded scholars narrow and restrict the circumstances in which this law was applicable even further. Emotionally also the passage is difficult to take in and digest. Slavery in general is an agonizing topic to discuss, and the scene depicted here is particularly gut-wrenching to contemplate among the abuses of a slavery system: His wife and child are considered the "possession" of his master, rather than in the custody of the husband and father; therefore the Hebrew slave about to finish his term of slavery faces the agonizing choice of whether to take the freedom and dignity he deserves and earned, leaving his wife and children, or stay eternally enslaved with the wife and children he loves. Family separation was among the worst traumas of slavery, and although there is a choice here, both choices are particularly harsh and stark: Take his freedom now and sacrifice his love or remain enslaved "unto eternity." (Granted, based upon harmonizing this Hebrew-slave law with a rule elaborated elsewhere, a number of commentators limit this period unto the end of the fifty-year "era" of the Jubilee, which counts as a lifetime, a legal "eternity.") Chances are slim that a poor newly-emancipated man could accumulate the cash and standing to buy his family out of slavery (even if he is given gifts, as the more humane formulation of these laws requires in Deuteronomy 15), and by then it's likely that too much time would have passed and they all would have moved on in one way or another. His basic human need for a family can only be met by sacrificing his need for autonomy and dignity - forever. It is a stark, painful, tragic choice. In this passage's context it is pretty clear which choice is preferred by the narrator: The Hebrew man, the text intimates, must snatch the Israelite freeman status when proffered to him at once. Love must be sacrificed for freedom. One can honestly question: What kind of "freedom" this is, if he must sacrifice the love of his life and a relationship which is culmination of all that he as an individual could wish for! Sacrifice his love so he can be a good citizen? So he could have his own land, his own house, or his own business? But a man builds a house and earns a livelihood in order to sustain a family and a relationship! Bereft of the family he loves, the apple of his eye, what satisfaction would there be in his merely "being his own boss," with no drive to succeed?

On the other hand, family entanglements tend to remain "forever." His family's needs will grow as his family grows, and since as a slave he is not providing for them, the master will continue to provide for them more and more. He and his family will become more and more indebted to and dependent upon the master, and the master will consequently have more and more claim upon their service in return. He must take the opportunity to cut his losses and get out of the cycle of dependency. His ill-fated love, the product of desperate, impoverished circumstances, must be the ultimate sacrifice, and it must be done now! Relationships like these, based in dependence, are best abandoned as soon as possible, without looking back: Throw out the key, Lee, and get yourself free! On the other hand, the exposition of the procedure for making the Hebrew a slave forever by piercing his ear at the door, symbolically binding him to his master's home, implies some recognition that the decision to stay with his master and family is a valid choice, even though it is denigrated by this demeaning procedure. The slave owns up to his love and his willingness to accept the consequences in front of the judges, and that too is worthy of some respect.

Interestingly, the quite different retelling of a similar law in the parallel passage, Deuteronomy 15:16, where the Hebrew slave is also enslaved forever by the same "awl through the ear into the door" procedure, makes no mention of a Hebrew slave being given a wife by his master, nor about the slave's love of a wife and children as a reason for staying: "And it shall be, if he says to you, I shall not go out from you, for he loves you and your house, because he fares well with you." There the slave's reason for staying is his love for his master, not his wife and kids. It's possible that the slave has been given certain inducements to stay, but they are not mentioned. In that passage the slave's decision to stay is more blameworthy, for he is averring that he likes having a master and prefers that to freedom.

Why does the text in Exodus present a so much more stark choice? Likely because it follows so close upon the heels of the leaving Egypt narrative. The inducements to stay in Egypt, in slavery, were fresh in the Israelites' minds. They had to make the decision to leave, and not look back, when the opportunity to leave presented itself, or they would be stuck in Egyptian slavery, as they had been, for an eternity. Extremely painful decisions had to be made; no doubt family and other connections had to be left behind. A life they had come to love and longed after had to be abandoned, individuals' loves, desires, and aspirations had to be set aside for the sake of the eventual common dignity and freedom of the Israelite community. For the generation of the Exodus, as opposed to the generation on the verge of the conquest, the pains involved in making that choice and all similar choices were still fresh. Fresh in their minds still was the natural allure of the beautiful and dependable land of Egypt and their love of their former life. They truly were aware of the painful and stark choices in life - often involving giving up the most dearly beloved - which have to be made.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Mishpatim

