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## THE VALUE OF SLAVERY

The concept of Noach's curse of Cham, "and let Canaan be their slave" (*Bereishis* 9:27), is alien to western thought. No modern-day grandfather would bring about the enslavement of the children of one of his sons by the children of another of his sons. The premise itself is abhorrent to liberal philosophy. How, then, could Noach have wished this on his son?

The answer lies in the fact that slavery and service are at the very core of human creation and existence. We are all, in a sense, enslaved by emotions, desires and passions, which are willfully controlled by the "Evil Inclination." We must, however, free ourselves from the clutches of the "Evil Inclination" and voluntarily submit to the service of Hashem. In essence, true freedom is recognition of the Creator and voluntary submission to His will.

Noach understood that through sinful actions, Cham had rejected the Creator and embraced the Evil Inclination. In order to comprehend and live the truth, it was imperative that he begin his re-education with the basics. Taken in this vein, Noach's condemnation of Canaan (the essence of Cham) was in fact an act of benevolence. Cham lacked self-control, and it was essential that he learn the elementary lessons of self-control from some sort of master (see Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, *Bereishis* 9:23). Thus, Noach assigned Canaan to be a slave to Sheim (Rashi, *Bereishis* 9:27) to enable him to learn the rudiments of self-control in order to submit to the will of Hashem.

This point is clearly portrayed in the case of the "*Eved Ivri*." When a Jew commits a financial crime, and cannot afford restitution, the *beis din* is authorized to sell him into slavery to recoup the money. Why is this man not referred to as an "*Eved Yisraeli*"? After all, he is still a Jew! Except for a few instances in the *Tanach*, the term "*Ivri*" is rarely used in reference to a Jew. Rather "*Yisrael*" is used to connote a Jew who is bound by the 613 mitzvos in the service of Hashem. The "*Eved Ivri*" however, is bound only by 612 *mitzvos*. He is exempt from the injunction against cohabiting with a *Shifchah Canaanis* (see *Minchas Chinuch* 427). This *eved*, not being free to express his service to Hashem to the fullest degree, is ineligible for the honored title of "*Yisrael*" (see *Or Hachaim*, *Shemos* 21:2). His loyalty is first to a human master who is responsible for re-educating him in the ways of serving the Almighty. In the absolute sense, this service is the only purpose of creation. The *Chovos Halevavos* (*Sha'ar Avodas Elokim*) remarks that implicit in the word "*avodah*" (worship of Hashem) is its root: "*eved*," indicating one who is subject.

The first major organized rebellion against Hashem after the flood was led by Nimrod, the grandson of Cham. The *Zohar* (*Bereishis* 10:9) explains that he was called "Nimrod" because he rebelled 'מרד'. Up until that point the family of man was united in language, spirit and, in a general sense, devotion to Hashem. Nimrod was invested with divine gifts, which he misused to turn men's hearts and minds against the Al-mighty (*Eruvin* 53•). He sought, in fact, to establish

himself as a deity (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 24). The people of that generation, known as the “*Dor Haflagah*,” built a skyscraper that reached to the heavens, in order to wage war against Hashem (Rashi, *Bereishis* 11:9), and to protect them from what they mistakenly assumed to be Hashem’s only weapon — the flood (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 24).

To stem the tide of rebellion Hashem decided to promulgate disunity among mankind by introducing the classical seventy languages in place of the exclusive use of *Lashon Hakodesh* (*Zohar* 11:1). This would promote enmity among the nations, and thus reduce the chance of a unified front. The mere introduction of different tongues at that point resulted in such stark cultural differences that it culminated in a world war in which fully one half of mankind perished (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 24).

As punishment for that generation’s sins, Hashem introduced anomalies into mankind — such as quasi-human monsters, and cave-men (*Seder Hadoros* 1973). The modern notion of a pre-historic caveman is certainly not an accurate description of the chronological development of man. Adam *Harishon* was created civilized, as were all his descendants until the *Dor Haflagah*. It was only when the human character became deviant due to sin that the corresponding physiological deviant was permitted to exist by Hashem.

