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There's another mitzvah, there's another law that's buried in Ki Tetze that I think is maybe You know, I say this I think about everything, so I say this with qualification, but it's one of the most radical things in the Torah. The Torah is so radical, but this is truly radical and I'm not sure if people even know it. I think you might be surprised.

If you know it, I'm impressed. The law, the halacha, the the commandment in the Torah this morning, and I don't think I mentioned this, but there are 74 commandments in this morning's parashat. Ki Tetze has 74 according to the traditional way of counting mitzvot, so it's the most chock-full of mitzvot in any of the parts of the Torah.

One of them is two sentences long, two verses long, and it goes like this You shall not turn over a slave to his master, a slave who has escaped from their master to you. Then the next verse They have to live with you in your midst. In the place that he chooses in one of your settlements, where it's good for him.

Do not oppress him. Do you hear that? Amazing, right? I know Rachel blows your mind. Rachel just has these moments.

Rachel and I are like, pffft. It happened this morning also in our open book. I was like, you know, Rachel is our play-by-play.

Someone arrives at your doorstep. They knock on the door, and you see it's an evid, it's a slave. And someone else comes and claims and says, this slave belongs to me.

The Torah says, lo tasgir. Don't hand that person back to their master. If we stopped there, that would be amazing, right? That would just be, okay, okay.

Something, on some level we might think, oh the Torah should say that because we all intuitively think that's the right thing to do. But it's not so intuitive in the rest of the Torah, where slavery is not a given evil, categorically. But certainly in this case, the Torah says it's absolutely wrong.

So lo tasgir, great. But the Torah doesn't stop there. That's not the end of it, right? Im ha-yeshev.

Let the slave live with you in your settlement, be-kir be-cha in your midst. And then maybe most remarkably, be-ma-kom ha-she-yiv-char, in the place that he chooses. Be-tov lo, somewhere where it's good for him.

So let's just like go through that linguistically, because it's pretty amazing. We begin with a person whose defining characteristic is that somebody else owns that person. Someone else decides where they live, someone else decides where they work, someone else controls their body and their movement.

And within one verse, the Torah returns to him the language of choice. Ha-she-yiv-char, that that slave chooses. When does a slave choose? A person who has had the choice taken away from them now gets that choice given back by the Torah.

You get to emancipate their power of agency and choosing. The person who had their choice taken away gets it back. Where do you want to live? What's good for you? Maybe that's the most radical part of this law.

Not just that we don't give them back, but in addition to not giving them back, we give them back something. Something irreducibly human and so powerfully dignified. Freedom in the Torah is not just the absence of a master.

The Torah is saying that just because you didn't give back the slave to their master, that's only like, that's one part of freedom. Freedom in its fullest sense is the restoration of agency. The capacity to say, this is where I want to be.

And for the surrounding society to honor that choice. This law from the Bible, from the Torah, is particularly striking. Because returning fugitive slaves was hardly an obvious moral assumption in the ancient world.

Other ancient legal traditions could demand the return of escaped slaves. Deuteronomy instead imagines a fugitive reaching Israel's borders and commands that that fugitive not be surrendered. Full stop.

So far so good? Is that a part of the Torah that you can be proud of? Because so frequently from liberal pulpits, and this one included, we have to always put in brackets how bad the Torah is. To our modern sensibilities. So before we do that, about, you know, all the things that bother us in the Torah, you could take this and say, I'm proud of this piece of Torah.

I put that in your pockets. When somebody brings out another part of the Torah and says, Oh, look at this, you say, Okay, okay. But look at this.

Lo tasgir evet, don't give back a fugitive slave. Now the rabbis, chazal, have a much more expansive conversation, they wrestle with just how broadly to understand this law. And chazal, the rabbis offer readings that both narrow its circumstances and then also expand it.

But before we narrow it, let's allow ourselves to hear the astonishing moral imagination of this verse, right? We just heard it. Because I think it's asking a larger than, you know, a larger question than this particular legal case. What kind of place are you building in your society? What happens when someone fleeing domination reaches your gates? What happens when someone arrives who has been told you belong to someone else, you don't get to decide, your life is not really your own life? The Torah says when that person reaches you, something has changed.

Lo tasgir, don't send them back. Make room for them, not somewhere invisible in your midst, and let them choose, let them seek what's good for them. And then as a tag, which we didn't even discuss yet, these last two words, lo tonanu, don't oppress them.

Don't exploit their vulnerability. That is a particularly moving part of this commandment, don't exploit their vulnerability. Because the Torah understands something psychologically sophisticated.

Escaping oppression does not instantly make you powerful. Escaping oppression doesn't instantly make you powerful. In some ways, the moment after escape can be the moment of greatest vulnerability.

