

"SONS AND SERVANTS"

After banning a permanent slave class among Israelites by legislating that every Israelite servant must be emancipated on the Jubilee year, the Torah offers its reason:

כִּי לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים עֲבָדֵי הֵם

"for the children of Israel are servants unto Me, they are My servants."

The title עֶבֶד or servant is obviously meant in an honorific sense. Thus, the highest encomium that the Bible offers for Moses, that most superior of all prophets and humans is, מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד ה', Moses the servant of the Lord.

There is also another description of man's relationship to God used by the Torah: בְּנֵי אֱתֶם לָהּ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, "you are sons (or children) to the Lord your God." So we have an interesting biblical typology: בֶּן and עֶבֶד, son and servant, two symbols or archetypes of the religious personality.

Unquestionably, in one sense eved (servant) is superior to ben (son). "Servant" indicates one who has no natural relationship, but has come to his master-father from without. The eved of the Lord is one who therefore comes to the אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם (the Eternal Lord) voluntarily, utterly of his own free will, ready to subjugate himself to the will of the Almighty, to suppress his ego and restrain his desires in manifest and meaningful commitment to God. "Son," however, is one who, as it were, was born into this relationship with his Father. From this point of view, the proselyte is superior to the native born Jew! Indeed, in a famous responsum or תְּשׁוּבָה by Maimonides to Obadiah the Proselyte who complained that his Jewish teacher was rebuking him and insulting him by reminding him of his pagan origin, Maimonides says that the teacher should be ashamed of himself, and should stand in awe of the student who is a proselyte and who came to the Almighty of his own free will rather than being born into it naturally.

And yet the weight of the Jewish tradition offers the reverse judgment, and maintains that the category of ben is superior to the category of eved. Thus, R. Akiva teaches in the Ethics of the Fathers חֲבִיבִין יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בְּנִים לַמָּקוֹם, "beloved is Israel that they were called sons of the Almighty."

What is the difference between these two conceptions, that of man as eved and as ben to God? Let us discuss three of them.

The first analysis is objective rather than subjective. It tells us how Judaism considers man as such, in all his weakness and his frailty, rather than how man conceives himself subjectively as a religious being in his relationship to God.

And here we turn to R. Akiva himself in a fascinating dialogue, recorded in the Talmud (B.B. 10a) between R. Akiva and his Roman tormentor, who was later to become the executioner of the venerable sage -- Rufus, the agent of the Emperor Hadrian, and a man known in Jewish literature as Tyranus Rufus, "the tyrant Rufus," a name usually accompanied by the epithet הרשע, the wicked one:

וְזוֹ שְׁאֵלָה שֶׁשָּׂאֵל טוֹרְנוֹסְרוּפּוֹס הַרְשָׁע אֶת ר' עֲקִיבָא:
אִם אֱלֹקִים אַתָּה עֲנִיָּים הוּא מַפְנִי מִה אֵינִי
מִפְרִנְסִים? אָמַר לוֹ, בְּדֵי שְׁנִיאוֹל אֲנִי מְדִינָה שֶׁל
גִּיְהִנּוֹם. אָמַר לוֹ, אֲדַרְבָּא, זֶה שְׁמַחֲיִיבְתָּן לְגִיְהִנּוֹם.
אֲמַשּׁוּל לָךְ מַשֵּׁל, לִמָּה הִדְבֵּר דּוֹמָה? לְמַלְךְ בֶּשֶׁר וְדָם
שֶׁכַּעַס עַל עַבְדּוֹ וְחִבְשׁוֹ בְּבֵית הָאֲסוּרִים וְצוּה עָלָיו
שֶׁלֹא לְהַאכִּילוֹ וְשֶׁלֹא לְהַשְׁקוֹתוֹ, וְהֵלֵךְ אִדָּם אֶחָד וְהַאכִּילוֹ
וְהַשְׁקוֹתוֹ. בְּשִׁשְׁמֵעַ הַמֶּלֶךְ, לֹא כּוֹעֵם עָלָיו? וְאַתָּם
קְרוֹיִין עֲבָדִים, שְׁנֵא' כִּי לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים.
אָמַר לוֹ ר' עֲקִיבָא, אֲמַשּׁוּל לָךְ מַשֵּׁל, לִמָּה הִדְבֵּר
דּוֹמָה? לְמַלְךְ בֶּשֶׁר וְדָם שֶׁכַּעַס עַל בְּנוֹ וְחִבְשׁוֹ בְּבֵית
הָאֲסוּרִים וְצוּה עָלָיו שֶׁלֹא לְהַאכִּילוֹ וְלֹא לְהַשְׁקוֹתוֹ
וְהֵלֵךְ אִדָּם אֶחָד וְהַאכִּילוֹ וְהַשְׁקוֹתוֹ. בְּשִׁשְׁמֵעַ הַמֶּלֶךְ,
דּוֹרָן מַעֲגֵר לוֹ? וְאַנּוּ קְרוֹיִים בְּנִים, דְּכַחֲיִב בְּנִים
אַתָּם לֵה' אֱלֹקִים... ..

