

Understanding the Hebrew Slave

Source Sheet by David Schwartz

The Hebrew Slave “on one foot”:

The “eved Ivri” (Hebrew slave) is an idea in the Torah that sometimes a Jew may be sold to another Jew. This had ramifications centuries later.

The Hebrew Slave in the Torah: Part 1

שמות א':ח-י"ד

(ח) וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע אֶת-יוֹסֵף: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: (י) הִבֵּה נְתַחֲכֶמָּה לוֹ פַּן-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׁנָאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: (יא) וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוֹ בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיָּבִין עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת לְפָרְעָה אֶת-פֶּתֶם וְאֶת-רַעְמֶסֶס: (יב) וַכֹּאשֶׁר יַעֲנֶנּוּ אֹתוֹ כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּלָּצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (יג) וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרָיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֹךְ: (יד) וַיִּמְרֹרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בַּחֲמֹר וּבַלֵּבָיִם וּבְכָל-עֲבֹדָה בְּשֹׁדָה אֶת כָּל-עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר-עֲבָדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֹךְ:

Exodus 1:8-14

(8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. (9) And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. (10) Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.” (11) So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. (12) But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites. (13) The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites (14) the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

Context: This is from the beginning of the Biblical Book of Exodus, after Joseph and his generation died.

Why did the Israelites become slaves in this situation?

How were they treated?

שמות כ':ב'

(ב) אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

Exodus 20:2

(2) I the ETERNAL am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

Context: This is from the beginning of the Ten Commandments.

How does G-d seem to feel about slavery based on this text?

שמות כ':ח'-י"א

(ח) זְכוֹר אֶת-יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקֹדֶשׁ: (ט) שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ: (י) וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת | לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה | וּבִנְךָ-וּבִתֶּךָ עֲבָדְךָ וְאִמָּתֶךָ וּבְהֶמְתֶּךָ וּגְרֶכְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: (יא) כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ: {ס}

Exodus 20:8-11

(8) Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. (9) Six days you shall labor and do all your work, (10) but the seventh day is a sabbath of the ETERNAL your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. (11) For in six days GOD made heaven and earth and sea—and all that is in

them—and then rested on the seventh day; therefore GOD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Context: This is the Fourth Commandment in the Exodus version of the Ten Commandment.

How does G-d seem to feel about slavery based on this text?

שמות כ"י"ד

(יד) לֹא תִחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ {ס} לֹא-תִחְמַד אִשְׁתִּי רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וְשׁוֹרְךָ וְחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ: {פ}

Exodus 20:14

(14) You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox or donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Context: This is the Tenth Commandment in the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments.

How does G-d seem to feel about slavery based on this text?

The Hebrew Slave in the Torah: Part 2

שמות כ"ב:א-ב'

(א) אִם-בְּמַחְתָּרַת יִמָּצָא הַגֵּנֵב וְהִכָּה וְהָמָת אֵין לוֹ דָּמִים: (ב) אִם-זִרְחָה הַשֹּׁמֵשׁ עָלָיו דָּמִים לוֹ שְׁלֵם יִשְׁלֵם אִם-אֵין לוֹ וְנִמְכָּר בְּגִנְבָתוֹ:

Exodus 22:1-2

(1) If the thief is seized while tunneling and beaten to death, there is no bloodguilt in that case. (2) If the sun had already risen, there is bloodguilt in that case.—[The thief] must make restitution, and if lacking the means, shall be sold for the theft.

Context: This is from the Biblical Book of Exodus, from a set of laws after the Ten Commandments are given.

If a thief doesn't have the means to pay back what they stole, what happens to them?