You've just left the structure that was controlling you. You don't yet have a home, you don't have security yet, you don't necessarily have any money or standing or relationships. And so the Torah does not say just, fine, don't send it back, give them a home.

The Torah says you have obligations. Don't exploit them, let them live amongst you, let them have their choosing. In other words, freedom requires a community willing to make freedom possible and then make freedom sustainable.

And maybe the reason why it appears here in the book of Devarim, the reason why it appears here in the fifth of the five books, is because we are at the moment in the Torah when we are the furthest away from the reality of having once been slaves. And the closest in the Torah to where we might be people who create a society that will welcome others. It's at that interstitial moment in Deuteronomy, we often think of Deuteronomy as the end of the five books, but it's really in the middle between where we were in Egypt and what's next.

The book of Devarim is written on the precipice of entering the land of Israel. And so the author of Devarim, Moses or whomever, says, Hey everybody, remember your foundational story? You were once the slaves. When that slave shows up at your door, you know who's showing up at your door? You.

This was you. You escaped, you crossed the border, you were pursued by people who were claiming you as their own. And you remember that God was on whose side? On your side.

God was on the side of the fugitives in that story. And now that you are no longer fugitives, God will be on the side of new fugitives. The question of Exodus, of Shemot, wasn't just, were you liberated? But what will you do with your liberation now that you are free? Will you build another Egypt? Will you reproduce the structures from which you escaped? Will you visit upon others who are seeking their own freedom, something that you did not have? Or will you, like God, be on the side of the fugitives? If we might do a little Hasidic turn here, we might do a little psycho-spiritual turn from that dimension of structures into individuals.

Because we can imagine people in some way or another also trying to leave something and not go backwards. People who show up in our lives, who have left things behind, are in the moment or the liminality between an identity that they once knew, a job that they once had, a self that they once inhabited, a friendship that once animated them, a relationship, a marriage, a family, a community. We meet people all the time in our own lives, maybe in the mirror.

Someone leaving an addiction or an abusive relationship. Someone trying to leave an old habit that they keep tripping themselves up by. And they show up at our door and they say, I can't be that person anymore, I can't live in that world anymore.

And often when someone makes that kind of escape, everybody around them has an opinion about where they ought to go next. You show up at somebody's door and you say, I'm running away from something that once was my master. And in your family system it's Thanksgiving or at your family wedding.

And they say, why don't you go back to being that person that we once knew? And that too would be a violation of low-task gear. Don't send them back to their Egypt. Don't send them back to their addiction.

Don't send them back to the small place. They're trying to build a new life. And here we are, they've come and said, look at me.

And you're like, oh, come on. Really, aren't you too old for that? Is this a midlife crisis? Really, a motorcycle? I'm just thinking like that. There are old versions of ourselves that keep coming back over and over again and demanding our attention.

And when is that more true than at this time of the year? As we make our way towards Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur, we look back at the year, at the places that we fell back in a habit or a pattern individually, collectively. We lost our sense of our own agency. And we show up and we say, God, you know, I really want to be a new person.

That thing owned me, and I don't want it to own me any longer. And the Torah gives us advice now. It says, first of all, do that with other people.

If someone shows up at your doorstep and says, you know, this is what I'm trying to change, I lost my gear. Don't send them back. Make room inside yourself for that person's new identity also.

Listen to what they're choosing. If you undermine their choice at this moment, and you send them back, they might not feel empowered agentically to change their life. Okay, maybe it's the wrong choice.

I remember a dear friend of mine, she'll never see this. I could probably say what it is. And she went through a perm period back in the 1980s, and she got a perm.

It was such a bad mistake. I mean, it was really, honestly. You look back at the pictures I've seen with her, because she's now a part of my family, and it's just like, okay, what were you thinking? But, you know, her parents are like, let her go through the... I mean, it's a very banal example, but honestly, we can all imagine our perm periods, you know.

Sometimes exercising that freedom to choose ourself is itself part of what it is to grow up, and eventually will lead to our own trust in ourselves that we can choose and play with options in the future in order to try on new things and expand beyond what we thought we knew of ourselves and others around us. So don't send them back. Let them choose.

Batovlo, move towards what's good in you. Lotonenu, don't oppress them. Don't mock them.

Such a beautiful Torah. For this Shabbos, to remember that each and every one of us has that capacity to run away from what is oppressing us individually, collectively, in our society, and that we have an obligation to stand at the precipice to see one who seeks refuge in a new life, a new choice, a new neural pathway, a new possibility, and be a facilitator of another's dignity and freedom. Do that for others, do that for family, do that for friends, and do it for ourselves.

May God give us the strength to be patient, to not turn away the yearning for freedom, and in that way all of us bring more liberation into the world, and let us say Amen.