

Rabbi Tovia Singer Speaks on Slavery in the Torah

Language

I want to stand up for the God of Israel and the Bible. When people said slavery was advocated in the Jewish Bible, this is a lie of the lie of lies. Now, it is true that we [are] using the word slave, that means the word is eved, but an eved in the Jewish people in the ancient world is not the cruel crime of slavery that existed in Europe and Australia and goes on today in the United States and goes on today in the Arab world. An eved meant that you are a part of the family. Abraham turned to his eved, to Eliezer, to say, 'I am putting my trust in you.' So understand that a person who joined, who was an eved, meaning a servant, whatever you want to translate it, that has nothing to do with black men in Alabama in 1840. It meant that you join the family. You were not biologically connected to the family but you were entitled to all the benefits of being [in the] family. And if fact we saw in the last portion, Genesis 15, that Abraham thought, 'I don't have children, Eliezer is probably the one.' Just let this hit home against all the enemies of Torah and many people who just don't know and rightfully see the word slave...A servant meant or a slave meant not the cruel, vicious iniquities of racism...He trusted Eliezer completely to continue the progeneration of the Jewish people. Completely. So this is very important to see here who Abraham is [trusting]. So you should know this for the rest of your life that there is no, we are using the same language but mean something completely different.¹

Slavery and the Curse of Ham

The question is that in the Torah we find that following the Flood, Noah drank wine. It's hard for us to imagine in the modern world but grapes ferment naturally and in the ancient world they didn't have a way to stop that process. In fact to halt the process of fermentation is a, to do it effectively and is really a fairly modern technique, when I say modern I mean the last few hundred years. Actually a methodist minister named Welch came up with the method and that's why you have Welch's grape Juice.

Anyway so grape juice just naturally ferments so Noah drank from the from the wine and he became, he fell asleep and he was not dressed. Now there's nothing in the text says that Ham is African and that, we don't know who Ham is today. But one of his sons Ham went in and gazed

¹ SpiritualBabies, *Torah Pearls -Season2- Chayei Sara / Life of Sarah - Rabbi Tovia Singer*, (YouTube, 14/11/2014, 21:21) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEgbKGa8G70>>.

upon his father in a disrespectful way when he was not dressed and went out, not only did that but he then went out to tell his brothers; who then returned back to the tent and turning aside, cover their father in a sign of respect, okay.

There's our event, now as it turns out the Torah says that cursed be Canaan, these descendants of Ham. Now you have to be very careful with the word 'curse' because there are two words for the word 'curse' in Tanakh. There's one word curse which means what we would think curse is, that means you're cursed, mekalel. If someone is mekalel his parents (God forbid), curses his parents so that's a klala is a curse, it has no benefit, it's just there to bring about suffering. Okay so that's one Hebrew word and this goes to why I say, if you don't know the Hebrew, you're sunk. I said earlier to a caller that if you are reading the Bible through any translation, you're kissing God through a towel. Well as it turns out I was being gentle, I was being mild.

In this example you don't even know what the text is talking about because the word arur is a different word altogether, it means curse and it's translated 'curse' but it's a different kind of curse. It means that this is your destiny and the hope of it is that you will have light in your life and that you will be raised up and you will be changed. In fact when God says about man and about the ground that he will till, He uses that word arur and the woman arur that it's that kind of curse. Meaning it's translated as curse but it really means something is going to happen to raise you up because you're not in very good shape spiritually right now. And if only men would have to turn to God in order to, in order for the land to give forth its fruit, if only the woman would have to turn to God to conceive and give birth, that would make them greater.

So what would make the Bnei Ham, the children of Ham greater is if they would be servants (slaves) to the other brothers, it does not mean slavery as in a black man in 1840 in Alabama. Does not mean that kind of slavery. It means that by becoming servants they will become a part of the family and they will be raised up.

Now would racists exploit, weaponize these texts? Would they use these passages as a way of ensuring that the masses would believe that apartheid was a divine or divinely ordained method of government, you better believe it. Did white people use this, of course they did, did the South Africans use these passages in the Book of Genesis, you bet they did. To advocate sin, to advocate racism, to advocate slavery. Now to be very careful my friends, very careful, why? Because we're using the term slave about a wicked behavior that went on in the United States, in Europe, in the Arabian country, a grotesque sin and a slave in the Torah which meant you became a part of the family. When Abraham didn't know where his child would come from in Genesis 15 when God is ensuring Abraham that from you will come a great nation and Abraham was childless and very old, Abraham said to God you must mean my slave Eliezer. And God said to him no that Damascene

will not inherit you but someone that will come from your loins. Which means a eved in the Torah means that you are, you join the family although you're not biologically connected.

