



Breaking the Cycle

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When it comes to the enslavement of Jews, God gives us two imperatives. First, strive to be like God. Failing that, resist the temptation to become like the Egyptians.

Ultimately, we fail at both.

The first commandment we are given regarding the enslavement of Jews is actually the imperative to try to help others in our community avoid being enslaved at all:

ויקרא כה:כה

כִּי יִמֹךְ אֲחִיךָ וּמָכַר מֵאֲחֻזָּתוֹ וּבָא גֹאֲלוֹ הַקָּרֵב אֵלָיו וְגָאֵל אֶת מִמְכַּר אֲחִיו:

Vayikra 25:25

When your kin is in distress and sold some of their property, the closest relative of theirs comes and redeems the sale of their kin.

We are commanded to help our relatives avoid becoming debt slaves. Interestingly, the verb used to describe paying off a relative's debt allowing them to remain free, is “גָּאֵל - redeem,”



the same verb used in Shemot to describe God's redemption of Israel from slavery.¹ In using it in the context of the imperative to help a relative who has fallen into debt avoid slavery, the Torah exhorts us: be like God. God redeemed you from slavery once. From now on, you must play God's role, redeeming one another.

The Torah, though, recognizes that we may not always live up to the demand to be each other's redeemers. Sometimes there might not be anyone willing or able to sacrifice to keep their relatives out of slavery. In that situation, the Torah goes to the other extreme. If we cannot be like God, we are at least commanded not to be like the Egyptians.

ויקרא כה:לט-מג

³⁹וְכִי יִמּוּךְ אַחִיךָ עִמָּךְ וְנִמְכַּר לָךְ לֹא תַעֲבֹד בּוֹ עַבְדֹת עֶבֶד: ⁴⁰כְּשֹׁכִיר כְּתוּשָׁב יִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ עַד שְׁנַת הַיָּבֵל יַעֲבֹד עִמָּךְ: ⁴¹וַיֵּצֵא מֵעִמָּךְ הוּא וּבָנָיו עִמּוֹ וְשָׁב אֶל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ וְאֶל אֲחֻזַּת אֲבֹתָיו יָשׁוּב: ⁴²כִּי עֲבָדִי הֵם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יִמְכְּרוּ מִמִּכְרֹת עֶבֶד: ⁴³לֹא תִרְדֶּה בּוֹ בַּפֶּרֶךְ וִירֹאֶת מֵאֲלֹקָי:

Vayikra 25:39-43

³⁹But if your kin is in distress with you and is sold to you, do not work them a slave's work—⁴⁰they will be like an employee or a resident with you. Until the Yovel year they will work with you, ⁴¹and [then] leave from with you—they and their children with them—and return to their family, they will return to their ancestral property. ⁴²Because they are My slaves that I brought out from the land of Egypt; they are not to be sold like a slave's slave.

⁴³Do not rule them **harshly**, but fear your God.

The connection to Egypt in these verses is explicit. God has redeemed us from Egypt, making us God's slaves and thus ineligible to be truly slaves to any human being. When one enslaves an Israelite, that slavery can only ever be temporary. To enslave an Israelite permanently is to

¹ Prior to this *perek* in Vayikra, the root is only used five times in the Torah, two of which are in Shemot to describe God's redemption of Israel. See Bereishit 48:16, Shemot 6:6, 15:13, Vayikra 23:13 (twice).



deny what God did for us in freeing us from Egypt. The text deepens the comparison to Egypt with the use of the word “*be-farekh*,” a word previously used only to describe the manner in which the Egyptians worked their Jewish slaves:

שמות א:יג-יד

¹³וַיַּעַבְדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ: ¹⁴וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבָּנִים וּבְכָל עֲבֹדָה
בַּשָּׂדֶה אֶת כָּל עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶךְ:

Shemot 1:13-14

¹³The Egyptians worked the Israelites **ruthlessly**. ¹⁴Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

The Egyptians worked us *be-farekh*, so we too are forbidden to make others work *be-farekh*. This linguistic connection adds an additional dimension to the prohibition against eternally enslaving other Jews: not only are we commanded not to enslave those God has freed from Egypt, but also to avoid becoming like the Egyptians who once enslaved us.

The commandment is both a dream and a warning: a dream that, once given power, we can avoid becoming like those who once exercised it over us. The very fact that we need to be commanded, however, warns us that there is nothing natural or easy about that stance. We must be vigilant if we want to avoid becoming Egyptians ourselves.

But dreams are difficult to make real, and warnings often fail. Hundreds of years later, in the lead up to the first exile, Yirmiyahu tells a story of a Jewish people that have become uncannily Egyptian in their behavior:

ירמיה לד:ח-יא

⁸הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֶל יִרְמְיָהוּ מֵאֵת ה' אַחֲרֵי כָרַת הַמֶּלֶךְ צִדְקִיָּהוּ בְרִית אֶת כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בִּירוּשָׁלַם לִקְרָא לָהֶם דְּרוֹר: ⁹לְשַׁלַּח אִישׁ אֶת עַבְדּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶת שְׁפָחָתוֹ הָעִבְרִי וְהָעִבְרִיָּה חֲפָשִׁים לְבִלְתִּי עֲבֹד בָּם בְּיַהוּדִי אַחֲיָהוּ אִישׁ: ¹⁰וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כָל הַשָּׂרִים וְכָל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בָּאוּ בַּבְּרִית לְשַׁלַּח אִישׁ אֶת עַבְדּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶת שְׁפָחָתוֹ חֲפָשִׁים לְבִלְתִּי עֲבֹד בָּם עוֹד וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּשְׁלַחוּ: ¹¹וַיָּשׁוּבוּ אַחֲרֵי כֵן וַיִּשְׁבּוּ אֶת הָעֲבָדִים וְאֶת הַשְּׁפָחוֹת אֲשֶׁר שָׁלְחוּ חֲפָשִׁים [וַיִּכְבְּשׁוּם] לַעֲבָדִים וְלַשְּׁפָחוֹת:

