

If you purchase a Jewish bondsman, he shall work for six years; and in the seventh he shall go free. (21:2)

The term *mishpatim*, ordinances, aptly describes the core of the *parsha*: to list many of the social ordinances found in the Torah. It is, therefore, interesting to note that the first law detailed in the *parsha* is that of the *eved Ivri*, Hebrew slave. The terminology the Torah uses to describe the slave's nationality and religious affiliation is inconsistent with the manner it uses throughout the rest of the Torah, in which Jews are referred to as *Yisrael* – not *Ivri*. The **Shem MiShmuel** quotes his father, the **Avnei Nezer**, who is bothered by this question.

In order to answer this, the *Shem MiShmuel* cites other occurrences of the word *Ivri*. “On the other side (*eiver*) of the river lived your ancestors from earliest times” (*Yehoshua* 24:2); “And he related to Avraham *Halvri*” (*Bereishis* 14:12). The *Midrash* explains the meaning of *Ivri* as related to *eiver*: “All of the world was on one side, and he (Avraham *Avinu*) was on the other side.”

The above teaches us that *Ivri*, in connection to the term used to describe Avraham and his descendants, is derived from – and denotes – “the other side.” It describes the members of *Klal Yisrael* as having an intrinsic nature which frees them from external influences. They are on the “other side” of a partition, separated in mind and action from the rest of the world – with distinct spiritual and life objectives.

Avraham *Avinu* was the paradigm of Jewish thought and behavior. He was one man, standing alone against a world steeped in paganism. He taught the concept of belief in One G-d. This idea is most reflected by the law of *eved Ivri* – which is essentially a spiritual misnomer. A Jew cannot possibly become enslaved to a physical master, since he is intrinsically free from outside bonds. His relationship with Hashem supersedes this. Yet, a system of physical servitude must be put in place by the Torah in order to address the societal problems which are endemic to various economic situations. Thus, one who perpetrates certain crimes, resulting from his economic straits, is able to be rehabilitated within a Torah system. At no point, however, is a *ben Yisrael* truly enslaved. He is an *Ivri* – and *Ivriim* stand apart – committed wholly and only to Hashem.

The *eved Ivri* is not a “slave” of his Jewish master. He is merely “attached” to him for the six years of servitude. Indeed, the Torah's requisite of six years – and no more – is of considerable significance. The number six, as in the six days of the week, connotes the physical dimension of an object. The number seven describes the true nature of any object, its purpose and character. Thus, the six work-days of the week represent its external core, while *Shabbos*, the seventh day, endows the prior six days with their essential meaning.

Slavery may last for six years – and no more. Six years will not penetrate the individual's psyche, such that he loses his focus on life as a Jew. A Jew is to be free, but even freedom has its demands. Many forms of freedom exist, including the exposure of, and return to, the slave's inner

essence. To continue to spend that seventh year as a slave defeats his purpose in life. Thus, the Torah refers to the Jewish slave as an *Ivri*, an outsider, one who may be temporarily indentured, but never really becomes a slave.