שמות כ"א:א-ו'

(א) וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תִּשִּׁים לַפְּנִיָּהִם: (ב) כִּי תִקְנֶה עֶבֶד עֲבָדִי שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים יַעֲבֹד וּבִשְׁבַעַת יֵצֵא לְחֹפְשִׁי חֲנֹם: (ג) אִם-בְּגֹפוֹ יָבֹא בְּגֹפוֹ יֵצֵא אִם-בְּעַל אִשָּׁה הוּא וַיֵּצֵאָה אִשְׁתּוֹ עִמּוֹ: (ד) אִם-אֲדֹנָיו יִתֵּן-לוֹ אִשָּׁה וַיִּלְדֶּה-לוֹ בָּנִים אוֹ בָנוֹת הָאִשָּׁה וַיִּלְדֶּיהָ תִּהְיֶה לְאֲדֹנֶיהָ וְהוּא יֵצֵא בְּגֹפוֹ: (ה) וְאִם-אָמַר יֹאמֶר הָעֶבֶד אֶהְבֵּתִי אֶת-אֲדֹנִי אֶת-אִשְׁתִּי וְאֶת-בְּנֵי לֹא יֵצֵא חֹפְשִׁי: (ו) וְהִגִּישׁוּ אֲדֹנָיו אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים וְהִגִּישׁוּ אֶל-הַדֹּלֶת אוֹ אֶל-הַמְּזוּזָה וְרָצַע אֲדֹנָיו אֶת-אָזְנוֹ בַּמַּרְצֵעַ וְעִבְדוֹ לָעַלְמִם: {ס}

Exodus 21:1-6

(1) These are the rules that you shall set before them: (2) When you acquire a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh year he shall go free, without payment. (3) If he came single, he shall leave single; if he had a wife, his wife shall leave with him. (4) If his master gave him a wife, and she has borne him children, the wife and her children shall belong to the master, and he shall leave alone. (5) But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to go free," (6) his master shall take him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his master's slave for life.

Context: This is from the Biblical Book of Exodus, the very next chapter after the Ten Commandments.

What do we learn about the Hebrew slave from this text?

דברים ט"ו:י"ב-י"ח

(יב) כִּי-יִמְכֹר לְךָ אֶת-יָד הָעֲבָדִי אוֹ הָעֲבָרִיָּה וְעִבְדְּךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וּבִשְׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית תְּשַׁלְּחֶנּוּ חֹפְשִׁי מֵעִמָּךְ: (יג) וְכִי-תִשְׁלַחֲנֻהוּ חֹפְשִׁי מֵעִמָּךְ לֹא תִשְׁלַחֲנֻהוּ רִיקָם: (יד) הָעֲנִיק תַּעֲנִיק לוֹ מִצֶּאֱנוֹל וּמִגִּרְנָה וּמִקֶּבֶד אֲשֶׁר בִּרְכָךָ יִהְיֶה אֵלֶיךָ תִּתֵּן-לוֹ: (טו) וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ

מִצֻּרִים וַיִּפְדֶּךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶךָ אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה הַיּוֹם: (טז) וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמַר
 אֵלֶיךָ לֹא אֵצֵא מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אֶהְבֶּךָ וְאֶת־בֵּיתְךָ כִּי־טוֹב לִי עִמָּךְ: (יז) וְלִקְחָתָּ אֶת־הַמֶּרְצֵעַ וְנִתְּתָהּ
 בְּאֶזְנוֹ וּבִדְלָתָהּ וְהָיָה לְךָ עֶבֶד עוֹלָם וְאִיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה־כֵּן: (יח) לֹא־יִקְשֶׁה בְּעֵינֶיךָ בְּשִׁלְחָךָ
 אֹתוֹ חֲפָשִׁי מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי מִשְׁנֵה שְׂכָר שְׂכִיר עֲבָדְךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וּבִרְכָךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר
 תַּעֲשֶׂה: {פ}

Deuteronomy 15:12-18

(12) If any fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, they shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set them free. (13) When you set them free, do not let them go empty-handed: (14) Furnish them out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the ETERNAL your God has blessed you. (15) Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the ETERNAL your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today. (16) But should they say to you, “I do not want to leave you”—for they love you and your household and are happy with you— (17) you shall take an awl and put it through their ear into the door, and they shall become your slave in perpetuity. Do this even with your female slave. (18) When you do set them free, do not feel aggrieved; for in the six years you have been given double the service of a hired worker. Moreover, the ETERNAL your God will bless you in all you do.

Context: This is from the Biblical Book of Deuteronomy, right after a section about responding to and preventing poverty. This juxtaposition may be connected to the fact that somebody might become a slave if they can not pay back what they stole, which would imply that they are in dire financial straits. The juxtaposition also may explain some of the differences with the Exodus text. Some scholars also think that this text is in response to the Exodus text. This section is part of the reading not only read for Parashat Re'eh but also on the last day of Passover, the last day of Shavuot, and Sh'mini Atzeret.

