

HAFTARAH EXHORTATIONS:

Haftarah Mishpatim

by Mark Huey posted 21 February, 2009 www.outreachisrael.net

Jeremiah 34:8-22, 33:25-26

“Free to Believe in Blood Covenants!”

The lengthy list of ordinances that is outlined in *Mishpatim* (Exodus 21:1-24:18) involves Moses delivering important instruction to Israel, and we see the people openly declare their intention to obey God. In an elaborate sacrificial ceremony, Moses takes blood from the burnt and peace offerings and sprinkles first the altar, and then the very people who have promised to obey the words of the Lord:

“Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘**All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!**’ Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put *it* in basins, and the *other* half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘**All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!**’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, ‘**Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words**’” (Exodus 24:3-8).

This dramatic sprinkling exercise affirms previously established patterns (Genesis 15:10) that in order to ratify a covenant, there must be a blood sacrifice associated with it. Over a thousand years later, the author of Hebrews makes reference to what we see in this week’s *parashah*, comparing and contrasting it to the atoning blood sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua:

“Therefore even the first *covenant* was not inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘**THIS IS THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT WHICH GOD COMMANDED YOU**’ [Exodus 24:8]. And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood. And according to the Law, *one may almost say*, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these” (Hebrews 9:19-23).

In the narrative of the Holy Scriptures beginning in Genesis and into the Apostolic Writings, the message is consistent in that there is a distinct spiritual connection between blood sacrifices and covenants established with the chosen people of God.

As this week’s Torah teaching begins, the first ordinance detailed after the Decalogue has been given deals with the provision to emancipate the Hebrew slaves from bondage. The theme of setting the captives free from slavery, as epitomized in the miraculous physical escape from Egyptian slavery, points to the ultimate deliverance from spiritual human bondage to sin. God communicates some profound truths to the Israelites about slavery, and the commandments given to slave owners require them to release their slaves in the seventh year, after six years of service to them. It is mirrored by a pattern of working six days followed by the Sabbath day, or working the soil for six years and then giving it a rest in the seventh.

Slavery, in and of itself, is not being condemned because selling oneself into slavery was simply a part of the Ancient Near Eastern economy, similar to what indentured servants experienced in colonial American times. It was very much like taking on debt today. Since sophisticated financial instruments were not in use at the time, instead, a man would basically sell his services to a slaveowner in order to slowly gain some financial wherewithal. The one unique aspect of Hebrew slavery was the requirement to release the slaves every seventh year.

Emancipation so that a man could choose to live free of the constraints of bondage was the commanded goal. This is elaborated upon as the portion commences:

“Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them: If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; **but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment.** If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. **But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently”** (Exodus 21:1-6).

Some of the particulars about how to handle preexisting marriages and those arranged during the time of service are delineated. Without getting into all of the specifics, suffice it to say that when someone was in bondage, all that was near and dear to the man was under the same obligation to the slaveowner.

Hebrew slavery, being a mutually beneficial economic system for both the slaveowner and the slave, did not have the physically cruel aspects often associated with different types of slavery most have read about in different cultures. In fact, note how the choice is given to the slave who is being offered his freedom, and the response regarding his love for his master. In this opening ordinance description about slavery, the concept of willingly becoming a permanent bondservant is stated. The offer of freedom comes to the slave as the choice to leave is given. If the slave loves his master and his wife and children, whether preexisting or given during his tenure, then upon the slave’s desire to serve his master, he willingly states and makes a total commitment to his master. A ceremony where the master brings the slave before God and pierces his ear with an awl to the doorpost of the master’s house is performed. This marks the slave and symbolizes permanent service to his master.

The slave can willingly choose to be a bondservant to his master. The transference of one leaving bondage from Egyptian masters to Hebrew masters to ultimately serving the Holy One of Israel is vaguely outlined. In some respects, one can almost see the progress of going from the bondage of sin, obeying God like being trained by a tutor, until recognition that perfect compliance to His laws is impossible. Paul communicates this to the Galatians:

“Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Yeshua the Messiah might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Messiah, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Messiah Yeshua” (Galatians 3:21-26).

It is not until the Apostolic period that one is more familiarized with the concept of being a bondservant to the Holy One of Israel. The process of being set free from the bondage of sin is responded to by making a total commitment to serving the One that set you free. Obviously, the most perfect example of a bondservant to the Most High is the Messiah Yeshua:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped [exploited, NRSV], **but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and** being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

The Apostles of the Messiah consistently referred to themselves and one another as bondservants.¹ These followers of the Messiah Yeshua were totally surrendered to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and they had each, effectively, allowed their ears to be pierced to the

¹ Acts 4:29; Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:7, 4:7; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 1.

execution cross and the truths communicated by the atoning work He had accomplished. How critical is it that humanity understand that everyone has to be a slave to something? You are either going to be a slave to sin—or a slave to the righteousness only available through belief in the redeeming work of the Messiah. These are the only two options, and God in His mercy toward humanity is attempting to illuminate this critical reality right from the beginning of His list of ordinances following the giving of the Decalogue. In many ways this initial ordinance, being described so soon after the Ten Commandments are given, allows one to conclude that part of God's plan for His people is that they relinquish their bondage to the Egyptians and instead willingly migrate to become bondservants to Himself.

