

When you acquire a Hebrew bondsman. (21:2)

The Torah selected the laws concerning the purchase of an *eved Ivri* and the master/servant relationship between the master and his Hebrew bondsman to be the opening *mitzvah* following the nation's receiving the Torah at *Har Sinai*. This Revelation and Giving of the Torah culminated their redemption from Egypt and their becoming Hashem's select people. In order to understand the preeminence of this *mitzvah* and its overarching significance for molding the national character of *Klal Yisrael*, I cite the commentary of the *Sefer Chinuch*. The *mitzvah* of *eved Ivri* is the adjudication of the law concerning the Hebrew bondsman: to free him at the end of six years of servitude; or, during the *yovel*, jubilee year, to treat him as a member of the family (actually better: if the master has one item, such as a pillow, he is to give it to the servant, and to supply him with gifts when he leaves servitude. *The Sefer HaChinuch* explains the *shoroshei ha'mitzvah*, roots of this commandment: "Hashem wanted His People to be a holy nation, replete and crowned with good and lofty character traits, as blessing will rest upon them from this. Kindness and mercy are from the most praiseworthy traits. Thus, Hashem warns us to have mercy on the one who is under our hand and to perform acts of lovingkindness towards him."

Chesed, kindness, and *rachamim*, compassion, are two character traits which are extolled by the *Sefer HaChinuch* as the cornerstone of the *mitzvah* of *eved Ivri*. It is through these two character traits that the descendants of the Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov identified and molded their national character. In other words, it is the commitment to *chesed* and *rachamim* that Hashem wants to see reaffirmed in His children's activities.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates an inspirational story concerning a *yeshivah* student who was experiencing difficulty in finding his *bashert*, designated matrimonial match. He had been prepared to say, "Yes," a number of times. The girls, however, did not have the same positive feeling about spending the rest of their lives with him. He was now seeing a wonderful young lady, to whom he was ready to say, "Yes." Unfortunately, she was prepared to use this upcoming date to inform him that it would be their last date. They went to a coffee shop, where the young man ordered three cups of coffee. She wondered why he would do that and asked for an explanation. He said, "I ordered one for each of us and the third one for the guard who is outside (quite common in parts of the Holy Land). He stands there all day, and it is an unusually cold day today. He cannot leave his position, so he must be cold. I figured that he could use a cup of hot coffee." When the young lady heard this, she immediately changed her mind about the young man. Anyone who was so thoughtful of others was the type of spouse for which she was searching. This was the type of home she sought to build. He would be the perfect partner.

Horav Elimelech Biderman, Shlita, relates that *Horav Yaakov Kamenetzky, zl*, once visited *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, and found the latter to be in an unusually jovial mood. *Rav Moshe* was very serious about his learning – and, since he was always learning, he was usually in a serious mood.

Seeing the incredulous look on *Rav Yaakov's* face, *Rav Moshe* explained, "I recently served as a

dayan, judge, involving a litigation between two parties. After analyzing the issues, I decided against one of them. They accepted my decision. A few days passed, and I received a call from someone identifying himself as *Rav* _____. He declared, 'The decision that you rendered is totally wrong. It is a false *psak*, *halachic* decision. Everything that you said should "be nullified like dust of the earth." Clearly, this was *chutzpah* at its nadir. One does not talk this way to the *gadol hador*, preeminent leader of the generation. *Rav* Moshe continued, "A few months later, this same *Rav* called me to test him on the laws pertaining to *shechitah*, ritual slaughter, with the intention that I give him my approbation. I tested him, he was proficient, and I gave him my letter. *Yom Kippur* had passed since the time that he had spoken to me audaciously, and now I felt that he had forgiven me, and I had forgiven him. Nonetheless, I felt he must be censured for speaking to me in such a manner. [*Rav* Moshe was the paragon of humility. His diffidence notwithstanding, he was well aware of the scope of his learning and *halachic* expertise]. I took the liberty of rebuking him for his *chutzpah*. The *Rav* was shocked beyond belief, 'It was not me,' he countered. 'I would never speak like that.' After some investigation, I discovered that a certain *mechutzaf*, insolent person, made the call and conveniently helped himself to the *Rav's* name. Imagine, had I not originally constrained myself, I might have wrongly denounced an innocent person. This is why I am so effusive – I merited not to upbraid a Jew." An added caveat which we derive from this vignette is the sterling character traits of *Rav* Moshe. We now have some idea why he merited to be one of the greatest *poskim*, *halachic* arbiters, of all time.

Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, zl, often reiterated the Torah's uniqueness in contrast to secular wisdom. Without *siyata diShmaya*, Divine Assistance, one simply cannot ascend the ladder of Torah knowledge. To achieve an understanding of the Torah's verities, to plumb its depths, one requires the added ingredient of Heavenly assistance and support. This can only be acquired through merit garnered from reaching out, helping our fellow Jew and carrying out acts of lovingkindness. We understand that people are not perfect and can act inconsiderately. This is where *vitur*, tolerance and giving in, come into play.

Rav Shteinman quotes *Chazal* (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a) who state that Abaye and Rabbah did not achieve longevity because they were descendants of Eili *HaKohen*, who were cursed. *Chazal* teach that Rabbah lived to be forty years old, in contrast to Abaye, who lived to be sixty. The difference: Rabbah engaged solely in Torah study; Abaye studied Torah and also engaged in acts of lovingkindness. The added acts of kindness added twenty years to Abaye's life. This distinction begs elucidation, considering that involvement in Torah study trumps all other spiritual endeavor. Veritably, Abaye helped widows, orphans and other unfortunates, but does this replace Torah study?

Rav Shteinman explains that meat is undoubtedly more nourishing than water, but without water, meat cannot be cooked. In order to make the meat palatable, one requires water. Likewise, learning Torah indisputably has greater significance than acts of *chesed*. One cannot achieve in Torah, however, without *siyata diShmaya*. In order to merit this Divine assistance, one must occupy himself with acts of lovingkindness. Abaye was blessed with an added twenty years of life due to

his devotion towards helping others.