

Mishpatim

Webbed Hands and Earplugs

If the servant says, “I love my master, my wife and my children; I do not wish to leave and go free,” his owner should bring him close to the door, or the doorpost, and drill his ear with a drill, and he will then work for him forever.

Shemos 21:5–6

The slave who wishes to stay a slave is looked down upon by our Sages.¹ At Sinai, Hashem told us that we were to be His slaves, and not slaves to others. This person who wishes to remain a slave to another person is choosing to bind himself to a master other than God. A second master is always somewhat exclusive of a first master. Unless you are free to define the nature of your life, you are not free to live as you deem fit. Even if you live a noble life, if it was another person’s choices that caused you to live that way, then your life was not what it could have been. Thus, teach our Sages, the ear of the man who failed to listen to God’s words, when He told us to be slaves to Him,² is drilled into, to constantly remind him that it is Hashem that we must listen to.

There is another answer, offered by the great R. Yonason Eyebshutz,³ to explain why it is that the slave who wishes to remain needs a hole in his ear. The Midrash⁴ teaches that until the time of Noah, men were born without individual fingers. It was only when Noah was born with individual fingers that mankind began to have hands as we do today. Thus, the people who saw Noah named him that name: “And they called him Noah, meaning, ‘This one will comfort us from our deeds and the sadness of our hands, from the land that Hashem cursed.’”⁵ Noah was the one who invented the plow.⁶ He was the first person to be able to successfully work the land, from the time that it was cursed by Hashem, following the sin of Adam and Chava. Until the time of Noah, the ground produced no more than thorns and thistles, but with the birth of Noah, the people saw that in some way, the curse was starting to wear off, for Hashem had created a man with individual fingers. These individual fingers are what mankind needs to be able to make something out of the physical world. Human action in this world, symbolized by the hands, is taken to a whole new level when we have the dexterity provided by fingers.

1 Mechilta; see Rashi to Shemos 21:6

2 Vayikra 25:42

3 *Tiferes Yehonason* to Mishpatim 21:6

4 Midrash Abkir, quoted in *Paneach Raza* to Bereishis 5:29, and Yalkut Reuveni. See also in *Paneach Raza* that “*mimaasenu imeitzavon yeadenu*” has the same *gematria* as “*yadayim bli chiluk etzbaos*,” and see *Seder Hadoros*, beginning of Elef Hasheni. See the similar but distinct approach of R. Yehuda Hachasid, recorded in the *Pirush Harash al Hatorah* there.

5 Bereishis 5:29

6 Tanchuma, Bereishis 11. Also see Rashi to Bereishis 5:29

But, in fact, the Talmud⁷ teaches that we were given individual fingers for another reason, namely, that we perform the mitzvos that must be done with each finger. It also lists five different mitzvos that each require a specific finger, and tells us that the reason why a person's fingers are sloped, is so that if he hears something that he should not hear, he can place his fingers in his ears and block out the destructive words that he should not be hearing. If a person did not have individual fingers, he could not block out the bad, nor could he accomplish good to the same degree. Until the time of Noah, mankind was both physically and spiritually handicapped.

Thus, teaches R. Eyebshutz, the slave who thought that his individual fingers – his abilities in this world – were to be used for manual labor in the realm of the physical, needs a reminder. He needs to be reminded that in this world, the fingers are primarily to be used for spiritual purposes. They are for placing in one's ears when one hears something that he should not. So the hole must be made in his ear, where his fingers ought to have been directed – to remind him that life is really about spiritual things, and not physical concerns.

But the whole thing seems to be a bit funny. What is all this about the fingers? Was Adam born that way? And if not, when did it start? And why did it end at Noah's birth?

Our Sages⁸ teach us that everything that God created in the world, He created in man, as well, at the beginning of time. There are forests in the world, and hair on man. There is a king in the world, and a head on a man. And they go on to list many amazing things that are beyond the scope of our discussion, unfortunately. One of the things that it mentions is that there are spikes (or pegs) in the world,⁹ and fingers on man. It would seem to be clear from here the Adam was created with individual fingers.¹⁰ In fact, the Talmud that we quoted above, when asking about why a person has individual fingers, phrased the question, "Why does an *adam* [a generic term for "man" in Hebrew] have individual fingers," whereas when it speaks about the ear, it simply says, "Why is the ear harder than the lobe?"¹¹ This hints to the fact that we are talking about the fingers of the first Adam. The individuality of our fingers is a connection that we share with him, and thus, when we ask about the hand, we term it "the fingers of Adam."¹²

7 Kesuvos 5b

8 *Avos Dirabbi Nosson* 31

9 This seems to refer to "pegs" that support the physical world, though it may also refer to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who are called the "pegs of the world" in Bereishis Rabbah 43:8; see also *Baal Haturim* to Dvarim 23:14. See also Yerushalmi, Brachos 4:1, and R. Chaim Palagi's *Lechaim Beyerushalayim* there (4:7), s.v. *lo shehu Ben Torah*.

