


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 24 January 2014 - 23 Shevat 5774
Sedra Mishpatim


AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FREEDOM

IS LIFE A RAT RACE? ARE WE SIMPLY DASHING IFROM ONE URGENT appointment to the next, with hardly time to catch our breath in between? Do we sometimes feel that we are not free, but are slaves to a variety of bosses, including the clock, the calendar and the bank statement?

In fact, our daily lives with all the associated pressures have great worth and positive meaning. Hopefully, with G-d's help, we are indeed creating something significant in the world: a dwelling for the Divine, in our personal lives, in nurturing our families, in strengthening the structure of our community, in playing our part in society as a whole. Yet at the same time, we might wonder, in the hectic cycle of daily life, apart from a few much valued vacations, is this how it has to be?

No. Obviously, a central feature of Judaism is that, so to speak, on the seventh day we go free. Shabbat the Seventh Day of the week comes, and brings the opportunity to be freed from most worldly and workaday pressures and anxieties. Suddenly, the atmosphere changes. There is peace, a different tempo, freedom.

Does everyone take full advantage of this opportunity? Well - not

	In Loving Memory of Mrs Jeanne Gewolb-Sostrin (Yenta bas Devora) ע"ה - 15 Tevet 5772 Dedicated by her Son Dr Roger Gewolb שי'
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always, or not as much as we might do. In fact there are some laws of Shabbat which are really quite difficult to keep, such as the law that one may not worry on Shabbat¹. Yet the more we create the Shabbat environment around us, the easier it becomes to be free from everything, even from worry.

Now, what has this got to do with our Sedra², which presents basic Torah laws for Jewish society? Many of these laws apply fully today, in all their details; yet there are others which seem to have been relevant only thousands of years ago.

A law which seems to apply only to ancient times is that concerning a Jewish slave. For a variety of reasons, he has sold himself or has been sold into slavery. However, the Torah tells us he should work only for six years³. In the seventh year he goes free, and – we learn in a later Sedra - the master must give him a fine “golden handshake” so that he does not go empty handed⁴.

Then comes the question of what happens if the slave does not want to go free. He enjoys working for his master. He does not want to leave. Then, instructs the Torah, there is a special ceremony involving his ear, and after that he is able to continue to be a slave⁵.

Why his ear? What has the ear got to do with it? Rashi, the famous Torah commentator, gives an answer. His ear heard G-d say at Mount Sinai “the Children of Israel are *My* servants”. If we are G-d’s servants, then we are not servants or slaves of anyone else. Now, when the seventh year comes, and with it, the opportunity of freedom, how can this Jew choose to remain a slave?! The Torah is reminding him: if you have the opportunity for freedom - take it. Don’t remain a slave, when the seventh year comes.

Seventh year? Or was it the seventh *day*? Yes! The Torah is speaking on two levels at once. It is hinting to us, across the millennia, long after the disappearance of slavery in its literal sense, that when Shabbat the seventh day comes, do not remain a slave - just seize the chance for freedom!

1. ShulchanAruch HaRav 306, sec.21. 2. Exodus chs.21-24. 3. Exodus 21:2. 4. Deut.15:13-15. 5. Exodus 21:6. 6. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.11, p.97.

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SEDRA MISHPATIM

BEING KIND

"We have a new boy in our class," Benjy remarked at breakfast one Sunday morning.

"Really? What's his name? Why has he just joined your school now, in the middle of the year?" Rachel asked curiously.

"Michael something-or-other. But he's a real spoil-sport. He sits around all day looking miserable, and he never joins in the football games or anything' My teacher told us he's sad because his father died a few months ago. That's why he just joined our school - his family moved here because he has grandparents here".

"Oh poor boy!" Benjy's mother said sympathetically. "He must be going through a very hard time. I hope you're all being very nice to him and making him feel welcome."

"Well it's a bit hard. Some of the boys are even teasing him a bit, because he's so mopey. But how can I even be nice to him? He never ever says anything".

“Oh Benjy, poor Michael is probably feeling very miserable about his father. He’s probably just waiting for someone to make friends with him,” his mother said.

Rachel put in - “You know we just learnt in school that it says in the Torah - in this week’s Sedra, Mishpatim - that you are not allowed to afflict widows and orphans.”

“Why just widows and orphans?” Dina asked’ “I didn’t know that you are allowed to be nasty to *anybody!*”

“Well of course you have to be nice to everybody, but especially widows and orphans, because they have no one to protect them,” Rachel explained.

“Yes, someone who has unfortunately suffered is more vulnerable,” said their mother. “Like poor Mrs Marks across the road, whose husband passed away last year. So it’s good to be specially kind to them.”

“That’s right,” said Dina, “and so I sometimes go shopping for her. So she shouldn’t feel so alone.”

“Well, I didn’t realise that,” Benjy said. He looked thoughtful. “Maybe I could start tomorrow making an extra effort to be friends with Michael.....”

“In fact, Mummy, I know where he lives, it’s just round the corner. Can I invite him to come over and play here today?”

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