

**Shayla:** Why doesn't the Bible speak against slavery, but instead seems to condone it by telling the slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5)?

**Meforshim:**

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament included regulations for societal situations such as slavery and divorce<sup>1</sup> which were the results of the hardness of men's hearts.<sup>2</sup> Such regulations did not encourage or condone such situations, but were practical ways of dealing with the realities of the day.

You have to remember that every nation of all time has allowed slavery. Rather than tearing society apart, God allowed certain traditions to continue while trying to make them more humane. For example, God does not condone divorce but He allowed it to continue "due to the hardness of men's hearts". Instead of completely overthrowing the society's mores, He allowed a natural evolution to occur while continually putting pressure to make it more acceptable. If you carefully examine Israel's divorce laws, and the way that they treated women, you will discover that they were the most enlightened nation of their time. Women could not be divorced without just cause. Women could have their own business. Women could stand with the rest of the congregation and hear discussions of the law. Women were allowed to be judges.

Returning to the question at hand, which is slavery, turn to Exodus 11. You will find that Hashem does not simply accept slavery. He begins by commanding mercy and moderation towards them. Slavery was sometimes used as a repayment for debt, or for the punishment of crimes. But even those who were so punished were to continue in slavery seven years at the most. At the seven years' end, the servant should either go free,<sup>3</sup> or he could freely choose to continue his servitude.<sup>4</sup> Some chose this route because it meant job security. If they liked the family, if they felt safe with the master, they could choose to continue the servitude rather than leaving and having to try to make their own way in society. It was less risky. Even today, some people would rather work for others than start their own businesses.

By these laws, God taught generosity, and a noble love of liberty. In the same way, Christians who have been "bought with a price and called to liberty"<sup>5</sup> must be the slaves of no man. Notice that in the New Testament, Paul said, "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise."<sup>6</sup>

Though Paul had clearly stated that there is neither bondage nor freedom in Christianity, he told Onesimus to return to his master.<sup>7</sup> Philemon was a believer in Colosse who, along with others, was a slave owner. One of his slaves, Onesimus, had apparently stolen from him<sup>8</sup> and then run away, which under Roman law was punishable by death. Onesimus met Paul and through his ministry became a Christian.<sup>9</sup> Now he was willing to return to his master, and Paul wrote a personal appeal to ask that he be accepted as a Christian brother.<sup>10</sup>

This situation is treated in more depth elsewhere but it suffices to say here that this was no simple matter of a runaway slave but of two physical brothers,<sup>11</sup> one being in financial bondage to another. However, by granting a slave status, Paul again does not necessarily condone slavery, but instead tries to alleviate some of the consequences and reform its use.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:7-8

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 11:2-3

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 11:5-6

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:23

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 3:28-29 HCSB

<sup>7</sup> Philemon 1:12

<sup>8</sup> Philemon 1:18

<sup>9</sup> Philemon 1:10

<sup>10</sup> Philemon 1:16

<sup>11</sup> Philemon 1:16 note "dearly beloved brother...more to you...both in the flesh and in the Lord"