Nimrod’s aberrant, rebellious nature, which he inherited from his grandfather Cham, was in turn transmitted to his own children. This characteristic was manifested by Nevuchadnetzar (*Chagigah* 13:), who rebelled against Hashem by destroying the first *Beis Hamikdash*. It becomes apparent that Noach’s harsh prescription of self-control is the only remedy for the deviant character trait displayed by Cham.

The benefit of servitude is illustrated by the case of Eliezer, the servant of Avraham *Avinu*. Eliezer was a slave granted to Avraham by Nimrod, after Avraham’s rescue from Nimrod’s fiery furnace (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 16). The *Targum Yonasan* (*Bereishis* 14:14) claims that Eliezer was actually Nimrod’s son, who obviously possessed Nimrod’s character and the “Chamian” potential for sin. By subjugating himself to a meritorious master, and by integrating his newly learned behavior into his own personality, Eliezer was able to escape the status of the accursed and to attain the level of the blessed (*Zohar, Bereishis* 24:31; *Bereishis Rabbah* 60:7). This is indicated by the prophetic utterance of Lavan:

בוא ברוך ה'

Come he who is blessed by Hashem (*Bereishis* 24:31).

The Torah expends an inordinate amount of time on Eliezer the slave of Avraham. The *Midrash* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 60:8) states:

יפה שיחתן של עבדי בתי אבות מתורתן של בנים

The idle narrative of the slaves of the house of our Fathers was more precious than the Torah of their children.

The fact that the Torah grants more space to the story of Eliezer than to some of our most intricate laws underscores his importance.

The superficial impression of the term ‘slave of Avraham’ intimates a butler or janitor. Certainly Eliezer belonged to Avraham, but here the Torah uses the description “slave” as a term

of endearment. Eliezer was physically, spiritually, and emotionally subservient to Avraham; so submissive that Eliezer no longer had an independent identity.

When the Torah states:

ואברהם זקן בא בימים

And Avraham was old, advanced in age (*Bereishis* 24:1),  
the intimation is

אין זקן אלא מי שקנה חכמה

that “old” means the acquisition of wisdom (*Kidushin* 32:).

Avraham was an elder who administered an Academy for the dissemination of Torah (*Yoma* 28:). Eliezer, similarly, is referred to as “the elder of his [Avraham’s] house” (*Bereishis* 24:2), indicating that Eliezer, too, had an important role in the *yeshivah*. The *pasuk* continues:

המשל בכל אשר לו

who [Eliezer] ruled over all that he [Avraham] had (*ibid.*).

The *Gemara* interprets this verse as meaning

שמושל בתורת רבו, מלמד שאליעזר עבד אברהם זקן בישיבה היה

He [Eliezer] ruled in the Torah of his master: this indicates that Eliezer was an elder and administrator in the *yeshivah* (*Yoma* 28:).

The *Gemara* continues that

דולה ומשקה מתורת רבו אברהם לאחרים

Eliezer drew from and provided others with his master’s teachings.

It is evident that Eliezer occupied a very prominent teaching position in Avraham’s *yeshivah*.

Moreover, the *pasuk*: “Who [Eliezer] ruled over all that he had” (*Bereishis* 24:2) can be interpreted to mean that Eliezer ruled over his own body in the same fashion that Avraham ruled over his own physical being. Avraham experienced full control over his two hundred and forty eight bodily organs to the extent that he had dominion over each one independently of the other (*Nedarim* 32:). Avraham exercised such control over his physical being that he was actually independent of his body (Maharal, *Derech Chaim, Pirkei Avos* 5:3). That is why the Torah (*Bereishis* 22:3) sought to inform us of the specific means of transportation that Avraham *Avinu* employed as he departed for the *Akeidah*: “and [he] saddled his donkey” — for donkey (חמר) is the numerical equivalent of 248, which alludes to the unique physical control Avraham was capable of exercising over his “248 limbs” (Maharal *Chidushei Aggados, Nedarim* 32:). A simple example of Avraham’s self-control can be found in two instances:

וישא עיניו וירא

And he [Avraham] lifted up his eyes, and looked (*Bereishis* 18:2).

וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא

Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place (*Bereishis* 22:4).