In fact in eved in the Torah was such a part of the family that when a slave, again in English it's all lost, in English it's all lost, curse, curse, curse, curse, that's all the translations can come up with. So it's true if you're using a translation all you got is the word 'curse' and then there's no distinction whatsoever between a klala, a 'curse' and 'arur' occurs. They look the same in English and this is why if you love Hashem and you want to understand His Torah, you have to learn Hebrew. If you don't learn Hebrew you're done.

So it is true that one of the children behaved in a way that showed complete disrespect whereas the other two children showed respect to their father, didn't gaze upon their father when he was compromised, rather covered him over and showed respect and therefore the arur for the Bnei Ham, for the children of Ham is that they will become servants to the other brothers so that they can learn how to behave properly. But again my friends if you think that you're going to be able to join the family of God, have an intimate relationship with Hashem, understand the Torah without reading the original Hebrew you're making a very big mistake. And here it's just in the English language there's just no equivalent. And the English language is a bloated language of vocabulary of upward of a million words whereas biblical Hebrew has less than 9,000 words. And if Biblical Hebrew is so tiny and only 10% of that language, only 900 words is found in 90% of Tanakh so it's really the same words over and over again. So in biblical Hebrew there are no real synonyms, why? Because it's not a generous language. It's not a bloated language, there are words that appear to be saying the same thing like this example but the purpose of arur as opposed to a klala is arur is doing something with somebody in hope that they will become enlightened because the word ohr is in that root. Ohr means light so learn your Hebrew. Without your Hebrew you're going to need commentaries, Jewish commentaries, proper commentaries to help you along, you're going to need that. But without, if you don't go back to Hebrew you're dead. There's no way you're going to understand what's being conveyed in the text, thank you for your question.²

Slavery and Polygamy

So let's explain why polygamy worked in the ancient world. And that is that a woman today if she didn't have a family, or she did not have a family that could secure her, protect her, she can get a job, if there's a problem she can call the FBI and so on and so forth. But in the ancient world this was not possible. A woman's only protection was her family and an extension was a clan and an

² Tenak Talk, 'Rabbi Tovia Singer Explains How Messianics Say the Passover is about Jesus – 1348', (YouTube, 7/3/2022, 46:41) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UliJqLr7N8w>>.

extension was a tribe, that was her protection. And therefore if a woman did not have a family, she can join another pre-existing family, have children as part of that family and then she was, if it was a wife, she was entitled to all the benefits of the family and the security of the family.

However if it was pilegesh, if it was a concubine, rather than a full-blown wife, of course this would have to be done with the acquiescence of any wife the man had. She was not entitled to the inheritance of the others, but she was afforded the protection that any other member of the family had.

I wanted to state this one more time, in the ancient world there was not something like an FBI, there wasn't like you can call 911. If you had no family you were as good as dead. You had no one to protect you, that's all you had to protect you and therefore if you didn't have a family and here you were, you were a widow or whatever you can join a family and then were afforded the protections of the family. This is not only true for a wife or a concubine, this is also true for an eved, a slave, a servant.

Slavery again in the Torah, I've done another show on this had nothing to do with the wicked system, the racist system that was in the United States. In fact the very big problem that existed in the Torah was that people who owned slaves wanted them to go free and the slave said, 'I don't want to go, I'm having a good time' because they had to have complete equal rights as everyone else. They were afforded enormous protection in the Torah. So that's the answer, the answer is a concubine, a pilegesh did not have the rights, the financial rights and inheritance rights of the wives' but she was afforded the opportunity to build a family and to enjoy the security of the family.³

Slavery as a Vital Institution

Right, so slavery was a wonderful institution and before you drop the mic, let me explain that. When we talk about slavery that means an eved is a slave in Hebrew, we don't mean a black man in 1840 in Alabama. That was disgusting, that was sin. Slavery was of a fabulous, vital institution for the ancient world.

Now I need to explain this because what does it mean to be a slave in the Torah. So very frequently we're using the same word 'slave' but we mean something totally different. So today if you wanted to live somewhere you can just move to another part of the United States, you can get a job, right? Then you can rent an apartment and what's really nice is you have, if somebody messes with you,

³ Tenak Talk, '358) 101- Let's Get Biblical Q&A with Rabbi Tovia Singer', (YouTube, 4/9/2017, 14:20)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTWmq0Shvn0>>.

you can call the police. If someone harasses you, you can get a lawyer, if it's an interstate issue the FBI might get involved, you're protected as an American citizen.