This question was posed by Tyranus Rufus the wicked to R. Akiva: if indeed your God loves the poor, as you say, why does He not provide for them? R. Akiva answered: so that we might thereby be saved from punishment of Gehinom (for in sharing one's substance with the poor and in helping the disadvantaged we affirm our worth in life and thus save ourselves from eternal predition). To this Tyranus Rufus replied: on the contrary, for doing so you deserve to go to Gehinom! I will offer you a parable: it can be compared to a human king who became angry with one of his servants and placed him in prison and ordered that he be given no food and no drink. Along came another man and brought in food and drink to the imprisoned slave. When the king hears about this, is he not angry with this stranger who violated his rules? And you Israelites are called servants, as it is written, "for the children of Israel are servants unto Me." To this R. Akiva responded: on the contrary, I will offer you a different parable. It

can be compared to a human king who became angry with his son and placed him in prison and commanded that he not be given any food and drink. Along came a stranger and brought in food and drink to the imprisoned son. When the king hears about this, is he not so happy that he is willing to send a gift to this stranger? And we are called sons, as it is written, "you are sons to the Lord your God."

If we see man as an eved, as a passive and servile creation of God, then we are fatalists. Then we must declare that whatever exists is the inexorable will of God, and that is the way it must remain. In that case, the poor must remain poor, the sick must remain miserable, and the sufferers must continue to suffer, all because this is the will of God. Any attempt to relieve or improve their condition is considered sacrilegious and a blasphemous interference with God's plans for the world. This philosophy of man as eved is the most convenient ideology for the establishment, the "haves" to keep control over the "have-nots."

But Jews do not subscribe to this eved anthropology; that is the way Rufus and his Romans and pagans speak. R. Akiva, however, declared that man is a ben, that men are children of God, and then we must interpret all evil and suffering as a challenge to us to remove it, as if God did indeed create a flawed world, but willed that his human creatures look upon each other as children of God and therefore free the imprisoned and the disadvantaged and the hungry and the poor from their distress and affliction. God made this world, but He is anxious that we make it better. God started this world, he wants us to complete it.

So whereas man should see himself as an eved, he must always see others as ben. Therefore, in general, as R. Akiva taught, ben is superior to eved, and this theory becomes the foundation of all of Judaism which urges us to treat every man as a child of God, therefore as a brother and sister, as one whose welfare and happiness God desires and commands to enhance.

There is a second definition of this dichotomy of eved-ben. In this definition, the two terms describe not only how we ought to view other men, but they are archetypes of how a Jew should relate to God and to Judaism. Thus, as one great Jew* of recent generations said, the eved does only what he has to, only what he must, only what he is told to do; whereas the ben seeks to satisfy his Father even beyond what he was ordered to do. The eved does what the master demands, the son does what the father wants. The eved is interested in the mitzvah (commandment) alone;

*I refer to R. Baruch Halevi Epstein, the author of "הנהגות אברהם", in his "הנהגות אברהם", on the basis of a Talmudic passage.

the ben also seeks to perform the ratzon (will) of his Creator. As an example: the Torah commands that whenever we have a four-cornered garment that we affix thereto the tzitzit or fringes. The eved will say: since I do not have such a garment, it is unnecessary for me to wear the tzitzit. And he is right, halakhically. But he is a minimalist, doing only what he must and no more. The ben, under similar circumstances, will seek out a four-cornered garment in order to be able to perform the law of affixing the tzitzit. The son is a maximalist, he goes beyond what he must, he reaches out for the supererogatory.

The third definition; this too a category of religious personality, and based upon a modification of what the Zohar teaches. The Zohar tells us that both terms are indicative of high religious personalities, and that ultimately ben and eved, the mystery of each, is really one. But in appearance they are different. The eved is a description of conduct or behavior, one who performs all the commandments fully, whereas ben not only performs the commandments, but also feels at home with God. He is ben, he knows all the nooks and corners of his Father's treasure house, and seeks not only to execute his Father's will in practice, but also to know as much as he can about his Father. What the Zohar means is that the eved is one who performs the Halakhah, who does all the practical commandments, whereas the ben is the one who pursues the mesoter, the mysteries of the Torah, or, in other words, is an initiate into the Kabbalah or mysticism.