10 Though this does seem clear from the *Avos Dirabbi Nosson*, as, in fact, the Chida points out in his *Kikar Laaden* to *Avos Dirabbi Nosson*, it was not the opinion of the *Tiferes Yehonason* there, or in his *Yaaros Devash* 1, 11. See also Chida in his *Dvarim Achadim*, *drush* 18 (see also *drush* 26), where he also understands that Adam himself did not have individual fingers, notwithstanding this source. The same is asserted by the Pirchei Shoshanim in his *Lechem Min Hashbomayim* (quoted by R. Yitzchak Bouchavzeh in his *Lechem Lifi Hataf*, *alef*, 36).

11 According to the text in the *Ein Yaakov*.

12 See *Ein Eliyahu*, who points this out, and offers a different explanation. See also *Yalkut Hameiri*, quoting R. Y. L. of Satmar, who explains that the only reason that the Talmud asks about fingers and doesn't

But when Adam “listened to the voice of his wife,”¹³ Hashem said that he therefore would be punished by not being able to work the land. It would sprout thorns and thistles. This was not because there was a qualitative change in the land, but rather, because there was a change in man. His hands could no longer get the job done. When Adam chose not to place his fingers in his ears, as his wife had failed to do when the snake began his enticement, mankind lost their individual fingers. They could no longer work the land. By the time Noah came around, something changed. Noah was born circumcised. (“When Noah was born circumcised, Lemech knew with certainty that ‘This one will comfort us.’”¹⁴) So was Adam born circumcised,¹⁵ but after the sin, he grew a foreskin.¹⁶ Noah was the first big personality to come and begin the rectification of the sin of Adam. He was born without the effects of sin. His fingers were separate, and he had a Bris Milah. The people saw that Noah would comfort them from “the sadness of their hands.”

Noah was the one who used his individual fingers as we are meant to. He put his fingers in his ears, so to speak, and would not be influenced by those around him. This was a rectification of what Adam did, listening to others who would have him violate what is right. And Noah worked the land. Since he was involved in the spiritual world first, and knew what his hands were really for, he could invent the plow, and truly use the physical world for what it was meant to be used for.

The slave to the physical world is not the one who uses this world properly. He needs a hole in his ear to remind him that this world is here to connect us to our real Master. When we appreciate that connection, then we can, like Noah, put our fingers in our ears when we need to, and then take our fingers and comfort the world, when we are done.

get into the rest of the shapes of body parts is because the fingers were changed at the times of Noah, and therefore, the question is more important. See something similar in *Pesach Enayim* of the Chida to this gemara.

13 Bereishis 3:17

14 Tanchuma, Bereishis, 11

15 *Avos Dirabbi Nosson*, 2

16 See Sanhedrin 38b, and *Yosef Daas* (Ben Arza) there, s.v. *moshech biorlaso*. See also *Ohr Hachaim*, Vayikra 19:26 and 12:3, where he explains this clearly, that if not for the sin of Adam, there would be no foreskin in man or animals, and no *orlah* in vegetation. He also explains that there would be no Niddah blood, which is the corollary in women to foreskin in man. See also *Nefutzos Yehuda* of R. Yehuda Moscato, *drush* 28, p. 226. For a different, but connected, approach to Adam’s state after the sin as regards his *milah*, see *Toras Chaim* to Sanhedrin 38b, s.v. *amar R. Yitzchak*, where he explains that Adam brought desire upon himself, for Ramban taught us that until Adam’s sin, there was no passion for intercourse for any reason other than procreation, and we know that circumcision takes away a bit of the pleasure of intercourse for the man (as Maimonides makes clear in his *Guide*, part 3). Thus, Adam brought himself to a greater level of desire.