February 21-22, 2025 | 24 Shebat, 5785

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 306 | Haftarah: p. 323 / Kaplan: p. 356 | Haftarah: p. 1118

Candle Lighting | 5:20 pm

Evening Services | 5:30 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights | Rabbi Soloveichik | following services | *5785 Season sponsored by the Julis Romo Rabinowitz family | Session sponsored by Faith Fogelman, in memory of her mother, Miriam Watkin*

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Youth Groups & Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush | following services | Levy Auditorium

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 4:25 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

Teen Shiur | 4:25 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Evening Services | 5:10 pm

Habdala | 6:11 pm

Rosh Hodesh Adar begins on Thursday night.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday (Minha & Arbit): 5:30 pm

Monday-Thursday (Arbit only): 6:30 pm

THIS WEEKEND

Rally for Our Hostages: 500 Days In Hell

THIS Sunday, February 23 | 12:00 pm
Naumburg Bandshell, Central Park

Film Screening

Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara

With remarks from Baruch-Lev Kelman

THIS Saturday Night, February 22 | 7:00 pm | \$12.00 per person
Walk-ins are welcome to pay at the door

Presented by the Sisterhood & the League

Join us for this award-winning Italian film from one of Italy's most revered directors, Marco Bellocchio, telling the story of a young Jewish boy forcibly taken from his family by the Pope to be raised Catholic. Our Rabbinic Intern, Baruch-Lev Kelman, who worked at the Vatican in the past, will provide additional remarks and context for us to better appreciate the history behind this sadly true story.

The Sisterhood presents

"Let's Get Organized" with Bohne Leah

THIS Sunday, Feb 23 | 4:00 pm | On Zoom

Link has been sent to registrants

Women's Megillah Rehearsal

First Rehearsal: THIS Sunday, February 23 | 6:15 pm

Next rehearsal: Sunday, March 9 | 7:15 pm

Women's Megillah Reading on Purim morning, Friday, March 14 | 7:50 am

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Linda & Morris Shamah**, who will be making *aliyah* on March 4.

Condolences to **Rabbi Albert Gabbai**, former hazzan of Shearith Israel and Minister Emeritus of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, upon the passing of his brother, Marco Gabbai.

PURIM AT SHEARITH ISRAEL

View the full schedule & offerings at shearithisrael.org/purim5785

Your Purim Checklist

- Become a Women's Megillah Reader - **First rehearsal THIS SUNDAY!**
 - Sign up for our Purim Dinner & Mini Show!
 - Give Matanot L'Ebyonim
 - Sponsor Purim Breakfast
 - Purim Night, March 13 - Come hear Megillah Reading
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Early Bird Pricing Ends THIS Monday, February 24!

Purim Dinner — and A Mini Show!

Thursday Evening, March 13

Following Megillah | Levy Auditorium

This Purim, we journey back to 16th-century Mantua, city of love, intrigue, and...rabbis! All while enjoying a relaxed dairy dinner.

Shearith Israel's own theater troupe Los Bilbilicos – led by Baruch-Lev Kelman, Adams Kornblum, and Shearith Israel League President Laurent Nahon – will offer a sneak peak of their upcoming production of *A Wedding Comedy*, adapted from Leone de Sommi Portaleone's hit play *Tsabat Bedibuta de Kiddushin* (c.1550). This unique Jewish twist on the classic Romeo & Juliet starcrossed lovers' tale definitely won't be like anything you've seen before!

Kids' PurimPaloosa!

Featuring Froggles!

Thursday Evening, March 13 | During 7:00 pm Megillah Reading
Dropoff in Fidanque Youth Room at 6:45 pm

Get ready for a fabulous Purim celebration filled with laughter, magic, and nonstop fun! Our action-packed kids' entertainment extravaganza for kids aged 2-12 will feature comedy magic, puppetry, party games, music, and dancing! Watch in amazement as bubbles float through the air, and chase after soaring rocket balloons! *Children under the age of 5 must be accompanied by an adult.*

PLUS: Families who sign up for the Purim Dinner (see above) will enjoy an exclusive balloon twisting session while they eat!