

Parashah Sixty
Exodus 21:1-22:24; Jeremiah 34:1-14; I Corinthians 6:9-11

Notes by Tim Hegg

Relationships

The cycle of life we so highly prize within the Torah community causes us often to reflect on the past, and to consider the future. As parents, we dedicate ourselves to the important task of preparing our children for adulthood, and particularly that, by God's grace, they would carry the life-message of God's greatness into their generation. The presence of the Yartzeit Board in our synagogue is a constant reminder that one generation gives way to the next. I have often remarked that one day my name will be on that board, and it will be left to my sons, daughters and grandchildren to pray the *kaddish* as they remember me. Then it will be the responsibility of their generation to be leaders in the community and to hand the message, both in word and deed, to their generation and the next.

This highlights the supreme importance of community and the relationships that are the building blocks of community. It is only when we apply the biblical standards of righteousness that relationships will flourish as God intends, and we will be able to disciple the next generation to carry on the important task of sanctifying His Name in our world.

Unfortunately, in our modern society, personal feelings reign supreme in matters relating to relationships, and this phenomenon surely has its effected upon us as well. As a result, God's standards for relationships are viewed as archaic and unworkable in our modern times. When God's instructions conflict with our feelings, we find ways to "reinterpret" what God has said so that we can follow our feelings and believe we're obeying God. In this way, relationships based upon personal feelings have replaced objective, biblical standards and "feelings" have eclipsed the bedrock of obedience. "What *should* I do" has been replaced by "what does my *heart tell me* to do." Little wonder the ears of many have grown deaf to the Torah, because the hearts of many no longer feel the need to listen to that unchangeable standard that regulates the lives of all people in all eras. Why should they? They have come to "understand" and even been encouraged from the pulpit to believe that one's own thoughts and feelings are in many ways paramount to knowing what is right "for me." "How can one eternal, standard fit the infinite variety of psychological profiles found in humankind"? And so, unwittingly, Freud has led the Christian community into a most subtle relativism, not based upon the pluralism of philosophies (something the apologist can critique), but upon the uncharted waters of individualism. Each person, so we are told, must find his or her way to the truth, sifting life's messages through the psyche of one's own self-realization. This, by-and-large, has become the church's answer to the so-called dilemma of "finding one's self," a condition applied to teenagers in the 60's and 70's, but now applicable for many adults who, during "mid-life crises" are still in the business of "finding themselves."

In the midst of such humanistic thinking, it would be easy to "throw the baby out with the bath water," to neglect talking about "relationships" because the term has lost its value in an era where its use is so encumbered by humanistic psychology. But to neglect the pivotal importance of relationships would be just as grave an error as to impose the humanistic psychology of the day upon the scriptural teaching about relationships. Let us never forget, *the relationships which God created among humankind reflect the relationship He longs to have with His people.* And this is so

because *the relationships which He created among humankind can reflect the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit*. In other words, God’s will is that human relationships should reflect the relationships extant with the Godhead, for mankind was created in the image of God. Therefore, to the extent that our relationships with one another reflect the relationship enjoyed between Father, Son, and Spirit, to this extent we make known the image of God in us.

This is one reason why God spends so much time telling us how our relationships ought to be, and how they are to be regulated. In our Torah section, we have a great many laws which either regulate relationships or prescribe payment or restitution for restoring relationships. Furthermore, in some instances our *parashah* notes relationships which are prohibited. “Do not let a sorcerer live” pretty much makes a relationship with such a person an impossibility!

Our *parashah* begins with the words “these are the ordinances” (וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, *v’eileh hamishpatim*). *Mishpat*, translated “ordinance,” literally means “judgment.” In other words, these are God’s assessments—His judgments in terms of how relationships within the Torah community are to be lived out. We are faced, therefore, with a clear and simple decision: will we accept God’s assessments regarding proper relationships, or will we set them aside for our own? Will we trust His way or lean upon our own understanding?

