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Treat Fugitive Slaves Kindly

23: 15-16

Treat fugitive slaves kindly **DIG**: Who were these slaves? Where did they come from? Why couldn't they be Jewish slaves? What would normally happen to a runaway slave? What would happen to anyone harboring a runaway slave? How were fugitive slaves supposed to be treated in Isra'el? What opportunity would that present to them? How would a treaty requiring the return of runaway slaves affect Isra'el's relationship with ADONAI?

REFLECT: How do you treat strangers or people in need? How do you view them? When you see them standing on the street corner begging for food, does that make you angry? Or does it melt your heart? How do you determine true need from a scam? When was the last time you were in need? Who helped you out at that time? Who can you help this week?

Contrary to the slave laws of all the nations surrounding Isra'el, ADONAI demanded that His people treat fugitive slaves kindly, for the Jews had once been slaves themselves.

Deuteronomy 19:1 to 26:15 (to see link click [DI](#) - The Social and Family Mitzvot) deals with individual mitzvot, and to today's readers they might appear irrelevant at first, but the very principles behind these commandments were the ones that have brought dignity to mankind. We need to examine these mitzvot in depth to discover the spirit in which they were given, so that we can still live in obedience to **God's Word** today. For example, in **Numbers 18**, the Israelites were to bring **their tithes** to the Tabernacle because **the priests** and **Levites** had **no inheritance**. But today we have no Temple and no priesthood; however, we bring our tithes to our place of worship. That is the spirit of the mitzvah.



From **23:15** to **26:15**, **Moses** deals with **twenty** real life situations that **the nation** would need to function in a godly manner, and valuable lessons for us today as well: **number one**.

A. Do not hand him over: If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master (**23:15 NIV**). The slaves in view here would not be Jewish, because the Jews were not allowed to enslave their brothers and sisters. Jewish servants would either be released in the Year of Release, or would agree to serve willingly for life (see [Cy - The Year of Release](#)). But contrary to the laws of other nations, this mitzvah allowed the Jews to harbor fugitive slaves and protect them. The prohibition against returning foreign slaves illustrated part of Isra'el's unique witness before the goyim. After all, YHVH delivered His covenantal people from slavery in Egypt and never returned them to their Egyptian master - Pharaoh.⁴⁹⁹

This was an astounding mitzvah. It was dramatically opposite to the whole thrust of slave laws in other ancient Near Eastern law codes, and indeed, in the laws governing slavery in more modern times. The normal, common rule in such laws was that any slave who ran away was subject to extreme penalties (sometimes even death). And in the Code of Hammurabi, a person who harbored a runaway slave was put to death. Therefore, this mitzvah was in direct conflict with the normal slave law at the time, which would have insisted on returning the runaway slave to his master.⁵⁰⁰

Dear Heavenly Father, You are amazing! Praise Your power and love which freed Your people Israel, from Egyptian slavery. Praise You that again Your mighty power freed us from the power of sin and death by your victory at the cross and at the resurrection tomb. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that to whatever you yield yourselves as slaves for obedience, you are slaves to what you obey - whether to sin resulting in death, or to obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching under which you were placed; and after you were set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness

(Romans 6:15-18).

We joyfully call **You** our **Lord** and submit to **Your** rule in our lives. **You** are a wonderful, kind and loving **Master** and **Father** and we are so grateful for **Your** giving us salvation that we might live with **You** forever, praising and glorifying **Your** holy name forever! **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. For the Scripture says, "Whoever trusts in Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all - richly generous to all who call on Him. Praise Your love and holiness. In Yeshua's holy name and His power of resurrection. Amen**

B. Treat them kindly: Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses (23:16a). It is remarkable that **the slave** was given the freedom to **choose his** own place of residence in words that echo precisely **the sanctuary . . . place ADONAI chose** to dwell (Deuteronomy 18:6). When the phrase **the place ADONAI chooses** is used so extensively in **Deuteronomy** to point to the sanctuary where **YHVH** would place **His Name**, and it is used in connection with **the free choice** of a **slave**, it has deep theological and personal meaning.

This short mitzvah is important for the indirect light it sheds on the political implications of the covenant between **YHVH** and **Isra'el** (see [Ah](#) - Treaty of the Great King). In suzerain treaties of the ancient Near East, provisions were made for the extradition of various types of fugitives from one country and their return to their country of origin. **Isra'el**, however, was not to have such treaties, at least in relation to runaway **slaves**. To do so would be to imply a treaty with a foreign power would undermine the total commitment required of **Isra'el** with her treaty with **ADONAI**. Therefore, this mitzvah not only provided sanctuary for runaway **slaves** (such as the Israelites had been themselves in their recent past), but also preserved the sanctity of the treaty with **YHVH**.⁵⁰¹

A. Do not oppress him: Do not oppress him (23:16b NIV). **Jewish** masters were not allowed to abuse **their slaves** so that **they** would want to flee. Those **refugees** come from other surrounding nations, and assisting **them** would give **the Jews** the opportunity to tell **aliens** about **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**.⁵⁰²

Paul says to us: **Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching under which you were placed; and after you were set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness (Romans**



6:17-18). People are either slaves **to sin** and the Adversary or **to righteousness** and **God**. Now that you have been set free from the slavery of **sin** and death, how can you help others to also escape?