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If You Buy a Hebrew Servant 21: 1-11

If you buy a Hebrew servant DIG: How does God's commandment about Hebrews serving Hebrews differ from their days serving Pharaoh? What freedoms, rights and needs is the LORD protecting? By freeing slaves every seventh year, how would that affect class barriers?

REFLECT: Do you think these commandments condone slavery? Why or why not? Other than God to whom or to what do you feel indebted, perhaps even enslaved? How does this passage help you to free yourself of that situation? How does your treatment of employees and fellow workers fit God's ideal?

Parashah 18: Mishpatim (Rulings) 21:1-24:18

(see my commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click [Af](#) - Parashah)

The Key People are Moshe, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, the people of Isra'el, seventy elders, Joshua and Hur.

The Scene is Mount Sinai.

The Main Events include mitzvot about servants, property, resting, and keeping the three annual travel feasts; an angel sent to lead Isra'el, going into Canaan, and driving out the enemies; Moshe telling ADONAI's judgments, the response: **We will do and we will listen**; Moshe sprinkling the people with the blood of the covenant; Moshe going up on Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of stone, staying 40 days and nights, and the Sh'khinah glory like fire.

This portion begins to set forth some of the specific, day-to-day guidelines for life in the redeemed community under the Covenant. When we begin to interpret the specific **rulings** the first level is halachic (see the commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click [Ad](#) - Glossary: Halakhah), trying to understand their application to every day life. In doing so, we need to figure out initially what these guidelines meant to Isra'el in the age in which they were first given by Moshe. The second level of interpretation is suggested by **Messiah**

Himself. After **His** resurrection, **Yeshua** said to **His apostles**: **This is what I meant when I was still with you and told you that everything written about Me in the Torah of Moshe, the Prophets and the Psalms had to be fulfilled. Then He opened their minds, so that they could understand the TaNaKh (Luke 24:44-45a).** That means we can look at **the Torah** to see what it teaches concerning **Yeshua** and **His** person/work.

Therefore, if we are able to see what the specific **rulings** teach concerning **Messiah**, that in itself will provide much of the basis for the doing of **them**. In other words, we live out these **rulings** because of what they can picture in our everyday life concerning **Messiah**, what **He** did for us, and who **He** has made us to be. **These rulings are God's blueprint for living.** Practicing these **rulings**, therefore, becomes a way of being a walking testimony of what **Messiah** did and who **He** is. Not only that, but obeying these **rulings** in this way will preclude all tendencies to legalism, where one receives credit for the doing of **them**, which is not what **YHVH** intended.

God said to Moses: **And these are the rulings you are to set before them (21:1). The force of the conjunction and, is to emphasize that although the section on civil law is separated from the Ten Commandments by an intervening passage, both were given on Mount Sinai.** These **rulings** concern the fundamental rights of **the Israelites**, and what punishments were expected when **their** rights were violated. They included civil and social rights. This first section describes **the rulings** involving **Hebrew** masters and **slaves**. **They** were not abusive, but very protective.

These **rulings** were to be **set before** all **the people of Isra'el**. No one was to be excluded from the knowledge of the Torah. That was important because in Egypt, as far as we can tell, there was no codified law. The word of Pharaoh was the law there - and he could change his mind at any time. Here the **God** of the Hebrews revealed **His rulings** in writing to all of the people.⁴⁰⁹ This section regulates that sale and treatment of **slaves**, or servants.

While **slavery** was a common phenomenon in all countries of the ancient Near East, the treatment accorded **slaves** differed from one land to another. In some land, Babylonia for example, the demand for **slaves** was greater than in others. This was due, perhaps, to a lack of free laborers. In order to meet the demand for **slaves**, large numbers were imported to the country or were captured in warfare. The economic conditions in Babylon as contrasted with **Isra'el** also had some influence on the manner in which **slaves** were treated. As far as **the Israelite** was concerned, it was unique because **God** was the source of the Torah and those commandments were based on unchanging moral and ethical norms, whereas other

law systems were produced out of social and economic necessities.⁴¹⁰

First, the rights of **Hebrew male slaves** are dealt with. **21:2-6** describe the rights of a **Hebrew** forced to sell himself into slavery because of a debt. The Torah said he was to be released after **six years** of labor. **If you buy a Hebrew servant because he was sold as to make restitution for his theft, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone without a wife, he is to go free alone (21:2-3a).** If both **he** and his **wife** were sold into slavery, **they** were both to be set **free** after **six years**. **But if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him (21:3b).**

However, if the **Hebrew** became a **slave** as a single **man** and then **he** was given a **wife** by **his master**, and the **wife** bore **him children**, after **six years his wife and children** would continue to be **slaves** of **the master** who provided **them** in the first place. **If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children belong to the master, and only the man shall go free (21:4).**



But after **six years he** did not want to be separated from **his** family **he** had the option of becoming a bond **slave**. **If the slave declares, “I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,” then his master must take him before the judges who met in the gate of the city that had doorposts. He shall take him to the doorpost and in an upright position, pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his bond slave for life (21:5-6).** There was a difference between a **slave** and a **bond slave**. Circumstances beyond one’s control made someone a **slave**. But a **bond slave** chose to remain a permanent **slave**. In that case **his ear** was to be pierced with a permanent mark, symbolizing **his** new status.

As a follower of **Yeshua**, the **Paul** called **himself a bondservant** throughout **his** letters. Because when **Messiah** redeems us from the **slavery** of sin, **He** sets us free. Then as believers, we can make the decision to become a **bond slave** to **Jesus Christ**. The means by which we do this is recorded by Paul: **Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:1-2).**

Here we also learn the powerful lesson of **the slave** who declares lifelong allegiance to **his master**. **Though the Sages frowned upon one who would throw away his freedom**, The Torah points out that **he** does so for the love of **his family** and the **love** of **his master**. This is the path of discipleship. We love our **Master** and we **love** our **families**; therefore, we put on the chains of **love** and declare our life long allegiance to **Him**. How would we know what it is to serve **the Master of masters** if we did not know what godly **slavery** looked like? In other words, **the regulations** regarding **slavery** reveal an aspect of **God's** character that is essential to understanding our relationship with **Him**.⁴¹¹

Secondly, the rights of **Hebrew female slaves** are discussed. **If a man sells his minor daughter** who is under twelve years old **as a slave, she is not to go free for six years as men slaves do (21:7)**. But if **she**, in **her slavery**, was engaged to be married to **the master**, but during the period of the betrothal **she** did not please **her master**, **she** could be released early. **If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to Gentiles, or foreigners, because he has broken faith with her (21:8).**

Concubines were permitted under the Torah and were not considered sinful. **If she** was engaged to the master's **son**, who had other wives, **she** was to be treated equally with all the other **women** in that household. **If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter (21:9)**. If the **son** of **the master** subsequently took another **wife** after marrying the slave girl, **he** was still obligated to **the female slave** for three things. **If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights** sexually. **If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free** because of his failure, **without any payment of money (21:10-11)**.

What does this teach us about the nature of **God**? How is this **mitzvah** a revelation of godliness? Just as **ADONAI** forbids a disenchanted **husband** from reducing **his wife's marital rights**, so too, **He Himself** must continue to care for, provide for and preserve a relationship with us, even when we are less attractive to **Him**! We need not fear a change in

His heart's attitude toward us. **He** is not subject to whim. **He** will not abandon **His** beloved. **He** will not turn **His** back on us. These are important truths, often difficult to grasp, especially if we have been hurt, rejected and abandoned by others before. Yet the good mitzvot of the Torah reveal it to be true of **YHVH**. **He** is faithful and true.