

From the Abravanel Jacob Solomon

Following the Ten Commandments, this Parsha opens the details of G-d's laws applying to human relationships with:

These are the ordinances that you shall put before them. If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work for you for six years. And in the seventh year, he will go free (21:1-2).

Rashi explains *asher TASIM LIFNEI-HEM* - "that you shall put before them", to mean that the code of law should not be taught parrot-fashion as something to be memorized, but conveyed in such a way that is easily understood by all, as "a ready-laid table with food fully-prepared to eat".

Many commentators ask why the Torah has to open the detailed laws following the Ten Commandments with the unpalatable notion of slavery. Indeed, elsewhere the Torah appears to frown on that practice: "For the Israelites are My servants" (Vayikra 25:55): G-d's servants only, not the "servants of servants".

The Ohr HaChayim places slavery in the context of helping a fellow-Israelite. Slavery was a way that the totally destitute might be given a livelihood (Vayikra 25:39), and that a convicted thief without means could pay for what he stole (22:2). By the Torah's opening this section with the Hebrew slave rather than the Gentile

slave, it is implying that he should be bought in preference to a gentile.

The Ramban sees the laws of slavery as a flow from the Ten Commandments. He explains that the freedom of Hebrew servants after six years is a reminder of Israel's own freedom from Egyptian slavery, linking with the First Commandment: "who brought you out of Egypt, from the place of slavery" (20:2). In addition, the slave's going free in the seventh year is a reminder of the seventh day of Creation, linking with the Fourth Commandment that recalls G-d creating the universe in six days, and His resting on the seventh.

Like the Ramban, Abravanel links slavery with the opening of the first five commandments. He explains that as the servitude in Egypt did come to an end, the servitude of one Hebrew to another must likewise come to an end. But Abravanel also connects slavery with the opening of the second five commandments: "Do not murder" (20:13). He views such a perpetual servitude and the impossibility of ever regaining freedom as taking away a person's life. It "extinguishes that person's light". They can indeed "turn off that persons' light".

In support, Abravanel cites the behavior of some Jews at the end of the First Temple period. When they re-enslaved those freed after six years, Yirmiyahu warned that they

would effectively be punished measure for measure. As they inflicted permanent slavery, they would die from starvation, from disease, and in battle:

"So says G-d. As you did not listen to me to proclaim freedom [for the slaves]... I declare you to be free... [to the ravages of] the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you an object of revulsion for all the kingdoms of the earth" (Yirmiyahu 34:17).

A person can be physically alive, but condemned to live in a reality of darkness, despair, and hopelessness for more commonplace reasons than permanent slavery. "The tongue has the power of life and death" (Mishlei 18:21). Insidious words that are directed to wound, to spread gossip, and to slander can remain deeply hurtful and socially destructive with socially-excluding effects that, as permanent slavery, can indeed be life-long... They can indeed "turn off that persons' light". 🚫