Yirmiyahu 34:8-11

⁸The word that came to Yirmiyahu from God after King Tzidkiyah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim a release among them—⁹that everyone should set free their Hebrew slaves, both male and female, and that no one should keep their fellow Jews enslaved. ¹⁰Everyone, officials and people, who had entered into the covenant agreed to set their male and female slaves free and not keep them enslaved any longer; they complied and let them go. ¹¹But afterward they turned about and brought back the men and women they had set free, and forced them into slavery again.

While the people of Jerusalem initially obey God's command and free their Jewish slaves, they later renege and recapture them, forcing them back into servitude. The situation is remarkably similar to the Pharaoh, who initially agreed to let the Israelites to go free, only to change his mind and attempt to recapture them. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have essentially become the Egyptians from whom God freed their ancestors.

For God, this Egyptian-like behavior is the sin that tips the scales. God declares that because of their refusal to allow their slaves freedom, the Jewish people will now be forced into exile:

ירמיה לד:יג, יז-כ

¹³כֹּה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנֹכִי כָרַתִּי בְרִית אֶת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הוֹצֵאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית

עֲבָדִים:...

¹⁷לִכְן כֹּה אָמַר ה' אַתֶּם לֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם אֵלַי לִקְרֹא דְרוֹר אִישׁ לְאָחִיו וְאִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ הִנְנִי קֹרֵא לָכֶם דְּרוֹר נָאֻם ה'

אֶל הַחֵרֵב אֶל הַדֶּבֶר וְאֶל הָרָעָב וְנָתַתִּי אֶתְכֶם [לְזַעְנוּהָ] לְכָל מַמְלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ: ¹⁸וְנָתַתִּי אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים הָעֹבְרִים

אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִקִּימוּ אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתוּ לִפְנֵי הָעֵגֹל אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתוּ לְשֵׁנַיִם וַיַּעֲבְדוּ בֵּין בְּתָרָיו:

¹⁹שָׂרֵי יְהוּדָה וְשָׂרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם הַסֹּרְסִים וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְכָל עַם הָאָרֶץ הָעֹבְרִים בֵּין בְּתָרֵי הָעֵגֹל: ²⁰וְנָתַתִּי אוֹתָם בְּיַד

אֹיְבֵיהֶם וּבְיַד מִבְקָשֵׁי נַפְשָׁם וְהָיְתָה נִבְלָתָם לְמֶאֱכָל לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבֶהֱמַת הָאָרֶץ:

Yirmiyahu 34:13, 17-20

¹³Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: I made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage, saying...

¹⁷Assuredly, thus said God: You would not obey Me and proclaim a release, each to your kin and neighbor. Lo! I proclaim your release—declares God—to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine; and I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. ¹⁸I will make the parties who violated My covenant, who did not fulfill the terms of the covenant that they made before Me, [like] the calf that they cut in two so as to pass between the halves: ¹⁹the officers of Judah and Jerusalem, the officials, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the halves of the calf ²⁰shall be handed over to their enemies, to those who seek to kill them. Their carcasses shall become food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.

By referring to the covenant that was made “between the halves (*bein bitrei*),” Yirmiyahu takes us back to Avraham and the *berit bein ha-betarim*, which was itself the first time we learned that Avraham’s descendants were destined to be slaves in Egypt:

בראשית טו:יג-יד

¹³וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יְדַע כִּי גֵר | יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֲךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וַעֲבָדוּם וְעָנּוּ אוֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה: ¹⁴וְגַם אֶת

הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרַי כִּן יֵצְאוּ בְּרֶכֶשׁ גָּדוֹל: =

Bereishit 15:13-14

¹³And [God] said to Avram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.”

While God’s promise in the *berit bein ha-betarim* obviously refers to the Egyptian slavery, the words “I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve” echo ominously for Yirmiyahu’s reader. Like the Egyptians before them, the Jews have become enslavers of Avraham’s descendants. And like the Egyptians, they are now the nation upon whom God will execute judgment for that sin.

To a Jew hearing God’s command not to eternally enslave another Jew or work them *be-farekh*, such an ending might have been unimaginable. It might have seemed obvious that the Egypt and its sins were antithetical to the Jewish project. It might have seemed impossible that Jews would ever fall to such depths.

Millennia later, we know better: a history of persecution is no guarantee of ethical behavior. Power, once attained, must be handled carefully, or all too quickly, the descendants of slaves may find themselves the enslavers.

But in warning us, the Torah and Yirmiyahu also hold out hope that this path is not inevitable. We can choose to intervene before the damage is done. We can choose to be those who free slaves rather than enslave them.

If we choose, they promise us, we can become redeemers.

