

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Gittel *bas* Chayim *a”h*  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

## Only One Master

## PARSHAS MISHPATIM 5777

It happened one Yom Tov that the Sfas Emes, venerated leader of the Gerrer Chassidic dynasty, shared an observation with his followers about Hallel, an important aspect of the day’s observance. He singled out a particular supplication, stating that by reciting “*Ana*” properly, one can catalyze wondrous effects in the Upper Realms.

However, an issue arose the next morning during the time of Hallel’s recital. For there are, of course, *two different* “*Ana*” supplications recited in succession: “*Ana Hashem hoshi’a na – Please, Hashem, grant salvation!*” and “*Ana Hashem hatzlichah na – Please, Hashem, grant success!*” (*Tehillim 118:25*). The Chassidim were unsure to which one their Rebbe was referring. Two schools of thought on the matter quickly developed. Thus, when the congregation arrived at the recital of this passage, half of them pronounced “*Ana Hashem hoshi’a na*” with added emphasis and gusto. The other half did so for the “*Ana Hashem hatzlichah na*” verse.

Who was correct? The Imrei Emes – son and successor of the Sfas Emes – in relating this anecdote, asserted that in fact neither group had succeeded in divining the Sfas Emes’ true intent. “Only I knew what he really meant,” the Imrei Emes said. “And he was referring to a different verse entirely – the other mention of “*Ana*” in an earlier passage (*Ibid. 116:16*): ‘*Ana Hashem ki ani avdecha – Please, Hashem, for I am Your servant!*’” (*Minchas Asher, Haggadah Shel Pesach, commentary to Hallel*)

What is it about the sentiment expressed in this verse that the Imrei Emes found so particularly monumental? We may perhaps derive some insight from the section in the Torah that deals with the notion of servitude.

### The First Mitzvah

Parshas Mishpatim, of course, delineates numerous civil and monetary laws, such as those governing cases of damage, theft, borrowing, etc. The first topic dealt with in the *parshah* involves the “*eved Ivri*” (Hebrew slave), a Jew sold to another in servitude: כִּי תִקְנֶה עֶבֶד עִבְרִי – “When you acquire an *eved Ivri*, he shall work for six years; and in the seventh, he shall go out to freedom, without payment” (*Shemos 21:2*). Seemingly, this is one in a string of various statutes.

However, it is apparent from the teachings of Chazal that there is a certain unique quality to this particular subject. According to the Yerushalmi (*Rosh Hashanah 3:25*), Yisrael was already informed of the mitzvah of dispatching the *eved Ivri* while they still resided in Egypt! Such is alluded to by the Prophet Yirmiyahu, who declared: כֹּה־אָמַר ד' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנֹכִי כָרַתִּי: בְּרִית אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הוֹצֵאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם... אִישׁ אֶת־אֶחָיו הָעִבְרִי אֲשֶׁר נָמְכָר לָךְ וְעַבְדְּךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים – “So says Hashem, the G-d of Yisrael: ‘I forged (the following) covenant with your forefathers on the day that I took them out from the land of Egypt... When your brother is sold to you as an *eved Ivri*, he shall serve you for six years, (after which) you shall send him from you to freedom’” (*Yirmiyahu 34:13,14*). In his commentary to the Yerushalmi, the *Korban Eidah* elaborates on the nature of this special “covenant” forged in connection with this mitzvah. Not only was this the first mitzvah Yisrael received in Mitzrayim, but they were granted redemption in its merit. What is it about this mitzvah, then, that warranted such distinction?

## Hebrews and Israelites

Quite revealing about the nature of this mitzvah is the fact that a number of methods are provided to terminate his servitude, as delineated in the Mishnah (*Kiddushin 1:2*):

עַבְד עִבְרִי... קוֹנֵה אֶת עַצְמוֹ בְּשָׁנִים וּבִיּוֹבֵל וּבְגֵרָעוֹן כְּסָף.

“An *eved Ivri*... acquires his independence through (the passage of six) years, (the arrival of) Yovel (the Jubilee Year), or through a monetary refund (for the remaining term of servitude).”

This contingency sheds much light on the Torah’s attitude to this institution. Even when a person sells himself into slavery, the servitude is inherently temporary in nature. The Torah strongly discourages one from enslaving himself to flesh and blood because a Jew, first and foremost, is really a servant to One Master only. The Torah ties *yetzi’as Mitzrayim* (the Exodus) to this very idea: **כִּי־לִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים עָבְדֵי הֵם אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם** – “For B’nei Yisrael are servants to Me; they are My servants, as I took them out from the land of Egypt” (*Vayikra 25:55*).

The above thus underscores what the true purpose of *yetzi’as Mitzrayim* really was. It entailed much more than just a release from harsh labor. Never was the intent that Yisrael should be a people unfettered to slavishly follow their whims; rather, it was to enable them to become elevated servants of the Master of the Universe. In fact, the Shelah Hakadosh (*parshas Lech Lecha*) asserts that this was the very purpose and goal of the servitude in Mitzrayim in the first place. The bondage there served to inculcate within Yisrael a nature of subservience. In this way, when they would eventually be redeemed, they would be primed to exchange their servitude to the wicked Pharaoh for the exalted service of Hashem.

It should be emphasized that the characterization as “*avadim*” (servants) of Hashem is in no way a pejorative. Rather, it is a coveted and most honored title. Rabbeinu Bechaye adds that it is for this reason that the Torah in this week’s *parshah* refers to a slave as an “*eved Ivri*”; after all, as a Jew, why not call him an “*eved Yisrael*”? The answer is that “Yisrael” is a dignified title, representing an elevated level. The people only received this title once they were redeemed; while still in Egypt, they were referred to as “*Ivrim*” (“The G-d of the *Ivrim* has called upon us” [*Shemos 5:3*]). And so, by voluntarily relinquishing his servitude to Hashem by acquiring another master, this individual has “downgraded” his status to be a mere “*eved Ivri*” (*cf. Yerach L’mo’adim, Pesach, vol. II, § 29*).

In any event, this may be the intent of the Sfas Emes, who stressed the importance of declaring with a full heart: “*Ana Hashem – ki ani avdecha.*” In so doing, one thereby shows that he truly recognizes his great fortune of being elevated to such a post, for which one merits that the distinguished title of “Yisroel” is conferred upon him. As we have seen, the very purpose of the entire experience of both the servitude in and the redemption from Mitzrayim was to adopt this role. And so, in this verse, one expresses his heartfelt gratitude that “I am a servant of Hashem.”

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