How does this text add to our understanding?

ויקרא כ"ה:ל"ט-מ"ג

(לט) וְכִי־יִמְנֹךָ אֶתְּיָךְ עַמָּךְ וְנִמְכַּרְלָךְ לֹא־תַעֲבֹד בּוֹ עֲבָדָת עֶבֶד: (מ) כְּשֹׁכִיר כְּתוֹשֵׁב יִהְיֶה

עֲמָךְ עַד־שְׁנַת הַיָּבֵל יַעֲבֹד עִמָּךְ: (מא) וַיֵּצֵא מֵעֲמָךְ הוּא וּבָנָיו עִמּוֹ וְשָׁב אֶל־מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ
וְאֶל־אֲחֻזַּת אֲבֹתָיו יָשׁוּב: (מב) כִּי־עֲבָדֶי הֵם אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יִמְכְּרוּ
מִמֶּכְרָת עֶבֶד: (מג) לֹא־תִדְּהָ בּוֹ בְּפָרֶךְ וַיִּרְאֵת מֵאֻלְהֵיךְ:

Leviticus 25:39-43

(39) If your kin under you continue in straits and must be given over to you, do not subject them to the treatment of a slave. (40) Remaining with you as a hired or bound laborer, they shall serve with you only until the jubilee year. (41) Then they, along with any children, shall be free of your authority; they shall go back to their family and return to the ancestral holding.— (42) For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into servitude.— (43) You shall not rule over them ruthlessly; you shall fear your God.

Context: This is from the Biblical Book of Leviticus. It comes after instructions as to what to do if somebody has to sell their land, and then if they have to borrow money. This leads the rabbis to assume that this text is about somebody who sells themselves because they don't have money to support themselves or their family (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 21:2:1). Scholars today see this text as a response to the ones in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

How is this text similar and how is it different from our previous texts?

If the distinctions between this text and our previous texts are not about different situations, but rather all texts are about Israelites who are slaves to other Israelites, how does this text change things (for better or worse) from the previous two texts?

Articles of interest:

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<https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-hebrew-slave-exodus-leviticus-and-deuteronomy>

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<https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-hebrew-slave-reading-the-law-collections-as-complementary>

The Hebrew Slave meets America

“The Bible View of Slavery”

- Rabbi Morris Raphall, New York City, Jan. 15, 1861,
delivered on the National Fast Day at the invitation of the
American Society for the Promotion of National Unity

...When G-d gave the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai

—*There where His finger scorched, the tablet shone;*

*There where His shadow on his people shone His glory, shrouded in its garb of fire,
Himself no eye might see and not expire.*

Even on that most solemn and most holy occasion, slaveholding is not only recognized and sanctioned as an integral part of the social structure, when it is commanded that the Sabbath of the L-rd is to bring rest to Avdecha ve'Amasecha, "Thy male slave and thy female slave" (Exod. xx. 10; Deut. v. 14). But the property in slaves is placed under the same protection as any other species of lawful property, when it is said, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, or his field, or his male slave, or his female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or aught that belongeth to thy neighbor" (Ibid. xx. 17; v.21). ...

- Full text: <https://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>

How does Rabbi Raphall feel about slavery?

David Einhorn's Response to "A Biblical View of Slavery"

- Rabbi David Einhorn, Baltimore, MD, January 1861

"... But to come to the point; let us consider his arguments. To allow his

beloved slavery to appear in the full glory of holiness, the revered speaker surrounds it with the prestige of remotest antiquity to prove that it existed already before the deluge; and it must be confessed that this evidence as given is presented in a very ingenious manner and in its skill exceeds the capacity already admired by our ancients to drive a camel through a needle's eye. In his (own) impulse to create, the pious speaker does not take the least notice of the story of the creation. Although it tells us: "and God created man in His image, man and woman He created them, and God blessed them and said to them: be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1, 28). Here no mention is made of dominion over the negro, who perhaps, according to the Raphall theory, was included with the animals that crawl and creep upon the earth..."

Full text: <https://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>

How does Rabbi Einhorn feel about slavery?

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