Why does the Torah utilize such a cumbersome expression to denote Avraham’s ability to see? The Torah is generally very pithy with words and certainly does not wax poetic. The

Scriptures are obviously demonstrating the self-control exercised by Avraham. Avraham exerted the utmost discipline over his eyesight, a body function over which most people have no control. The Torah gives similar credit to Yitzchak and Rivkah (*Bereishis* 24:63-64). Eliezer, too, “ruled over all that he had” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 59:8). The Torah informs us that

ואיש משתאה לה

[Eliezer] looked steadfastly on her [Rivkah] (*Bereishis* 24:21).

Nevertheless, the Torah also bears witness:

ואיש לא ידעה

Neither had any man known her (*Bereishis* 24:16).

Eliezer’s “looking” was more on a spiritual level than on a mundane level due to the strict self-control (*Mei’am Lo’ez* 24:15; see *Pirkei D’Rebbe Eliezer* 16).

Eliezer so emulated his master that he came to resemble Avraham in his physical appearance, to the extent that Lavan mistook Eliezer for Avraham (*Bereishis Rabbah* 60:7). Yitzchak’s physical appearance was identical to his father’s by virtue of genetics (*Bava Metzia* 87•); Eliezer’s physical appearance, in contrast, resembled Avraham’s due to a conscientious effort of subordination (*Peirush Maharzu on Bereishis Rabbah*, 59:8).

Eliezer grew to great spiritual heights while under the influence of his great teacher. He had a daughter, in whom he certainly invested much effort, and who probably was one of the finest women of that generation. He secretly hoped that she would be acceptable as a mate for Yitzchak (*Bereishis Rabbah* 59:9), even though she was a member of the accursed Canaanite nation. Avraham administered a terrible blow to Eliezer by announcing that “the accursed cannot join with the blessed [in marriage].” Nevertheless, Eliezer remained the prototype of the loyal and selfless servant/disciple, fulfilling his master’s wish even to his own disadvantage.

The statement “the accursed cannot join with the blessed” must have been extremely vexing to Eliezer. Hagar, the niece of Eliezer and the granddaughter of Nimrod (*Targum Yonasan, Bereishis* 16:5), was also of the seed of Cham. Nevertheless, Avraham was very content to have a child with her and to have Yishmael represent the sum total of his progeny (*Bereishis* 17:18). If Avraham were convinced that it was appropriate to produce his eternal offspring from Chamian seed, why did Avraham object to his son Yitzchak marrying the virtuous daughter of Eliezer (see *Rabbeinu Bechaya, Bereishis* 25:6). Eliezer, the ever-loyal servant kept his silence and obeyed the wishes of his teacher and master. This was despite the fact that prior to Yitzchak’s birth, Eliezer was convinced that he would be heir to Avraham’s fortune (*Targum Yonasan, Bereishis* 15:2). Eliezer also demonstrated his extreme loyalty to Avraham in the war against the four kings, when he sided with Avraham against his own father, Nimrod (*Targum Yonasan, Bereishis* 14:14 and 14:1).

Interestingly, the *Midrash* categorically states that Eliezer and Canaan were one and the same.

ועל ידי ששרת אותו צדיק באמונה יצא מכלל ארור לכלל ברוך

Due to the fact that (Canaan – in the person of Eliezer) faithfully served that righteous person (Avraham), he merited to leave the domain of accursed, and enter the domain of the blessed (*Bereishis Rabbah* 60:7).

This confirms Noach's conviction that the most benevolent rehabilitation of an errant Canaanite was for him to submit to slavery in the service of Sheim.

As a reward for faithful service, Avraham emancipated Eliezer, who then went on to become the enemy, Og King of Bashan (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 16). As long as he had been under Avraham's dominion, Eliezer was capable of attaining glorious heights. Once he achieved freedom, Cham's dominant character trait resurfaced, and he became an enemy of *Klal Yisrael* (see Rashba, *Berachos* 54:).