The opening paragraph deals with how a slave or servant was to be treated in terms of the economics of his or her service to the master. The way the English reads, it might appear cruel and uncaring, but we need to read more carefully. The situation is this: if a male servant or slave enters his time of service already having a wife, then at the *shemittah* or sabbatical year both he and his wife and their children are free to go without having to pay any redemption price for any member of the family. If, however, a male servant or slave enters his service alone, and is given a wife during the six years he serves his master, then at the sabbatical year, he does not have to pay a redemption price for his freedom, but some reimbursement for his wife and children (if they have had children) must be made to his master. The English reads: “...he shall go out alone” (21:4). However, the issue being dealt with here is one of economics, as the wider context makes clear (e.g., damages and restitution). Often in the ancient world, a person became a slave or servant in order to repay a debt for which he or she did not have the ability to pay. In Israel, however, six years was the maximum for such an arrangement—the sabbatical year marked the release of all slaves.

When our text states “he shall go out alone,” the Hebrew translated “alone” is בְּגִפּוֹ, which is the preposition ב followed by גִּפּוֹ, with the third masculine singular possessive suffix י. The question is the meaning of גִּפּוֹ, a word used only here. Most commentators take this word to be from גִּי, “body,” and thus meaning “in [or with] his own body,” that is, he is free to go as he came. But again, in the context, the issue is monetary. Since a slave did not earn wages, when the time of release came, he legally could only take with him what he had initially brought. So we should understand the phrase “he shall go out alone” to mean “he does not have to pay a redemption price for himself.” This meaning is confirmed by the parallel of the next verse (21:5), in which the word חֹפְשִׁי, *chofshi*, “free” is used: “I will not go out free.”

It seems obvious that if he had the means, he could pay the redemption price for his wife (money he acquired during his time of servitude) and children. Such a scenario is not entirely out of the question: other family members or friends could have come to his aid in supplying the necessary redemption price for his newly acquired family.

But even if he did not have the means to redeem his wife and children, he had the option to remain with them as an indentured slave. It appears as though the own-

er was not given the option of refusing such a request. He would take the man “to God” (אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים), meaning “to the place where God’s judgment was made known, i.e., the recognized court (note that אֱלֹהִים is also used of judges in 22:8, 9) in order to establish that the slave or servant, who had the legal right to go free, had given up this right in order to remain with his wife and children.

A major question now arises in such a scenario: is the man to be counted as a purchased slave or as a freeman? Has he given up his freedom so that he remains in the status of a slave, or is his master obligated to compensate him for his work? A crux in answering this question is the word עֲלַם, ‘*olam* in 21:6, “...he shall serve him permanently (עֲלַם). If this means “for the rest of his life,” then how are the laws of the *sh^emittah* and *yovel* (the Sabbatical and Jubilee years) to be observed? For our text begins by noting that the slave in question is a Hebrew, and Lev 25:40–41 makes it clear that all Hebrew slaves were to return to their families at the Jubilee.

This being the case, the Sages understood our text to mean that the slave who puts his ear to the doorpost remains a slave to his master only until the Jubilee (cf. Ramban on Ex 21:6; Ibn Ezra on Lev 25:40–41; *Mechilta* on Ex 21:6). At that time, he and his family go free. Thus, the slave who remains with his master in order to remain with his family is working for the release of his wife and children. His labor is compensated by purchasing the redemption of his family at the Jubilee.

The matter of a Hebrew daughter sold as a maidservant (אִמָּה, ‘*amah*) is different than that of a male slave (21:7–11). She does not obtain release at the *sh^emittah* year since she was obtained with a view to marriage. If, after obtaining the young lady, the owner is not pleased with her in terms of being suitable as his wife, she is given the right of redemption. He has no right to sell her as a slave to someone else. If the man who initially acquired her has a son who desires to take her as his wife, then she is to be treated as a free woman (not a slave), meaning that she has the right to refuse the offer, and to obtain a dowry if she does agree to the marriage.