In the ancient world this didn't exist. What protected you was your family, that's all you had and incidentally what I am doing here is I am using the most difficult example. Because much of slavery had to do with an indentured servant, people just had no money, people who stole and had to repay a debt, and didn't have it so they had to work it off. So I'm not doing that, I'm actually not referring to those people right now. So I'm using, the I'm looking at the most difficult element of slavery, but again, what the Torah meant. Okay so I'm ignoring, most of it was that, someone stole from you, they couldn't pay you back. Someone just had no money, they worked off their debt. We're gonna not talk about that now.

In the ancient world, what protected you was your family, that was it. It was it was your family, it was your clan, it was your tribe. If you didn't have that, you were dead. There was no 911, you couldn't get on the phone or in Israel 101, you can't do that so all you, now what happens if you didn't have a family? Well there's a method to join a family and that is to become an eved. And what an eved means is that you're joining a family that's not biologically connected to you. You are enjoying all the benefits of the family, sustenance but also receiving all the the challenges that being part of the family is. So you do join a family that's not yours, you have the benefits but you have the responsibilities of a family. The Torah has many conditions of what you can do with a slave, what you can't do with a slave and there's so many. If there's one pillow in the house, guess who gets it? Not you, but the slave does. Guess who gets [to] eat first? The slave [See Kiddushin 20a]. But the slave becomes a member of the family.

Remember Genesis chapter 15 when Abraham is told by God that he's going to have an eternal nation out of him, at that moment in Abraham's life he was childless. And Abraham said, 'Well what do you mean, oh you must mean Eliezer my slave, my eved, the Damascene.' And God said, 'No, no, no, he's not going to inherit you.' So 'slave' was family. Very often there was a problem where people just didn't have anyone to marry their daughters to because they were afraid what their husband might do with their estate. So they would have, they would free their slave to marry their daughter.

The slave was the person you trust, he was a part of the family and the problem in the Torah is that slaves didn't want to go free. They want to say, 'I love you, I love my master.' Now no doubt, in fact we're sure of this, there are many people who abuse the system. Just as there are physicians who abuse the system and molest their patients, people can abuse a system and did. And the Torah has provisions for that.

But slave meant that you joined a family and that was a financial exchange you then had the responsibilities of family and you enjoyed the protection of the family and all the benefits of the family... "Whosoever acquires a slave has acquired a master." [See Kiddushin 20] Because there's so many responsibilities to caring for him that was associated. Now we don't, this of course has nothing to do with slavery, or I don't say nothing but little to do with slavery that we know about in America's history and so on. It's not that, it's becoming, joining the family. Good question.⁴

Summary and Selling a Daughter

I really want to take this in a different direction because I'd rather talk about slavery in the Bible for a moment. I want to give it 30 seconds because the key point is the Torah says that a slave is set to go free, it's time, he's an indentured servant, it's time for him to go free. 'I don't want to leave, I would stay' so then his ear is pierced against the door that he should remember that you should be only a slave to God, only be a servant to Hashem, and to no one else. That's not the part I really want to discuss. What I really, really want to discuss is something that people talk about all the time and that's, 'Doesn't the Jewish Bible advocate slavery??' So the answer is of course not! But you see slavery all over the Jewish Bible! So maybe the Jewish Bible does advocate slavery?

So the answer is the word slave is spelt S L A V E in English in the translation so it sounds the same, it superficially appears the same but they have nothing to do with each other. Because in 1844 if you were a black man in Alabama and you wanted to get away, you want to do what you could to get away from your slave master rather than have to live like garbage. You were subhuman, you lived out in a barn and slaves fled their masters, were beaten terribly for that.

In the Torah people who were called slaves, again we're using the same language but we mean something completely different. In the Torah a slave is somebody, an eved was somebody like Eliezer which means you were not any part of the family biologically, you're not related to a family but you were allowed to join the family in order to benefit as though you were a biological member of the family. And you had the responsibilities of the family, that was called an eved.

In fact when Abraham was looking that his son Isaac should have a wife he entrusted Eliezer his servant, his slave. This is not the slaves of the south in the 19th century. This is something completely different.

⁴ TJump, 'Rabbi Tovia Singer, Reasons to believe in Judaism' (YouTube 7/9/2022, 1:05:00) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy2FcU6DL-8&t=3490s>>. The original video is no longer available but can be accessed here: TJump Gaming, 'Rabbi Tovia Singer, Reasons to believe in Judaism', (YouTube, 7/9/2022, 1:05:11) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=So9_o2CfISU>.

The other kind of slave is the Hebrew slave and that's the person who stole and the person who didn't have the money to repay what he stole so he was an indentured slave. Which meant that he had to then serve out work for the person he stole from to repay his debt. That's the point I want to get into. Anybody can look up the text on the other thing.