Lot is another example of a devoted disciple who achieved greatness by being subservient to his human master. Lot sacrificed the comfortable security of his homeland in order to accompany his uncle and teacher, Avraham, in his wanderings from Haran to Canaan, from Canaan to Egypt, and from Egypt back to Canaan (*Bereishis* 12:5, 13:1). Lot learned much from his teacher and emulated him to a great extent: he was kind to wayfarers (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 25), and he learned to pray for those who did not pray for themselves [Sedom] (*Bereishis Rabbah* 26:5; *Vayikra Rabbah* 23:9). He so identified with his teacher that he even developed facial features identical to his teacher's (ibid. 41:6). Lot benefited materially from his association with Avraham, for

דברים טובים היו ללוט בעבור אברם

Positive things happened to Lot because of his association with Avraham (*Bereishis Rabbah* 41:3).

By nature Lot tended to be wicked, but the fact that he associated himself with his virtuous uncle directed him to righteousness (see ibid. 7). Lot's latent wickedness surfaced when he sided with his shepherds against Avraham's shepherds. Avraham ordered that his sheep be muzzled when passing through private property en route to the public grazing pastures, thereby avoiding the possibility of grazing on other people's fields (*Pisikta Ravti* 3). Lot felt that he would ultimately inherit his uncle's properties, since at that point there were no other heirs, and the land of Canaan was promised to Avraham by Hashem (*Bereishis* 12:7). Hence, Lot felt justified in allowing his cattle to graze on other people's property, contrary to Avraham's position that the land was not yet his. Lot felt himself an equal to his uncle Avraham in righteousness and scholarship, and he therefore felt that it was perfectly logical to rule on an halachic question independent of his uncle. This was Lot's first major error:

תלמיד אל יורה הלכה במקום רבו

A disciple may not render an Halachic decision in the district of his teacher (*Sanhedrin* 5:).

In fact, it is even prohibited for a disciple to render a judgment in an area of *halachah* as elementary as the permissibility of eating "an egg with a cheese dish," if that disciple is in the region of his teacher (*Kesubos* 60:). Lot permitted his ego to overcome him, and he considered himself an Halachic authority equal to his uncle. Avraham baited Lot with the statement:

אל נא תהי מריבה ביני ובינך...כי אנשים אחים אנחנו

Let there be no strife...between me and you... for we are kinsmen [equals] (*Bereishis* 13:8).

At this point Lot should have recognized that he was the disciple and Avraham the teacher, and he should have begged his teacher's forgiveness in order to maintain the previously harmonious relationship. But Lot's ego got in the way, and he accepted Avraham's demand to separate, thereby committing his second error.

According to the Talmud "A man should always reside in proximity to his teacher; as long as Shimi ben Geira lived, [his disciple] Shlomo did not marry the daughter of Pharaoh" (*Berachos* 8•). For as long as a disciple is in close proximity to his teacher, the chance of error and sin are diminished. Once his teacher departed from the scene, even Shlomo *Hamelech* was less diligent and scrupulous in his behavior.

"Learning Torah [from one's teacher] is even greater than building the *Beis Hamikdash*. For as long as Baruch ben Neryah was alive, Ezra did not leave [Bavel] to return [to *Eretz Yisrael*]" (*Megillah* 16:). Ezra was already an established Torah sage when *Klal Yisrael* was permitted to return to *Eretz Yisrael* to rebuild the *Beis Hamikdash*. Ezra, however, would not initially join them because he could not forsake his teacher. Living in the presence of one's teacher is essential to maintaining the high idealism espoused by the teacher.

Lot mistakenly decided that he no longer required the guidance of a mentor. He felt he could forsake Avraham and succeed independently on the basis of his own greatness.

ויסע לוט מקדם

And Lot journeyed from the east... (*Bereishis* 13:11)

is interpreted by the *Bereishis Rabbah* (41:7) as

הסיע עצמו מקדמונו של עולם

He separated himself from the One who preceded the world (a play on the word "kedem") (see Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, *Bereishis* 19:29).

It is evident from these examples of Lot and Eliezer that subservience to a master is essential to successful spiritual growth. Once they cut the bonds to their master, their spiritual decline became apparent. This is precisely the lesson that Noach is teaching mankind. The relationship between Hashem and man must be that of master and disciple, master and slave. If man is unable to achieve this ideal relationship with Hashem, it is appropriate for man to learn this lesson by submitting himself to a human master.

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