Clearly by the time of Jeremiah's generation, the Haftarah passages that the Sages chose to reflect upon—as they dealt with all of the ordinances instituted in the early weeks of the wilderness sojourn—it is understood that these slavery ordinances had not been followed by Israel for many generations. In fact, Jeremiah reminds those of his generation about the very blood covenant that spoke initially about the release of the slaves from bondage in the seventh year. His admonition was that the forefathers did not obey or incline their ears to this ordinance:

“Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘I made a covenant with your forefathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, saying, ‘At the end of seven years each of you shall set free his Hebrew brother who has been sold to you and has served you six years, you shall send him out free from you; **but your forefathers did not obey Me or incline their ear to Me**’” (Jeremiah 34:12-14).

The consequences of disobedience are going to be devastating. Jeremiah describes a brief time of revival or return to the ordinances under King Zedekiah, as the threat of Babylonian attacks approach:

“The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were in Jerusalem to proclaim release to them: that each man should set free his male servant and each man his female servant, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman; so that no one should keep them, a Jew his brother, in bondage. And all the officials and all the people obeyed who had entered into the covenant that each man should set free his male servant and each man his female servant, so that no one should keep them any longer in bondage; they obeyed, and set *them free*. **But afterward they turned around and took back the male servants and the female servants whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection for male servants and for female servants**” (Jeremiah 34:8-11).

This act of desperation does not last long. In short order, the willingness to set the slaves free subsides, and they are brought back into subjection. The concluding verses of Jeremiah 34 detail the horrific consequences of not obeying God's ordinances regarding the release of the slaves:

“Although recently you *had* turned and done what is right in My sight, each man proclaiming release to his neighbor, and you had made a covenant before Me in the house which is called by My name. Yet you turned and profaned My name, and each man took back his male servant and each man his female servant whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your male servants and female servants.’ Therefore thus says the LORD, ‘You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming release each man to his brother and each man to his neighbor. **Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you,**’ declares the LORD, **‘to the sword, to the pestilence and to the famine; and I will make you a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth.** I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, *when* they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf—I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life, and into the

hand of the army of the king of Babylon which has gone away from you. Behold, I am going to command,' declares the LORD, 'and I will bring them back to this city; and they will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant'" (Jeremiah 34:15-22).

Instead of releasing the slaves per the ordinances detailed in *Mishpatim*, the Lord is going to release the sword, pestilence, famine, and terror upon the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Eventually, those who are fully aware of the covenant that required the sacrifices will be given into the hands of their enemies. Their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the Earth. Ultimately, Jerusalem will be burned and the land will become desolate without inhabitants. This is not a very pretty picture of the penalties incurred as a result of disobedience.

The scene of devastation to reflect upon—as one considers the lack of obedience to *just* the slave emancipation ordinance—is not what the Sages want us to dwell upon. In order to end this week's Haftarah on an more upbeat note, a reference to God's ultimate restoration of Israel directs our thoughts back to Jeremiah 33:25-26:

"Thus says the LORD, 'If My covenant *for* day and night *stand* not, *and* the fixed patterns of heaven and earth I have not established, then I would reject the descendants of Jacob and David My servant, not taking from his descendants rulers over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. **But I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them**" (Jeremiah 33:25-26).

Lamentably, God's chosen people have a tendency to disobey His rules. The consequences of disobedience are described in great detail in the Tanakh and Apostolic Writings. While there is comfort in knowing that God will eventually restore Israel and demonstrate great mercy to His people—how much more significant is the knowledge that a blood covenant has been completed that gives all who believe an assurance that His promises will be kept? The fact that God the Father was willing to sacrifice His Son, our sacrificial Lamb, in order to pay for the penalty of our sin *is very reassuring*. But do not take it for granted! Denying it has grave consequences, especially if you have believed upon it and then despised it as ineffectual:

"How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.' And again, 'THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:29-31; cf. Deuteronomy 32:35; Deuteronomy 32:36).

While we might proclaim that we have become bondservants of the Most High following in the footsteps of the Apostles, the fact remains that *none* of us, despite our protestations, love the Lord perfectly. We all fall short of His glory and sin. As the Apostle John writes, we all continue to sin regardless of our professed desires. But in case we think all hope is lost, he does give us a prescription for cleansing ourselves when we do sin:

"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10).

Praise God that the Word—from Exodus to Jeremiah to the Apostolic Writings—is in us! Praise Him that He has given us His ordinances so that these great tutors will lead us to the conclusion that we need a Savior. And above all of this, praise God that He sent His Son, the perfectly sinless Bondservant, whose blood, sprinkled upon the altar and covering our sin, continues to intercede for us and His people. **Thank God we are free to believe!** To Him be all the glory!

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