In contemporary terms, we may modify that statement to mean not one who is a mystic, but that the eved is one who practices alone, but not necessarily with feeling; whereas the ben is one who invests emotion and feeling and love. The eved is a Jew who observes and gives and participates, but you can feel the icicles hanging from his heart. The ben is a Jew who not only observes and gives and participates, but also worries and loves and feels, who puts in heart and soul into what he does.

We thus have three interpretations of the distinctions between the terms ben and eved, all of which relate to the superiority of ben over eved. To summarize: the first definition is that, relating to others, we must see them as sons, and therefore as individuals whom God loves and whom God wants us to help out of their distress even if they deserve their misery; and not as servants whom God does not care about, or desires that they remain in their punishment. The second is that the eved is a minimalist who does only what he must, whereas the ben is a

who goes beyond his minimal requirements. And finally, the eved is a Jew who carries out everything in practice, but not necessarily with the feeling and inner participation that characterize the son.

As a rabbi of an Orthodox congregation, it is often my very unpleasant duty to reproach not only my congregation but the entire Orthodox community, and especially what we call Modern Orthodox Jews. Today, however, for the sake of proper proportion and perspective and to complete the picture, permit me to assert that despite all its shortcomings it is this community of Orthodox and especially Modern Orthodox Jews which, in the context of our times, represents the quality of ben as opposed to eved.

At a time such as ours when other Jews who were long blind to the Jewish destiny have become hysterical, and speak so breathlessly of "Jewish identity" and "Jewish survival," Orthodox Jews go far beyond that, and are striving for infinitely more than these bare minimum qualities of identity and survival. ^{עבודת ה' ודאגה לנפשו}, and our concern as children of Israel and of God is with the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot, not merely with that elusive and intangible and insubstantial "identity" and "survival."

Moreover, by the same token, while other fine Jews are panic-stricken and motivated by a fear for the Jewish future, grasping at all kinds of artificial devices, and acting as if merely crash-financing a program which reaches out "to the young" will solve all problems, Orthodox Jews approach their Judaism not exclusively as a communal matter, but also with

^{דאגה}, with inner feeling and total commitment as a supreme personal way of life which demands warmth and love.

And at least for Modern Orthodox Jews, for most of them and for most of the time, although not for all of them all the time, we have learned how to view other, recalcitrant Jews as ^{דו"ר} and not as ^{דו"ר}. We may be distressed at their non-observance and their lack of religion, but we recognize them as children of God, and therefore as our brothers and our sisters. And we shall not give up on them!

Within the community that embodies these conceptions and that typifies these attitudes, the most representative segment is Yeshiva University, an institution which is more than 75 years old. Orthodoxy in America, and especially Orthodoxy that has come to terms with the modern experience, is unthinkable without Yeshiva University.

An amazing thing happened several months ago, and the Israeli press commented in almost disbelief upon this event. When Prime Minister Golda Meir visited this country, she received an honorary degree from Yeshiva University. After her reception, in the office of Dr. Belkin, Gold Meir -- wept! She said that she had never seen such a youth, that she had never believed it could exist even in Israel. She saw thousands of young men and women, an overwhelmingly impressive community, which left her breathless. Here were young people devoted to maximal Jewishness, not to just surviving or identifying; young people who obviously were effusive in their love and devotion for Israel and Torah and the State of Israel, with warmth and enthusiasm. And here were Orthodox Jews, fully committed to Torah and Judaism, who nevertheless had about them an openness to other Jews -- not by avoiding the issues, not by being pliant and submissive, not by accepting uncritically anything that all Israelis or the government or Golda Meir does or says, but young people who are aware that all Jews are

בנים למקום.

Why did Golda weep? Because she discovered then and there, in the encounter with Yeshiva University, that חביבין ישראל שנקראים בנים למקום, that these charming and lovely young people were indeed children of God and of Israel. She saw these vibrant and enthusiastic, uncompromised and proud Jews, Jews whose way of life she once may have thought existed as cultural relics only in Meah Shearim or else in the Russian ghettos she left as a child -- who nevertheless had not abandoned the Jewish tradition, who were able to combine it with a worldly outlook, who were college and graduate university students. And withal, they are

בנות תורה and even בני תורה.

She saw before herself not בניים but עבדים. Indeed, that was something to cry about, דמעות של שמחה, tears of joy. For she found sons, not merely servants.