But 21:10 seems to talk of polygamy. It appears to describe the scenario in which the man who initially obtained the young woman as a slave took her as his wife and then later is displeased with her. As a result, he marries another woman. Then 21:10 indicates that, in regard to the slave woman whom he initially married, he must maintain “her food, her clothing, and her conjugal rights.” So on a surface reading, it appears that the man is required by the Torah to maintain both women as wives.

We should first step back and consider the wider teaching of Scripture. Paul teaches us clearly that the relationship between husband and wife is a divinely painted picture of Yeshua’s relationship with the His *kehilah* or “congregation” (*ekklesia*, Eph 5:25ff). In the same manner as Yeshua loves His *kehilah* as His bride, so every husband is to love his wife. This type of love has, at its heart, a quality of uniqueness. To give to others what should be reserved only for a spouse is the quickest way to damage this most important relationship. Yeshua has one bride, one people, one wife. The picture of polygamy just does not work to describe what the Bible clearly teaches about Yeshua and His *kehilah*.

What is more, the Scriptures are replete with the teaching of monogamy, from the earliest description of marriage (Gen 2:24) through the wisdom literature (“the heart of her husband trusts in her,” Prov 31:11) and even in the words of Yeshua (Mt 19:4ff) and the Apostles (Eph 5:33). All of these pictures and admonitions fall if polygamy is actually God’s plan for marriage. But what then of our portion that appears to assume the rightful existence of polygamy?

The pivotal turning point in this passage is something hidden to all but those reading the He-

brew text. For in order to accommodate the long-standing position on polygamy by the Rabbinical authorities, the Hebrew text, while not changed, has nonetheless been interpreted to condone polygamy, and all English translations have followed without exception. This pivotal point is in 21:8, where the text has the word לֹא, “no” or “not,” but which the Masoretes wrote in the margin should be read as לוֹ, “for himself.” Since the two words are pronounced exactly the same, it was an ingenious way to make the text say what it actually does not. Taking 21:8 *as written* it would read like this: “If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who did not designate her (אִם־רָעָה אֲדָהָּ, בְּעֵינַי אֲדָנָהּ אֲשֶׁר־לֹא יַעֲדָהּ), then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because he has dealt unfairly with her.” Now this entirely changes the meaning from what the English translations have. What the text now says is that the man who bought her, originally intending to marry her, but did not, in the end, take her as his wife—then he may designate her as wife for a son (if she is so willing), or else allow her to be redeemed, but he may not sell her to foreigners because he has failed to meet the expectations given when he first indicated to her that he desired to marry her.

But there is one more translation blunder which must be corrected, for 21:10 seems still to have polygamy in mind: “If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights.” What this seems to imply is that if he decides not to marry her after all, does not designate her as wife for a son, and she is not redeemed by anyone, and he marries another woman, he still must treat her as a wife, for he must maintain conjugal relations with her. The Hebrew word translated by all the English versions as “conjugal rights” or equivalent is עֲנֻתָהּ, a word found only here in all of the Tanach. As a result, the meaning of the word is uncertain, and the translators have given it the sense of “conjugal rights” based upon the context as they interpret it. But documents from other ancient Near Eastern cultures (such as those found in the Akkadian language) have similar laws, with this wording: “food, clothing, and oil” or “food, clothing, and shelter.” The Hebrew word עֲנָה could easily be cognate to the Akkadian terms used for “oil” or “shelter.” Thus, the meaning of the text would simply be that if, after purchasing the woman for a bride, then deciding not to marry her but marrying another, the man must maintain her welfare—he cannot simply turn her out to a life of poverty. Moreover, if he fails to deal with her properly, she is to be set free without the need to pay any redemption price.