.....The slavery in the United States in the early years of the United States, the primary author of one of the greatest documents of the American Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves. Those slaves were not free to go. Now Thomas Jefferson happened to be one of those people, one of the, it's kind of a dichotomy, he was a brilliant man and so on and he did speak about and write about his opposition to it, but he happened to have owned a few hundred slaves. That is immoral, that is sinful because these people were not free to go, these people were property. A black man, a black woman was two thirds of a white person. They didn't have the rights of a person.

In Jewish law if you had an eved, in the Torah, and there was only one pillow in the house, you know who got it? The slave got it, the servant got it, Eliezer got it, the eved got it, not you. If there's only one mattress in the house the eved is the one who gets it. And in fact all kinds of, the problem in the Torah is you can see, this is the point I want to bring out. This is the question that is addressed to me frequently. If you notice the problem of slavery in the Jewish Bible is not the [oppressions?] it's that slaves love being a part of the family. That's what it meant, it meant you join the family although you weren't biologically connected to the family. You had the responsibility of other family members and in addition to that you had the benefits of other family members.

In fact your benefits exceeded that of other members of the family so it's not slavery of Alabama of 1844. That's the point I want to make. The problem with Torah was not like you read the Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn where you have slaves who are on the run, no. The problem is slaves saying, 'I don't want to go! I love my master! I don't wanna go anywhere.' That's the point.

...In fact when God came to Abraham and said, 'Out of you will come a great nation' in Genesis 15, Abraham said, 'You be must mean Eliezer who's my eved, who is the Damascene.' And God says, 'No that one shall not inherit you it will be the one who come from your loins.' So therefore a person who was an eved means that a person was a member of the family.

That's what it meant, but it doesn't mean you're hiring someone because if you hire someone that person has the right to quit, you know just to walk away. And another part of your family it's different and then certainly in slavery and European slavery which is a horrible sin and a horrible crime, they were subhuman they had no rights, were property.

...[Selling daughter]: Let's just do this, he could not do this against her will. It was, this is an important point...It's not like today where there is a welfare state, it's not like, why was a need for someone to become an eved? So when I teach history... the greatest challenge that I find is that we're thinking 21st century, we're thinking you can get a job, you can be out there, you can work, you can get yourself an apartment. You could live out there, there's the FBI, there's the police, state police, local police officers, there are federal policing. That's not the way it worked in the ancient world.

In the ancient world there was no police force, there were soldiers but if you didn't have a family to take care of you, if you didn't have those who will defend you, protect you, if you didn't have a husband that would look over you, if you didn't have someone to take care of you, you were as good as dead. You needed a clan to protect you.

So in ancient world if you didn't have a family, if a girl didn't have someone to protect her, to guard her, if a woman was single and she wanted to have a family, had no security whatsoever and nothing to protect her, she can join a family and there was a polygamous marriage in the Torah and throughout Tanakh, throughout the Jewish Scriptures. But the model at the time was by joining the family you were then by marrying into the family or becoming a servant in the family, you were, this is critical, you would join the family, you bore the responsibilities of the family, and you also had all the the rights and the benefits of the family.

That's the common denominator in all these points because if you didn't have family then you had no one to protect you. There was nothing, that was it, it was your family. You had to belong to a large family and family would take care of you. You have the benefits although you were not biologically connected and therefore all of these be commandments we see in the Torah, whether it's a father who wants to make sure that his daughter is cared for, it does not mean that she is sold into slavery, it means that she joins a family. And joining a family meant that she was protected, that she had all the benefits of the family and so on. So that that's the key point...it has nothing to do with slavery and selling and child you know, in Saudi Arabia you know because there's some pedophile in Kuwait whose 63 years old that wants a nine year old girl so some Indian father sells his little girl so that some, that's not what's happening here.

What the Torah is providing for is that people have a family because if you didn't have a family, there was nothing else, there was nothing there to protect you and to provide for you. So belonging to a family was extremely important. But it has nothing to do with the phenomenon that we see today in slavery in America, in Europe, that slavery that we know going back hundreds of years, that is sin and it's sin that damns the soul because it said to black men and black women that you are less, you are subhuman. That is a sin and happily we're done.

The only thing I like about Obama is he's black. I am happy, that's the only thing I liked about Obama was that America elected a black president and it turns out the only thing I like about him in assuming that he didn't choose, and that's his race.⁵

⁵ Tenak Talk, "Slavery' with Rabbi Tovia Singer and host wil'Liam Hall – 012', (YouTube, 14/1/2015, 43:31) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETwp5JQCuQ8&t=679s>>.