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The Hebrew Slave

15: 12-18

The Hebrew slave DIG: What is a bond-slave? What rights did Jewish slaves have? What responsibility did the owners have? In what way do these instructions help Isra'el prevent slavery? Why do you think God reminds the Israelites that they had once been slaves? What is the new relationship in verses 16-17? How is this different from the previous relationship?

REFLECT: In what way have believers been freed from slavery? How is this to influence our care for others? What implications do these verses have for employees? Employers? What do these verses tell you about God's priorities in relationships and property? As ADONAI has cared for the woman maidservant, how has He cared for you?

Jewish debtors unable to repay their loans could become indentured servants in the household of the man to whom they were indebted, and in that way, worked off their debt.

The second **mitzvah** designed to protect the poor is concerned with a **Hebrew man** who would sell **himself** as a **slave** (Greek: *doulos*, meaning *a bond-slave*) to **his** creditor to pay a debt. At the end of six years, **he** was to be released and sent away with generous gifts which would help **him** to start a new life. In the faithful observance of this **mitzvah**, **Isra'el** would recall **her** own time of **slavery in Egypt** and the abundant provision **she** enjoyed when **her** release came. The memory of this would act as a powerful motivating force.³⁵⁶

The mitzvah stated (15:12): If your fellow Hebrew - a man or woman - is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you are to set him free (15:12). It is very probable that the word **Hebrew** here has a socioeconomic meaning rather than a merely ethnic one. This is basically a restatement of the mitzvah that occurs in **Exodus 21:2-11**, but adds some typically **Deuteronomic** extras. This commandment serves to limit the time of servitude. However, it also gives us a great principle that prepares us for **the** coming **mitzvot** dealing with our fellow mankind. The commandment that permeates the Torah, lifts up men and women as being created in the image of **God**. Through this **mitzvah**

and the ones that follow, **ADONAI** claims **His** own and warns of any abuses that one person would exercise over another. The point is, no one can own another person. Every **man** and woman belong to **YHVH** who created them.³⁵⁷

The mitzvah explained (15:13-18): When you set him free, you are not to send him away empty-handed. You are to surely provide for him as much as he can carry from your flock and threshing floor and winepress. As **ADONAI** your God has blessed you, you are to give to him (15:13-14). This would give the man a fresh start in life. Once again, the humanitarian spirit of **Deuteronomy** is clear.

While **the master** was **himself an Israelite**, he would not have experienced **the Exodus**. But, because of the corporate nature of **Isra'el**, any person, in any age, could be regarded as one with those who had personally experienced the deliverance of **the Exodus**, and could in memory, and by an act of identification, enter into that ancient experience by faith. **You will remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and ADONAI your God redeemed you; therefore, I am commanding you this thing today (15:15).** Hence, any **master** of a **slave**, in any age, by freeing **his** own **slave** would be expressing gratitude to **God** for having liberated **His** own **people**. It would also remind **him** that **his** own personal welfare depended on that grace.

If, for some reason, the man or woman in **Isra'el** desired of his or her own free will to remain in the service of **the master**, it was possible to do so for the rest of life. But even apart from that possibility, the release of a **Hebrew slave** was not to be counted as a loss, since six years of **his** or **her** service was equivalent to the cost of hiring a **servant**. Obedience to this **mitzvah** would guarantee **the divine blessing** and no loss would result to **the master**.³⁵⁸



Now if the Hebrew slave tells you, “I will not go away from you” - because he loves you and your household since he is well off with you (15:16). The example given in Exodus 21:5 was a slave who had married and had children during that **seven-year** period and did not want to leave them behind. The master would formalize that decision by taking an awl and putting it through his ear (the symbol of obedience as in Psalm 40:6-8; Isaiah 50:4-5) to the door as a symbol that he had joined the master’s household, and then he would become a servant forever (15:16-17a). Notice that the name changes from slave to servant. The name implies someone of value and importance, and does not have any negative implications.³⁵⁹ Therefore, the servant had an important place in the family. We see the case where Eliezer the servant was sent by Abraham to find a wife for his son Isaac (see the commentary on Genesis, to see link [click Fx - Go to My Country and My Own Relatives and Get a Wife for My Son Isaac](#)).³⁶⁰

And to your female slave you are to do the same (15:17b). So, the man was free to go after the sixth year, but for a woman, it was different. If a man sells his daughter to be a maidservant, she is not to go free as the male servants to (Exodus 21:7). To our human way of thinking, this hardly seems fair. But in the eyes of God, this was a very loving thing to do. ADONAI was more concerned about her safety than anything else. If she does not please her master who has selected her for himself, then he is to allow her to be redeemed. He will have no power to sell her to a foreign people, seeing as he has dealt deceitfully toward her (Exodus 21:8). In those days it was virtually impossible for a woman to make it in the world without some protection. As a result, the LORD required someone from her family to redeem her (see the commentary on Ruth [Ax - Ruth and Bo’az on the Threshing Floor](#)). And as ADONAI cares for the women maidservant, He

cares for each one of us.³⁶¹

But because it is hard for an owner to let go of his **free** labor, **ADONAI** reminded him of his great deal: **Do not consider it a hardship when you set him free from you, for he has served you six years - equivalent to the value of a hired worker. So, ADONAI your God will bless you in all that you do (15:18).** Throughout the TaNaKh, **Isra'el's** treatment of the poor, fatherless, and widows served as a barometer of the nation's obedience to **YHVH's mitzvot**. Treating these needy people with compassion, justice, and equity was a fundamental part of being able to lift up **God's** name before the surrounding nations. The health of **Isra'el** was often measured by the quality of their care for these **people**, not by her accumulation of wealth.³⁶²

*Dear Loving Heavenly **Father**, How wonderful **You** are! Praise **You** that **Yeshua** bore the pain and shame of being the sacrifice for our sins, **He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21).** Praise **You** for saving all who love and follow **Yeshua** as their **Lord** and **Savior**. **For if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart it is believed for righteousness, and with the mouth it is confessed for salvation (Romans 10:9-10).** What a joy to know that **Yeshua** is preparing a home for them in heaven. **In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be (John 14:2-3).** There is eternal joy in pleasing you by being merciful as **You** are. It is more important to be kind and merciful than to be selfish and greedy. We love **You**. In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

Certainly, there is a spiritual message here for **God's** people today. We should love our **Lord** so much that we should want to serve **Him** willingly and gladly all our lives. We must never look upon our service as **slavery**, but as being a **servant** (see the commentary on **Romans By - The New Master in Messiah**). **I love my Master . . . and do not want to go free** is a wonderful confession of faith and love (**Exodus 21:5 NIV**). Granted, the **servant's** love for **his** wife and children entered into the picture, but even those blessings came because of **his master's** kindness, and **the master** was caring for **them** as well as **his servant**. What we all need is an open **ear** to hear the will of **ADONAI**, and a pierced **ear** that announces we love **Him** and are ready to obey **His** every **mitzvah**.³⁶³