With this understanding of the text, based squarely upon the words themselves, rather than supporting polygamy it sustains the virtue of monogamy, and furthermore shows the requirement to take the marriage relationship seriously. As husbands, the treatment of our wives is to be accepted as a sacred privilege given by God Himself. We are to care for her, respect her, and in every way edify her as a picture of how Yeshua Himself cares for, respects, and builds up His bride, the *kehilah*. Our love for her cannot be shared or divided, but must be singular, faithful, and enduring. This is one of the highest *mitzvot* we can fulfill, as this picture is the only one in the universe endowed with such clear brush strokes of Yeshua’s love for His bride.

Another passage within this *parashah* which deserves our special attention is 21:22-25, perhaps the most clear Torah teaching on the issue of abortion. Once again, we must look carefully at the text if we expect to navigate through the murky waters of the English translations.

The core terms in this passage are in v. 22, translated by the NASB as “so that she has a miscarriage.” This is a translation of וַיֵּצֵא יְלֶדֶיהָ, which literally means “and her child comes forth.” “Miscarriage” means “to give birth prematurely to a fetus, so that it does not live.” But there is a perfectly good word for this in the Hebrew, שָׁכַל (cf. 2 Ki 2:19; Mal 3:11; Gen 31:38; Jb 21:10; 2

Ki 2:21). What our text indicates is not that the child is stillborn, but simply that the trauma causes the child to be birthed prematurely. The issue of injury to the woman and to the baby are taken up separately in the following context. If the woman is injured but the baby is fine, then the restitution is determined by the woman's husband. If, however, there is further injury (v. 23) which, in the context, must be interpreted as injury to the baby (since injury to the woman has been dealt with in v. 22), then the child is treated as fully viable and penalty is meted out accordingly, life for life, etc.

Why is this passage put here, in these particular laws? I think the reason is clear, for these laws generally are dealing with manslaughter and negligent homicide. The laws which immediately follow describe death by a bull which, known to be dangerous, is nonetheless not sufficiently restrained by its owner. This describes a situation of negligent homicide. In the same way, men who fight in the presence of a pregnant woman *have neglected to take into consideration the high value of the child she carries*. As such, injury to her child falls within the context of negligence, and if the child is killed as a result, then there is a clear case of negligent homicide.

What lessons we can learn from this passage! Rather than supporting abortion (as some would have us think), this text accredits to the baby in the womb the status of a living soul. But this text, rightly understood, also gives us a glimpse into the heart of God and His view of life. Indeed, He sanctifies life—He sets it apart as valuable in all respects. It must therefore be cared for, nurtured, and protected. Not only must the life of a child within the womb of his or her mother be guarded, but the mother also must be cared for with special attention, for she is the very instrument of God to bring into His creation yet another soul, a soul created in His image, and breathing the breath of life from His very nostrils.

Abortion, then, is nothing less than spitting in the face of God. It is a hideous idolatry where mankind has put his own selfish interests and pleasures ahead of the clear commands of God. Living by feelings and not by Torah has opened the way for even “religious” people to find an excuse for snuffing out the life of the unborn. The scourge of “partial-birth abortions” should horrify us all, and launch us into action against it in every legal and God honoring way. If the life of the unborn is of no value, then surely our understanding of God has changed, and we have created Him in our image. No wonder the words of Scripture seem to have such little power in our society, for we have found effective ways to make them subservient to the whims of psychology. The pleasures of life have eclipsed the Giver of life, and we have cast His words behind us (Ps 50:17).

Let us resolve, then, by His grace and power, to walk in His ways and to sanctify His name through righteous, biblical relationships. Let us resolve once again to make our marriages a living testimony of God's love for His own, of Yeshua's relationship with His bride. Let us covenant once again before HaShem to love life as He loves it, to guard and protect it as a supreme gift from His hand, and not to waste it or devalue it, but to agree with Him that life is sacred. Let us, in our relationships, be the canvas upon which He may paint the glory of His own person and the majesty of His salvation.